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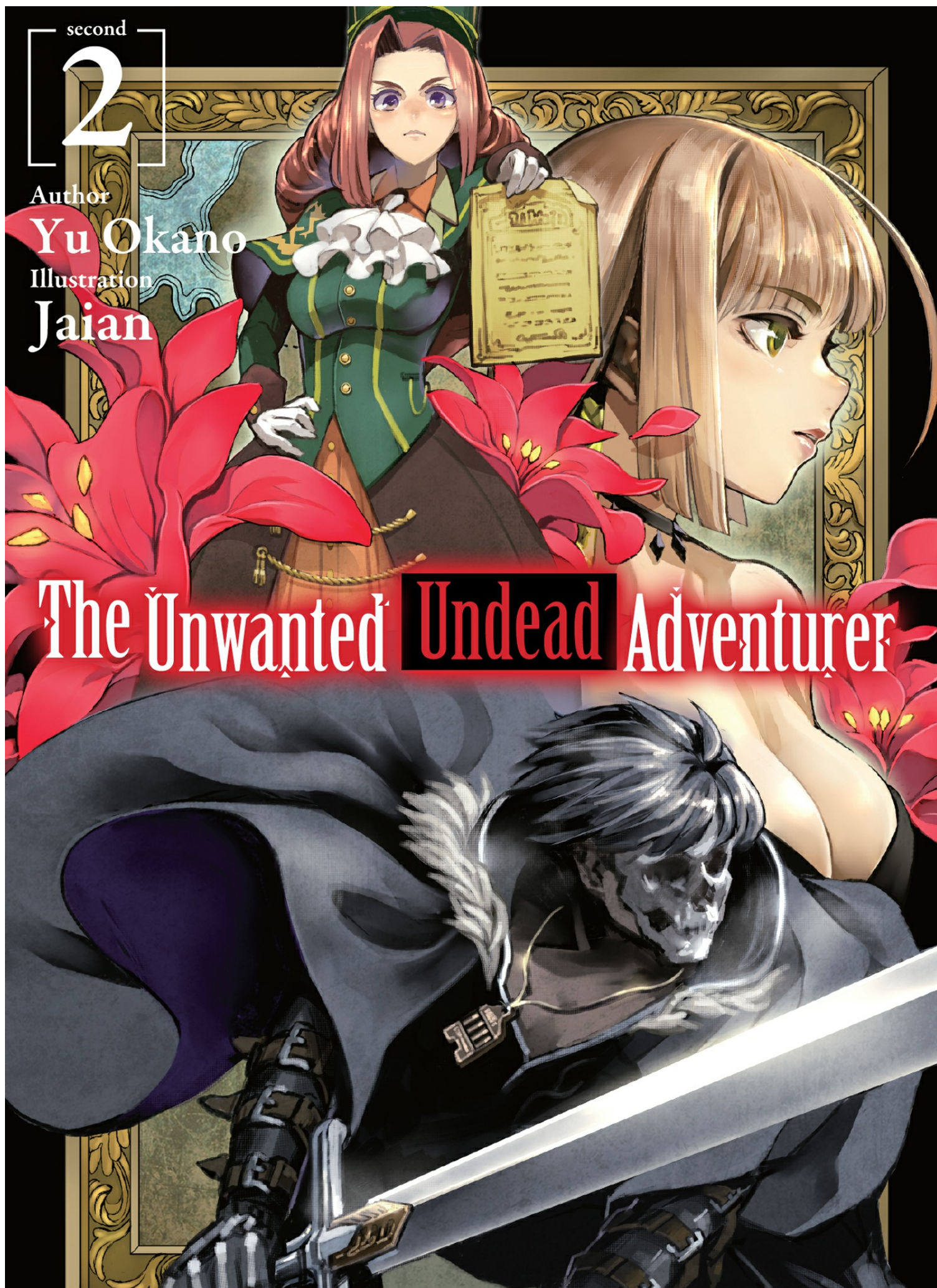
Author

Yu Okano

Illustration

Jaian

The Unwanted Undead Adventurer





The Unwanted Undead Adventurer ^{second} 2 Yu Okano / Illustration: Jaian





The Lord of the Lake that
appeared before us was
none other than a Kraken...

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The Unwanted Undead Adventurer

Yu Okano

Illustration: Jaian



[C O N T E N T S]

Chapter 1: The Labyrinth of the New Moon

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Chapter 1: The Labyrinth of the New Moon

That quest of mine needed completing. I speak of the assignment I had accepted prior; specifically, the one which involved me hunting Orcs and gathering Orcish materials.

Due to certain circumstances and events, I found myself somewhat idle, with a sizable chunk of free time. I did, however, still have quite a bit of time before the assignment's deadline. As such, I did not foresee there being too much of a problem.

Orcs were, as their name suggested, creatures with piglike heads and somewhat humanoid bodies. They were, however, more monster than human, and were classified as such. Around Maalt, they mainly inhabited forests and the like, as well as the Labyrinth of the New Moon.

In other words, if one took an assignment to hunt Orcs, one had two simple choices: to search in the forests, or to go hunting in the Labyrinth's halls. My choice, on the other hand, was obvious. A simple reason, really: Orcs that inhabited the forests around Maalt usually moved in packs, while solitary Orcs were somewhat rare in such an environment.

Taking those factors into consideration, as well as the obvious problem of monster repop rates in the forest, one could quickly notice the differences in difficulty between the two choices.

Though in reality, it was more a problem of the Forest Orcs in question engaging in group-based warfare. To put it simply, one would be going up against a raging band of Orcs amongst the trees. For a solo adventurer like me, the odds weren't exactly favorable.

Comparatively, Orcs that lived in the Labyrinth—specifically the more shallow levels—were, for the lack of a better word, relatively stupid.

For starters, the thought of grouping up to ambush adventurers didn't even occur to these Labyrinth Orcs. In addition, even though Forest Orcs were

commonly armed with rudimentary weapons and armor, Labyrinth Orcs fared much more poorly in this regard, often dressed in mere rags and scraps. Of course, they did not fare very well in the weapons department, either. Simply put, Labyrinth Orcs were much less of a threat, sporting lower offensive and defensive capabilities.

Honestly speaking, this very same logic could be applied to Goblins, as well. Orcs, however, were more visually striking, and this was why it made no sense to hurl oneself into a huge crowd of reasonably-equipped Orcs. My choice was already made up for me, as if there was never any doubt that I would instead choose to explore a labyrinth.

With those thoughts in mind, I found myself standing at the entrance to the Labyrinth of the New Moon. Many moons had indeed passed since I last stood at its gates.

Said entrance was, in fact, thronged with people; it was lively as usual. It was a stark contrast to how the Labyrinth of the Moon's Reflection was; to think I was hunting there just yesterday, too.

Another easy explanation: even beginner adventurers found themselves with larger, more tangible gains by hunting in this labyrinth, provided they hunted in groups. Reality was a bit more disparate for solo adventurers.

And this came with yet another simple explanation for such a phenomenon: as opposed to the Moon's Reflection, monsters in the New Moon commonly organized themselves into looser groups, ambushing adventurers as and when they could. Add on the fact that the hallways of the New Moon were at least twice as wide as those of the Moon's Reflection, and it was all too easy for a single adventurer to get surrounded by monsters in a single moment of carelessness.

In turn, the monsters that dwelled in the halls of the New Moon were considerably more powerful than those that resided in the Moon's Reflection. Due to this, the New Moon was considered the more threatening, and hence higher-leveled, Labyrinth—at least, that was the public opinion surrounding the issue. The veracity of that claim remains to be seen, however.

Wading through the noise and commotion at the entrance, I came across

many groups of adventurers; fixed parties, perhaps. Just a cacophony of noise, really, as the adventurers spoke and gestured in an excitable fashion. Leaving them behind me, I instead made a beeline for the entrance of the Labyrinth.

Of course, I did not for a moment think they were simply playing around. The discussions of party strategy and other points of caution within the Labyrinth were essential for survival, after all. While veteran adventurers regularly engaged in this practice, it wasn't an uncommon sight for the new adventurers of Maalt to do so, as well.

These budding adventurers would probably have their seniors to thank, for it was those very same veterans that encouraged the spread of such discussions throughout Maalt and its surrounding lands. Plus, due to the fact that a simple discussion of strategy markedly improved the odds of a party surviving, new adventurers often found themselves engrossed in said conversations, obediently following the advice of those who had come before them. Good practice formed good habits—at least, that was how I felt about it.

From what I'd heard of other townships, new adventurers there hardly engaged in these talks. Compared to them, the adventurers in Maalt seemed like a more hardworking bunch.

But with that being said, I became increasingly aware of the many pairs of eyes trained upon me as I slowly made my way to the labyrinth's entrance. I didn't blame them; they didn't really intend to stare in the first place. The reason for them doing so was because trekking through the halls of the New Moon alone was a rare phenomenon in and of itself. Their curious looks, in turn, were not difficult to comprehend.

It would be unbecoming of me to say that *no one* challenged this specific labyrinth by their lonesome. Those who did often had strategies or similar means of dealing with monster hordes prone to surrounding them.

If I were to gauge my own abilities in fighting while surrounded... Hmm. How would I do, I wonder?

It was difficult to say. Although I had absorbed a fair amount of life energy from the monsters I'd defeated and now wielded some strength, to this day I had only faced Skeletons, Goblins, and Slimes. It was therefore impossible for

me to imagine how I would perform against Orcs and stronger monsters—at least, not until I could try my hand at defeating them.

It was worth noting, however, that familiar monsters such as Skeletons and the like did appear in the shallower levels of the New Moon. In order to find monsters like Orcs, I had to descend deeper into the Labyrinth's halls.

In any case, I felt it was necessary to test my mettle in the shallower levels for now, and from there I would be able to make an informed judgment.

Steeling myself, I shelved my thoughts and strategies as I stepped into the Labyrinth of the New Moon.



I suppose one really does hunt more efficiently with a party in these parts...

That was the only thought that entered my mind as I journeyed through New Moon's hallways.

I should have probably mentioned that I was currently surrounded and in combat with a small group of monsters. Such a thought would not resound in my mind for no good reason, after all.

At the very least, they weren't strong monsters in the slightest. It was more like they were all old friends of mine, being odd groups of Skeletons and Slimes, visiting me for a jolly reunion in groups of three or so. They were no stronger than they used to be, but I didn't exactly find myself cutting through them in swathes. The circumstances and lay of the land were just too different: back in the Moon's Reflection, it was all too easy for me to strike at their weak spots, decisively ending the fight, but in the halls of the New Moon, I found myself surrounded, no longer having the same windows of opportunity to strike.

To make things worse, each and every one of them attacked me in succession; my old friends kept me relatively busy just evading their attacks. Even if I were to swing my sword wildly at one of them while dodging, I would hardly land a meaningful hit. All I could do was progress cautiously and carefully, striking as and when I could while staying on the defensive. I found this tiring, and utterly exasperating.

While I could have simply ploughed through entire groups of said monsters, it

was worth remembering that my actual target was an Orc, a monster dwelling in the lower levels of the New Moon. If I were to use up my reserves of mana and spirit here, I would be faced with the prospect of fighting an Orc later on without any means of attacking. Missing the forest for the trees, indeed. As such, I consciously made the choice to not expend my reserves needlessly; the necessity of that was obvious to me.

Walking through the meandering halls, I continued on, relying on mild enhancements to my body that did not eat away at my reserves. Quite the departure from my usual “one-strike” tactics. Even the absolute minimum of my body-enhancing magics seemed sufficient for my means. Eventually, the number of enemies started to grow thin. If I could continue on at this pace and emerge unscathed, that would be half the battle won.

—Whoops—

In a moment of carelessness, I found a bit of my robe grazed by the Acid Blitz of a Slime. But the robe did not seem to melt at all; I suppose it truly was an item of considerable defensive capabilities. I could not find a single nick or tear in its surface, despite the fact that some of my opponents wielded physical weapons.

Perhaps I will be able to take on an Orc in my current state after all...

Thinking as such, I gathered the magic crystals of the Slimes and Skeletons that had fallen to my blade, placing them in my tool belt’s pouch.

Though it seemed like a small pouch that could not contain very much at all, my waist-pouch was in fact enchanted with magic—the inside was bigger than the outside, so to speak. I had used this very same pouch in life; being a magical tool of sorts, it cost quite a bit of coin. It was a reasonable price for such a tool, however, and I ended up saving for five years to make the purchase.

If I had to say, though, the pouch’s capacity wasn’t exactly hefty. It had the capacity of approximately five to six normal-sized backpacks, which was a more than sufficient size for gathering magic crystals and the like.

More expensive variants with much larger capacities did exist, of course, some even being said that you could put an entire Dragon in one of their pouches. If one really did have such a treasure, however, it probably wouldn’t

be for sale. Regardless, such items were beyond my means for now, but perhaps I would make that a reality one day. For now, I was content with dreams remaining dreams. Though I would still continue down the path realizing my dream of becoming a Mithril-class adventurer.

Having finally gathered all the magic crystals from my fallen foes, I began making my way into the labyrinth's depths once more.

The Labyrinth of the New Moon was strange in its construction; most notably, the design and atmosphere of each floor was markedly different from the previous one. If I remembered correctly, the next floor was—

I felt a sense of anticipation surge up within me as I descended the labyrinth's stairs, as if I were about to step into a great unknown.

Truly...unbelievable. Am I really in a building? A labyrinth?

Such was the force of the sight that greeted me as I found myself momentarily at a loss for words. Warm rays of sunlight pierced through the air, landing on rolling plains of soft grass. In the distance, I could make out the outline of a forest.

While I had been taken to this floor by other veteran adventurers back in the day, I could not help but be overwhelmed by a feeling of awe as I stared out at the green vista before me. To think the interior of a labyrinth could host such a space... If anything, this area was indistinguishable from the grasslands and forests above.

No one knew who or what made these labyrinths, and even to this day, many questions remained. One could not, however, deny the abnormality and magnificence of the sight before them.

Perhaps the existence of this space wasn't too strange, given the fact that the pouch on my tool belt defied the laws of physics with the aid of magic. Be it magic or magecraft, it was entirely possible to enchant a space to behave in rather strange ways. Even a space like this could be woven from magic, assuming the wielder had enough skill to perform such a feat.

But this would be nigh impossible for people that lived in this modern age.

There were many reasons for this, particularly the amount of magic needed,

the incomplete nature of some ancient magic techniques, and the like. Although I wasn't exactly familiar with the rules and laws of magical landscaping, I could list many reasons as to why such a spectacle would be impossible to duplicate by the hands of man.

Even so, magical places like this one did exist, scattered wide across the lands. In addition, they were known for appearing and disappearing—in seemingly random intervals—repeatedly as the seasons passed.

A mysterious phenomenon indeed...

Perhaps there was once a god who made such magical spaces within labyrinths; or at least humans who worshiped a similar being capable of such miraculous feats. Some have said the labyrinths were forbidden grounds, places that could never be truly comprehended by the knowledge of man. Some have even said that merely entering the labyrinths was an act of unforgivable trespass.

Even so, labyrinths were an unmistakably core part of humanity—of human culture and life. The reason being that ingredients and materials gathered from the labyrinths, and the monsters that inhabited them, were used to create complex magical tools. In rare cases, adventurers even found ancient treasures.

In addition, as long as the labyrinths were left undisturbed for a short amount of time, said monsters reappeared once more, again with useful ingredients available for harvesting. I could almost say that labyrinths were an almost inexhaustible, renewable source of resources and materials. Some would go even further and claim that labyrinths were eternally self-renewing.

In reality, however, proponents of the labyrinths often found themselves arguing with those who felt these ancient structures threatened the existence of humanity. Both arguments had their merits, and there was certainly no denying the number of adventurers who had lost their lives exploring the labyrinths for fame and glory, not to mention treasure. But if a new labyrinth suddenly appeared and was left alone, monsters would eventually spill forth from its depths, causing large-scale destruction to human settlements.

Even taking all those points into consideration, though, labyrinths were still an important part of people's lives. If labyrinths were to completely disappear one

day, many aspects of trade and industry would just suddenly cease—such was the situation humanity had found itself in.

Everything came from the labyrinth: materials for weapons, armor, medicine, and even a most fundamental need, food.

Take, for instance, a certain humanoid, piglike monster: the humble Orc. Amongst the many food ingredients collected from the labyrinth, the flesh of an Orc was the most prized; truly, a name synonymous with delicious cuisine.



It was incredibly easy to describe an Orc's visual characteristics: they were rotund, stood on two legs like a man, and had the head of a pig. If one were to describe them that way, even a child would be able to imagine how they looked. In fact, they were somewhat popular amongst children—at least, that was the popular image of an Orc for the people that lived in these lands.

They looked slow and stupid, to the point one would assume they could be easily defeated even if one was lacking in technique, skill, or strength.

I was now facing that very same monster; however...

The Orc before me hardly trotted in a leisurely fashion. On the contrary, it was rushing at me with great form, aiming to close the distance between us swiftly. A single look informed me of the muscles in its limbs, and an equally savage gaze in its eyes. It was plain to see that a single blow could easily reap the life of a grown man.

While the Orc in question did not hold a sword or spear in its arms, it did hold a roughly hewn, stick-like club; it was probably salvaged from the odd branch of a tree in the surrounding forests. It wasn't difficult to imagine the sort of impact that such a weapon would have on the human body, as perhaps a single strike was enough to fell an adventurer.

The Orc, however, seemed to effortlessly wield its wooden stick-club, a testament to its brute strength.

Taking all the above observations into account, I could confidently say that Orcs were not weak monsters in any shape or form. If one were to simply treat an Orc as an oversized Goblin, one would surely lose their life almost instantly.

I, for one, was no stranger to such tales.

While Orcs were often portrayed in children's picture books and the like as rotund beings with large, bulging stomachs that trotted slowly on tiny legs, reality was not quite as forgiving. A caricature of an Orc, perhaps; nowhere near as threatening as the real thing.

A real Orc was, at the end of the day, a warrior. Even if the quality of its equipment left much to be desired, it would be foolish for one to lower their guard. That folly could easily kill the most skilled of adventurers.

With that being said, it was perhaps worth noting that I had just dodged a savage blow from the Orc's club.

Quickly propelling myself to the monster's unguarded rear, I held my sword up high, bringing it down in a wide arc upon its now-exposed back.

Orcs were indeed strong; that was a point I would not contest. But as long as one was aware of a monster's strengths, and if one took the appropriate cautions and prepared accordingly, victory would always be within one's grasp. This rule applied to all kinds of monsters in the labyrinth.

The Orc, however, quickly understood that I had attacked it from behind, immediately turning around and swinging its club violently in a horizontal swipe.

Perhaps one would question why my attack did not seem to instill the slightest sense of fear into the Orc. But that answer was clear: my blow most likely did not cut very deep.

At a glance, an Orc may appear to be nothing more than a fat, walking pig; however, its round shape belied the true nature of its body, namely its intensely honed musculature. If one did not fully commit to the blow, its muscles would simply stop most types of blades, causing the weapon to leave little but a shallow flesh wound. It was not a very damaging attack at all. One could think of it as a natural kind of armor that all Orcs had been blessed with at birth.

But that alone was not enough for me to concede defeat, however.

Dodging the Orc's horizontal swing, I channeled forth my reserves of mana and spirit. If this dragged on, it would surely become a long, pyrrhic skirmish.

Enchanting myself with the Shield spell in case my plans went awry, I converted my spirit into physical stamina. It was clear to me that I had to land a killing blow with just a single strike.

A normal Orc such as this did not come equipped with metal armor or shielding of any kind. If I had to say, more than half of the normal Orcs also did not have any reserves of mana or spirit. Even so, this particular Orc sensed my changing aura, raising its club and staring at me with its beady eyes. Before I could finish my enchantments, the Orc pounded the ground with its feet, rushing toward me with its club raised and without a second thought.

One could almost feel the intimidation; the sight of an Orc running at full speed toward oneself was indeed one to behold, and perhaps one that many would run from. Adventurers that did run from a charging Orc, however, would eventually be overtaken by it, losing their lives in the process.

The method by which one secured victory over an Orc was astonishingly straightforward: to not be intimidated by its charge, and strike at its weak points with whatever abilities one was blessed with. Simply put, one watched for openings, then exploited them. But for such a strategy to be successful, one needed the appropriate knowledge and experience, in addition to being able to read the flow of battle.

As for myself, I possessed knowledge. Experience, however, barring the fact that I was currently in combat with an Orc, I had little to none.

A thin line divided victory and defeat. Compared to when I was alive, I now wielded a sharply-honed sense of combat. Of course, comparing myself as I was now to how I was in life was one thing; it was quite another to compare myself to adventurers who were Silver-class and above. But I was confident that I had enough strength in me to defeat an Orc; on that point I was certain.

It was neither a declaration of pride nor folly, but simply a fact that I had become aware of.

Trusting in my own capabilities, I readied my blade, steeling myself to intercept the Orc's charge.

A chance will surely reveal itself. Of that, I am certain.

Yes... Those words resounded in my mind.

Before long, I could see the whites of its eyes. In that moment, time itself seemed to slow down as I found myself clearly observing the Orc's actions and movements.

Charging toward me, the Orc raised its club, intending to ram straight into me while swinging its weapon for good measure. Unfortunately for the Orc, the decision to raise its club while charging created a particularly large opening at its torso.

With my blade held out behind me, I slammed my foot down on the ground, swinging my blade into the Orc's exposed chest in a grand, spinning arc.

In a moment of what seemed to be pure silence, the Orc and I passed each other. Turning around, blade still in hand, I glanced at the Orc that was now silently standing as copious amounts of blood spurted from its body. Slowly, and with its hand still grasping its club, the Orc fell forward face-first into the ground with a resounding thud.

Observing the scene before me, a single, simple thought crossed my mind:

It seems I've won.

And that was exactly what had happened.



While it was all well and good that I had defeated the Orc, my job was far from over. Even though it would have been easy to dig around the carcass of the Orc and extract its magic crystal from near its heart, the request I had taken on specifically asked for materials to be gathered from the Orc directly.

More specifically, it was for the delivery of Orcish flesh, not its magic crystal. I suppose the guild's client intended to use its flesh as a culinary ingredient.

A variety of meats were consumed across the lands, the most common ones being pork, beef, and chicken. Needless to say, cattle and the like did not possess mana or other abilities, and they were much safer to domesticate and breed. Their meat, in turn, was more affordable as a result. These meats tasted relatively satisfying, and with the appropriate techniques and adequate effort

put in by the farmer, products made from said meats could potentially be of exceptional quality. Cattle were useful creatures indeed.

But there still existed a type of meat that stood above what most people subsisted upon: Orc meat. While there were many reasons as to why this was the case, the easiest and most straightforward reason was the fact that it was well known that Orc meat simply tasted great.

I should perhaps dispel a common misconception by the masses: many assume that the taste of Orcish flesh could be attributed to its musculature, but they are very much mistaken. The reason for this was, as I am fond of saying, relatively simple: the flesh and muscle of an Orc was reinforced by mana, with said mana dissipating upon the Orc's untimely death. This would, in turn, cause the flesh of the Orc to return to its original soft state.

It is said the taste of Orcish flesh is vastly superior to that of the most well-bred pig, so much so that any who tasted it would be loathe to consume other types of meat.

Perhaps one would find it strange that such a delicious ingredient was not more common, but it was a simple case of supply and demand. To begin with, adventurers that could actively hunt Orcs were few and far between. At the very least, no adventurer to my knowledge was capable of delivering a shipment of Orc meat large enough to sustain an entire town on a regular basis.

It was a rare ingredient indeed, commonly found gracing the dinner plates of rich individuals and nobles, or on the tables of slightly pricier restaurants. Such was the nature of its supply; perhaps it goes without saying that it would command a high price due to its scarcity.

In other words, if one could defeat an Orc and successfully return with its flesh, one would be rewarded handsomely for their efforts.

Approaching the very same fallen Orc that was to become part of my fortunes, I promptly cut deep into its neck with my blade. Blood once again began spurting forth from the carcass's new wound. This, combined with the already large cut in its chest, allowed me to quickly drain the body of its fluids.

During the process, however, I remained silent and deathly alert. There was always the risk of other monsters appearing and attacking me, for Orcish meat

was not only favored by humans, after all. Even other monsters lusted after its supposedly heavenly taste.

As such, it was with much relief that I completed the process without encountering another monster.

Continuing on with my grisly task, I sliced off what parts of the carcass I needed, wrapping the freshly-harvested meat in large, soft leaves. These leaves were from a plant known as the Maalt-Hoonoki found in the forests around Maalt. It was specifically known for its preservative effects, and it was commonly used to wrap up fresh meat. It was indeed a useful plant.

I, for one, often carried a good supply of them with me. Much like the fluid-flasks I had used to collect the bodily fluids of a Slime, these leaves were similarly useful tools that every adventurer carried.

The parts I cut from the carcass were the loin, filet, and brisket, as well as large cuts from its thighs. Although I would have much preferred to toss the entire body into my bag, my pouch could hardly contain it. A pity, really.

With those oft-used parts removed, I made some cuts for myself, namely its heart, intestines, and trotters. This was as much as I could carry.

It was a good haul; if nothing else, this amount of meat would fetch a fair sum. Having properly dissected the carcass, I would be able to sell it to a butcher for good coin. In fact, if I somehow delivered more than what was asked for, I would even be able to eat or sell the rest. Due to the nature of the request, I did not have to deliver a specific part of the Orc as it had only asked for certain *cuts* from the carcasses. It didn't exactly hurt to collect more than what the request asked for, since that way, the flesh would not go to waste.

It was worth noting, however, that the guild did offer dissection services, in addition to having a dedicated dissection room. If possible, I would have liked to transport the carcass wholesale, but I suppose there was little I could do with the physical constraints of my pouch.

Having finished my harvest, I left the Orc's body where it lay; it would eventually vanish given some time, as yet another unanswered mystery of the labyrinth. Perhaps it fed the other monsters of the Labyrinth, or was simply absorbed by the structure—either way, one of those two natural means would

claim it. So it was not exactly harmful for me to leave the carcass as it was. If anything, it would be put to good use as fertilizer or food for whatever came after.

With the present possibility of a fresh carcass attracting monsters, that too was merely a fact of life; nothing much could be done about the natural order of things.

Well, then, I suppose I should move on.

As I set out on my journey once more, I was reminded of the fact that the request specifically asked for cuts of meat from three Orcs.

Before I could call it a day, I would have to defeat and collect ingredients from two more Orcs. While I felt repeating two more similar battles would be taxing, I could not help but feel stronger after absorbing the life force of the slain Orc. Indeed, I found myself looking forward to my next battle.

With those thoughts in mind, I continued my journey, venturing deeper into the Labyrinth of the New Moon in search of such an elusive culinary ingredient.



After quite some hard work, I finally gathered the required ingredients. With specific cuts of meat and other organs harvested from the carcasses of three Orcs, I began venturing forth once more, this time headed toward the steps that would take me back to the previous level. While monsters had attacked me on the return leg of my journey, I hadn't strayed too far from the stairs, fulfilling the details of my request in the general vicinity. In fact, I only crossed paths with Slimes, Goblins, and the like, so I found myself easily progressing without incident.

If anything, I felt relaxed enough to think of opening the Map of Akasha that I had received from that strange woman.

Even so, the risk of an Orc suddenly appearing was still ever-present. In light of this, I found myself still somewhat cautious, as I was not exactly confident enough to stand in the middle of a clearing and stare at a self-drawing map. If I had companions keeping an eye on my surroundings, things would have been different, but of course, reality was somewhat different for a solo adventurer

such as myself.

I would really only consult a map if I could be absolutely sure of my safety, or if I was completely and utterly lost. In fact, even if I did have a choice, I would still feel conflicted. What a conundrum.

I could not help but think of the convenience the map brought to me, however. To think it was capable of charting the paths I had walked along as long as I channeled mana through it!

And so, it was with the thought of filling out as much of the map as I could that I chose to take a different path as I made my way back to the steps. But the Labyrinth of the New Moon was larger and wider than any other Labyrinth I had set foot in before. Mapping it, in turn, would certainly not be an easy task. At the very least, I would have liked to completely chart one floor of it, if only due to the fact that it would enable me to use the map's adventurer-tracking function. But on the other hand, this restriction was particularly troublesome for labyrinths with large floors.

Under normal circumstances, it mattered little to me if I could discern where my fellow adventurers were, but this only held true under said circumstances. If anything, I would only be depending on this function if I were searching for someone, and I suppose that was not the case for now.

My ponderous trek was soon interrupted by the faint, but definitive sounds of battle.

In situations such as these, there was no singularly adequate response, with adventurers typically having varied viewpoints. While some adventurers felt it was a courtesy to not pass by and potentially distract a fellow adventurer in combat, others felt it was better to observe silently, offering aid should the situation prove dire.

Many things could be said about both viewpoints and courses of action, but it was indeed difficult, if not impossible, to say that one was more correct over the other.

As for my case, I belonged to the latter group. Much like how I had behaved during my first encounter with Rina, I slowly approached the source of the sound. Keeping adequately silent, I slowly walked in the general direction of the

commotion, eventually coming to a quick stop.

Peeking out behind some cover, I spied two adventurers putting up quite the good fight with a few Goblins and Slimes. From their movements and techniques, I suppose they were Iron-or perhaps lower-Bronze-class adventurers of roughly 15 to 16 years of age.

With that being said, however, they displayed considerable skill despite their youth. The boy was a swordsman of sorts, and the girl, probably a practitioner of the healing arts.

It was a simple but effective formation: the boy held the front line, and the girl supported him with magic from the rear. Frankly speaking, this formation was a little risky for just two people. While they did a good job of holding out against the Goblins, the Slimes seemed to pose a bit of a problem.

Just as that thought flitted across my mind, the girl launched a fireball at the Slimes. Such magic was one of many lower-class attack spells, and those with the talent for spellcasting were often quick on the uptake.

Unfortunately for me, I possessed no such talent or affinity with spells. The only thing I could do was reinforce my body with shielding magic. While I could not cast spells, that girl was throwing fireballs with quite an impressive velocity; I suppose she had studied and practiced quite enough on her part.

These Slimes were, as usual, weak to attacks of a magical nature, and they were immediately felled by the girl's blasts. The Slimes, catching fire and dissolving, eventually left only their magic crystals upon the grassy ground. At the same time, the Goblins that the boy had been fighting fell, slain by his blade.

I supposed these two were fine on their own.

Satisfied, I turned around and walked away, once again heading for the steps.

"...Oh, do excuse me."

While I had run into some other adventurers on the way back, they had not so much as looked at me, nor had they very much to say at all. For some reason, this filled me with a sort of joy, and I soon found myself out of the labyrinth, with a good day's worth of hunting now behind me.



“...Gaahh! Y-You...” was the sound that greeted me as I entered Lorraine’s abode. Lorraine, who had been drinking some tea before my entrance, was apparently startled enough to spit it all out, with the tea now hanging in the air like a fine mist. Upon closer inspection, she seemed hunched over some documents—documents which bore my registered name with the guild. Specifically, that of a certain “Rentt Vivie.”

“Are you... All right?” I asked, getting down on all fours with a rag to clean up the small puddle of tea-colored fluid on the ground. Lorraine, however, did not seem to be doing too well, as she was holding her head with both hands, looking positively exasperated.

“...In some ways I would say, no, I am definitely *not* all right. Which brings me to the point... Why did you register with such a name? Did you not think for a moment that using my family name would be strange, given our history together?”

It was as Lorraine said. While what she said had merit, there were other problems to me being here in general, problems that had been a long time coming since my untimely arrival and subsequent entrances into Lorraine’s abode. Me stubbornly using the name of “Rentt” did indeed make things a little worse; I could have used another name, no doubt, but things were not that simple.

If I had used another name, I would perhaps not appear as suspicious in this context. However, rumors of a strange man visiting Lorraine’s home on a regular basis would soon spread, and I did not wish for that to happen. Lorraine was a woman of age, after all. Such a thing would be most undesirable for her reputation. This was specifically why I had chosen to use her family name and pass myself off as a distant relative instead.

With all that in mind, and the history of my first name being that of a Saint’s and all, combining both that and Lorraine’s family name did not seem too strange. In fact, I had gotten used to it relatively quickly, and I was now using it on a regular basis.

Concluding my explanation, Lorraine’s expression slowly lightened up. Her

previously incredulous stare soon faded, eventually being replaced with one of understanding.

“...A relative... A relative, you say... Hmm... I suppose that would be somewhat believable, yes...”

“You see?”

“...Well, even so. You did not have to go out of your way to consider my circumstances, yes? I really do not mind.

“To begin with, the fact that I am a woman and a scholar in these rural parts already gifts me with a questionable reputation; at the very least, I am surely regarded as strange.”

Just as Lorraine said, a female scholar in the faraway, rural frontier town of Maalt was a strange thing indeed in the Kingdom of Yaaran.

There were, however, no laws prohibiting Lorraine from doing what she had been doing all this time. While there were some contrary opinions and the like, the protests did not center around her gender or profession, but more on the physically taxing nature of operating out of a border town. After all, many monsters walked these lands, so it was almost an occupational hazard for a scholar to cross paths with more monsters than most other professions.

For the sake of research, many scholars traveled far and wide; I supposed one had no choice but to travel after leaving behind a large-scale academic institution. As such, most scholars in her line of research were often men with higher physical abilities—at least, that was how most people saw them.

Of course, such generalizations did not really apply to a Silver-class adventurer like Lorraine, but society would always have its opinions.

Even so, there had been a notable rise in female scholars as of late, albeit in fields of study that did not require too much fieldwork. In Lorraine’s case, however, her study of monsters and magic often meant that she had no choice but to personally set off on exploratory journeys. Such was the nature of her work. I suppose one could say that it came with the job.

But with that being said, Lorraine never was the type to be bothered about details like these. This was precisely why she had continued doing what she

loved.

While Lorraine could have easily avoided the gossip and judgment of the narrow-minded if she had instead presented herself as an adventurer first and foremost, the fact that she still adamantly insisted on being a scholar first goes to show just how much she was dedicated to her research. Adventurers were judged on their capabilities, after all; gender was nary a consideration.

Although there was no shortage of adventurers who would find fault with Lorraine simply because she was a woman, their behavior perhaps said more about themselves.

All these points made adventuring a more woman-friendly occupation than being a scholar; such was the state of affairs in this land.

In reality, though, Lorraine was trusted by many at the guild, with her titles not being just for show.

“I can’t... Simply. Keep imposing. I am already... Causing you a fair amount of... Trouble, Lorraine. I would not... Want to be any more of... A burden.”

“Yes, yes. Just like you to say something like that. You should not worry too much about such things. To start, I am indebted to you in more ways than one. Do you not cook and clean? You do all that and more, no? If anything, we should be on equal footing now—well, I suppose I would still be in your debt, considering all that you have done for me in the past...” Lorraine said, smiling.

I found those words heartwarming; indeed, they were kind words for one such as myself. But reality was quite different; if anything, *I* was the one indebted to Lorraine.

Under normal circumstances, one could not exactly justify turning up at a friend’s home as a member of the walking dead and summarily live with them just because one had helped said friend with a fair number of chores. There was also the ever-present problem of potentially dangerous developments, seeing how I had once taken a bite from Lorraine’s shoulder and eaten it. There was no other way of portraying what I did.

Under normal circumstances, one would be terrified of me—at the very least, they would be unwilling to remain in close proximity to myself. Even so,

Lorraine continued to interact with me normally, treating me as an ordinary person and allowing me to live in her home.

I was truly thankful from the bottom of my heart. And that was why I said:

“That... Is not... True. I am only able... To remain human now... Because of your help, Lorraine...”

“Rentt... Well, if that is all there is to it, I will happily stay where I am. If the latest developments are to be believed, you are a relative of mine, are you not? Such formalities have no place amongst family and kin.”

To think that Lorraine had quickly utilized my made-up setting to her advantage—an impressive woman, as always.

“Then... I suppose I will... Gladly continue accepting... Your aid, then,” I said, nodding as I did so.



After that conversation, Lorraine and I sat down and I gave her my report, detailing my achievements in the labyrinth today, as well as my thoughts on the capabilities of my new Thrall body. The Map of Akasha was discussed, as well, particularly how I felt about actually using it. Unfortunately, our conversation on those topics did not reveal anything new, and I instead moved on to discussing the current progress of my adventuring career.

It was a simple affair, really, with me informing Lorraine of my Orc-slaying quest, what had occurred during the hunt, and my spoils for the day.

The results of the hunt were just as cut-and-dry: next up, I would be accepting a class progression ranking test. To be more precise, I would be taking the test to rise to Bronze-class. This development did not surprise me very much, especially considering the fact that most adventurers did not merely start hunting Orcs successfully from the get-go after immediately signing up with the guild. The fact that I had returned with spoils from not one, but three Orcs relatively unscathed was perhaps more than enough to convince the guild that my adventurer class should be revised.

But good adventurers were not merely defined by martial prowess: an adequate set of knowledge was required as well, hence the ranking test.

Basically, it would be a written exam of sorts, with the topics in question being the guild's rules and information on monsters, materials, and the like. Within reasonable means for a Bronze-class adventurer, at the very least.

The test was, of course, reasonably difficult. For one such as myself, however, the test was frightfully easy. I could say that I was fully prepared, and would most likely score full marks on said test.

The problem rested with the practical section of the test; this particular section usually differed with each candidate.

Commonly, a Bronze-class quest would be handed out to the adventurer in question to test their mettle, but of course, this was not guaranteed. The nature of the task at hand was completely up to the whims of the guildmaster.

This part of the test was not varied for the sake of variation. It was most likely to prevent cheating and other kinds of undesirable behaviors. With that being said, however, it was common knowledge that some particularly talented individuals would find one way or another around that veil of secrecy. That act in and of itself was commonly taken as a fair indicator of their skills, and they weren't usually reprimanded too harshly.

In any case, looking into the details of the test would involve too much time and effort, so I instead decided to take the test normally, passing it with my own ability.

I could not help but wonder what trials awaited me tomorrow, and it was with these thoughts in mind that I sat, eagerly anticipating the next dawn.



"I have come... To take. The rank advancement test..."

Having arrived at the adventurer's guild on the dot, I promptly walked right up to Sheila, announcing my intent without uncertain terms. Sheila, for her part, understood what I was here for immediately.

"Ah, yes, Mister Rentt. You're right on time! I am most grateful," she said, a smile on her face.

It was perhaps strange that Sheila would be grateful for my timeliness.

Considering that many adventurers had a unique perception of time, however, her feelings were not too hard to understand.

For one thing, a fair number of ruffians and the like ended up as adventurers; it was a problem of attitude, really. While one could say that being late was not a big deal, small details like that easily distinguished a professional from a run-of-the-mill adventurer. Tardy adventurers would eventually find their bad habits catching up with them, usually in the form of a formal penalty from the guild, no less.

In addition, adventurers often had to deal with human clients as they climbed their way up the ranks, since adventuring wasn't all about beating up monsters, after all. As such, having a large number of tardy adventurers milling around was not good for the general reputation and public opinion of adventurers in general, hence the guild's efforts at cultivating some semblance of punctuality in its members. In fact, showing up punctually for the test was part of the test in and of itself.

But with that said, tardiness was not defined by a few late minutes or seconds, as such precise timekeeping instruments were not readily available to the masses, and were commonly owned by royalty or rich merchants and the like. I could possibly go out on a limb and say that top-class adventurers kept a timepiece on their being, but on that I was not certain.

In any case, the candidate in question would basically lose points for showing up overwhelmingly late to the test. Due to me already knowing this fact, I had no qualms about showing up on time.

Although Lorraine's perceptions of time were painted in somewhat broad strokes, she did own a personally-crafted timepiece of sorts, if only so she would not be late for her own appointments.

While clocks and the like were installed in public spaces for general use by townsfolk, I was able to tell the time from the comfort of Lorraine's abode, largely due to Lorraine's tinkering habits.



“Of... Course. Is the... Written test... First?”

“Yes, that is indeed the case. However... Are you sure of this? There are opportunities to take the test tomorrow, or the day after. You certainly don’t have to take it today. Have you considered taking some time off and studying for the test, at least? I would advise you to do that much...”

I understood Sheila’s concerns; she had merely informed me of my right to take the test the day before, and was probably not expecting me to show up for it the very next day. Perhaps there was some merit in that, as it was indeed uncommon for one to apply to take the test during the next available time immediately after being informed of the right to take it.

To begin with, more than half the questions that were commonly featured in the written test would be unanswerable by most Iron-class adventurers. In turn, most of these adventurers would take weeks, or sometimes even months off to study and gain the required knowledge to take the written part of the test.

In my case, I had proven myself to be worthy of taking this test immediately after registering. So naturally, the guild staff wouldn’t have had the time to warn me of the knowledge required for the test.

But I had taken the test previously in life, so while the test now might not be identical, I had firmly memorized the general types of questions and topics that awaited me: guild rules; monster information; material information; the general knowledge expected of a Bronze-class adventurer... I had more than enough time to ready myself for this test.

In addition, the tests were not held daily, instead held usually on a monthly basis. If I were to stagnate and continue drifting about as an Iron-class adventurer, I would never fulfill my dreams. This was why I had to act when the opportunity presented itself.

With those thoughts in mind, I offered Sheila my response: “There is no... Problem. Where should I... Go?”

If memory served, the test was held on the second floor of the guild, in a meeting room of sorts. Even if I had known the answer to my question, I had to ask either way.

“It will be held in the meeting room, on the second floor. This way, if you would...” Sheila said, stepping away from her counter to guide me to the relevant location.

Upon entering the room, the eyes of a handful Iron-class adventurers glanced at me, before immediately shifting back to various papers in their hands. Each paper looked to be filled to the brim with various notes and handwriting. Some of the adventurers mumbled under their breath as they did so, as if reciting ancient spells.

Notes, perhaps, written to aid in their test-taking efforts. The guild did loan these out to test candidates as the day drew near, but with the scope of questions having been relatively broad, the relevant information and knowledge could be squeezed onto one piece of paper as long as a smaller writing style was used.

This knowledge, of course, expanded proportionately to the rank one aspired to: a booklet for the Silver-class; a book for the Gold-class; an encyclopedia for classes beyond; so on and so forth.

Unfortunately, the candidates were unable to use said papers during the test, but perhaps they should consider it a blessing that the guild would loan them such resources in the first place. There was, however, a penalty to pay should they lose it, with the piece of paper in question costing one silver coin; an affordable price for even Iron-class adventurers. After all, if one dedicated at least a week or two’s worth of time to studying for the Bronze-class test, one would naturally obtain enough knowledge to score a passing grade.

Honestly speaking, it wasn’t too much to worry about.

It was worth noting, though, that for the greater half of the adventurers in this room, written tests such as this one would be a first in their lives. This fact perhaps accounted for the tense atmosphere—to think that I was once amongst their number! Any individual who did not take the time to prepare would surely be nervous.

On another note, while I had decided to take the written exam, there were other methods of testing available, such as an oral question-and-answer format. In fact, in kingdoms and countries with a lower literacy rate, that was the more

common format of testing.

This was the reason as to why there were only a few adventurers in this room: due to the nature of the oral testing process, it was conducted in a separate area, with higher waiting times as well due to the fact that participants had to be tested individually. And so, those who did not enjoy waiting often took to the written version of the test instead.

After I made myself comfortable at my seat, Sheila, who had left the room after guiding me here, returned with a sheaf of roughly-hewn papers and quill pens in her arms.

“Well, then, let us begin the test. I am under the impression you are all literate and capable of writing, so I will not engage in unnecessary explanations. However...as a reminder, this set of papers contains the questions that candidates must answer. Candidates are to write their answers on this answer sheet, with the provided quill pens. The test will formally end when the sand in the upper chamber of this hourglass runs out. Are there any questions?”

I suppose what Sheila said made sense: all the candidates in attendance could indeed write. Even I had used a quill pen before.

As expected, there were no questions from the gathered adventurers in the room.

“Then I will now hand out the question and answer sheets, as well as the quill pens. I will also be retrieving the test revision sheets loaned to you by the guild.

“The question and answer sheets are one-sided only, and will be placed face-down on your tables. Please only turn them around when I instruct you to.”

Saying so, Sheila began making her rounds, distributing the appropriate pens and papers as she did so.

A strange aura of muted tension filled the air. For me, it was a nostalgic feeling. I did not have much time to reminisce, however. Sheila was already done with her rounds, and she now stood at the front of the room.

With a deft motion, Sheila turned a large hourglass over, setting it back down gently on her desk.

“...You may begin.”

And so the test began.



As expected, the test progressed smoothly, ending on a relatively inconsequential note. It was a given by this point, perhaps—after all, I had taken this test once before in life.

With that being said, however, the questions themselves were different, but the relevant area of knowledge largely stayed the same. It would have been quite strange if I did poorly.

The other candidates in the room, while looking uneasy, would probably pass the test without too many issues, as well. This was plain to see from the fact that they could read and write. They were clearly blessed with a fair amount of education in their lives.

In turn, it would not be too difficult to memorize the required facts for this test, given the narrow scope of tested knowledge. Empirical evidence to back up my observations did exist: it was public knowledge that the oral test had a much lower pass rate than the written one.

My literacy was gifted to me by my village elder and herbalist, as they were the ones who taught me how to read and write. My motivations back then were far simpler, as to me, a proper adventurer should at the very least be literate. This, too, contributed to my unchanging dream, that of becoming a Mithril-class adventurer.

We did not wait very long for our results to be published. The test papers were sent back after a short while, perhaps due to the smaller pool of candidates. If one’s name was read, one would be among those who passed. I, of course...

“Rentt. Mister Rentt Vivie,” Sheila continued as I stood, walking up to her desk in the front of the room. “...You have passed the written test. Well, actually, you received full marks! While it’s not exactly a difficult test, a result like this is somewhat rare. You’re something else, Mister Rentt.”

I suppose my performance was worthy of praise. Sheila’s choice of words

suggested that other candidates had received full marks from time to time, too. Personally, I would not consider it such a great achievement.

Thinking back upon it, I realized that I had not scored full marks when I first took the test. I lacked experience, forgot the answers to some questions, and made some stupid mistakes. I kept all that to myself, of course, as one could not exactly tell the guild's administrative staff that one had taken the test before.

"...I see. It is... Great. That I passed. What should I do... Next?" That was my relatively subdued answer as I asked Sheila about the next step; mainly, the practical, hands-on segment of the test.



"...Next up is the practical assessment, where you will cooperate with some of your fellow candidates and reach a certain point in the labyrinth. This will still be a competition of sorts, however, and the first group of candidates to reach the designated point wins."

I nodded in response to Sheila's words. I vaguely remembered collecting medicinal herbs and the like for my first practical assessment all those years ago. While the assignment sounded relatively simple in passing, I ended up having to defeat a fair number of monsters while making my way to the area where the herb grew. The entire time I took great pains to not get lost in the dense undergrowth of the forest I had ventured into. All in all, it was mostly an unpleasant experience, to say the least.

Come to think of it, quite a few candidates had gotten lost, and had to eventually be retrieved by guild staff. Unfortunately, it goes without saying that those poor saps failed their practical assessments.

Compared to that, the goal for this assessment seemed easy enough. Monsters would definitely be present in the labyrinth, and one could easily reach the designated spot quickly if one just purchased a map and took the shortest path...

At least, that would be what an Iron-class adventurer taking the test for the first time would think. Judging from my past experiences with the guild's tests and trials, it was plain to see that they were up to no good—behind the cover of a simple request surely lay traps and other insidious devices.

“I... See. Are there... Any. Restrictions?”

Perhaps it would be the prohibition of maps, or other little details of a similar nature. But Sheila just smiled, somewhat faintly.

“Mm... Not really, no. Everything is permitted.”

Something was off about the way Sheila delivered her answer. The guild had definitely planned something. Of this, I was certain. If I were to go out of my way to avoid this, it would be used against me, or worse still, disqualify me outright.

“I... Understand. So... Where is the... Adventurer I am cooperating... With?”

“Hmm... Right, it would be these candidates here. Candidates Raiz, Laura!”

At Sheila’s call, two silhouettes separated themselves from the throngs of adventurers on the first floor of the guild. Slowly, they made their way toward us: a young boy and girl. They were strangely familiar; familiar faces indeed...

It did not take me long to remember that they were the pair who were locked in combat with Goblins and Slimes in the Labyrinth of the New Moon.

That very same swordsman-cleric pair.

I had assumed they were Iron-or Bronze-class when I first laid eyes on them, and I suppose I was not too far off the mark. The fact that they were here, however, meant that they were Iron-class adventurers, much like myself.

“If I may introduce you to Raiz Dunner and Laura Satii. And this here...is Mister Rentt Vivie,” Sheila said, introducing us to one another.

Raiz and Laura. Hmm...

Raiz was a short youth, with a head of short-cropped red hair and an energetic gaze. Laura, on the other hand, was a seemingly quiet girl with tresses of soft, faded brown.

The two adventurers lowered their heads at me as their names were called, and I did the same. It would seem like they had come to the table with the most basic of manners. That gesture brought me some degree of relief. There were, after all, many ruffians and the like who ended up as adventurers. Among them were a few who had strange notions about never so much as bowing to their

fellows, all in a misguided show of strength. In fact, a cursory look around the room revealed more than enough of those fools. Yes, they were everywhere.

Each team had a member of the guild's staff assigned to them, presumably to explain the relevant procedures, but also to monitor each group for unsuitable behaviors.

...It did not take much to see that those certain individuals would fail the test since they were, after all, fools who could not even be half-decent at greeting their peers. I, however, kept my observations and opinions to myself.

More importantly, I had to find out more about my teammates; this much was necessary, given that we would soon be headed off into a labyrinth together. Failure to share adequate information would lead to deaths, and wherever possible, I would like to avoid dying a second time.

"I am... A swordsman. I can only use... Enhancing magic... And the Shield... Spell. Nothing... Else."

Raiz and Laura were quick to respond to my simple introduction.

"I'm a swordsman, too. I reinforce my body and stamina with spirit in battle. And Laura here..."

"I'm a mage... But I can use healing magic, too. I will work hard from the back lines. I hope we get along and work well together, Mister Vivie."

Hence concluded our simple exchange of pleasantries, if one could call it that.



Sheila continued her explanation:

“Well, then. I suppose you are all acquainted, so I will now proceed to explain the details of the test.”

Her words were enough to draw our undivided attention, for if one ignored something as crucial as the guild’s instructions, one’s life would easily be forfeit. I strained my ears, listening closely.

“As I have mentioned previously, the objective of this assessment is to reach a designated point in the labyrinth. To be precise, it will be this point, right here on the map. Is this understood?”

Saying so, Sheila pointed to a single point on the map detailing the Labyrinth of the New Moon.

“The guild will be providing you with this map, so please use it as you see fit. This concludes the explanation. But one note: you may engage in conflict with other adventurers. Otherwise, the first group that reaches this point wins. That is all.”

Raiz and Laura both nodded. I had my suspicions—something had to be afoot. Even so, I remained silent.

“There is a time limit for this assignment, namely until sunset today. Do keep that in mind as you progress.

“Well, then, I hope the three of you give it your all. I’ll be cheering for you!” Sheila said, smiling innocently.



“Well... Should we head off to the New Moon? Maybe by carriage, as usual? Oh...have you been there before, Rentt?”

I nodded at Raiz’s query.

It would seem like Raiz had seen fit to act in a leader’s capacity for our motley crew. This worked out in my favor, mainly due to the fact that I did not have much of a grasp on team mechanics. I had, after all, been adventuring on my own this whole time, so I suppose it was fine to leave things to Raiz. If there was a problem, I would raise it; otherwise, I fully intended on staying as silent as

possible.

With regards to Raiz's preferred mode of transport... Well, I suppose there was no problem with it.

Probably.

As it turned out, our horse carriage made it safely to the entrance of the New Moon. There was always the possibility of the carriage veering off-course and heading somewhere else. For my part, I stared at the coachman, and was rewarded with what seemed to be a bitter smile. There was no telling what could happen on occasions like this, and I certainly would not be smiling if I really did end up somewhere else instead of my intended location.

The coachman's bitter smile itself was a good indicator of this—one of the guild's traps, perhaps. Raiz and Laura, on the other hand, did not seem to suspect a thing. After all, who would suspect a trap in such a simple, everyday activity?

This, however, was exactly the sort of tactic that the guild was fond of using, and I, for one, knew this very well.

Upon reaching the entrance of the labyrinth, Raiz and Laura immediately began their preparations, eager to set off. I supposed they weren't doing anything wrong, but I should probably say something, and so I did.

"...Hey. The two... Of you."

"What's up, Rentt?"

"What is it, Mister Vivie?"

I didn't have too much trouble attracting their attention, at least.

"...We should... Buy new maps."

The two looked surprised at my words, before eventually pulling out the supplied map from their packs.

"Well, we have a map right here, Rentt."

"That's right... Can't we simply use this one?"

I shook my head. "...This... Map. Was drawn... Almost 15 years... Ago. There is

no... Guarantee. That this map is... Still accurate, now.”

“Eh...? Ah! You’re right! Why’d they write something this important in such tiny letters? It’s even in this tiny corner, too!” Raiz said as he finally made out the fine print on the corner of the map.

Labyrinths weren’t static structures. It was all too common for the chambers and interior structures of a labyrinth to collapse and reshape themselves, eventually forming new roads into the unknown.

With that being said, however, labyrinths typically changed their interior structure once every ten to twenty years. Given that this map was 15 years old, I could not help but have my doubts about its accuracy. It would be best for us to purchase the newest edition of the New Moon’s map.

I, of course, had the Map of Akasha, so other maps mattered little to me. The problem in this case, however, was the fact that the designated location was only on the guild-provided map. Unfortunately for me, a route to the designated location was not charted on the Map of Akasha—a road yet to be traveled, perhaps. Hence my suggestion, for all the reasons above, that we were better off purchasing a new map altogether.

“Who should we buy it from, though...?” Raiz questioned, craning his head as he took a good look around.

Map merchants were a common sight in the streets of Maalt, and they were, of course, present in large numbers near the entrance of the New Moon. The problem, in this case, was not one of quantity, but of trust: who should one believe? Anyone could scribble some lines on a canvas and call it a map.

With that in mind, I took a good look around myself, and almost immediately settled on a single peddler in the distance.

“...We will buy... Our map. From that... Person.”

Looking at the individual I had pointed out, my teammates both raised their eyebrows.

“...He looks super suspicious, you know?” “Yes, he does... Looks a little out of the ordinary...” was what they had to say.

I could not fault them, however. The person I had pointed to was a man dressed in black robes, seemingly emanating a strange, unreadable aura. Upon closer inspection, the corner of the man's lips curled up in a sort of twisted half-smile; it almost seemed like he would attempt to sell us dangerous herbs.

...Perhaps I should not be commenting on the appearances of robed individuals. What made me so different from that other robed man? My teammates did not seem to distrust me as much...

In any case, I made a beeline for the robed man. The two of them, still relatively unconvinced, quickly followed after me, having apparently set their doubts aside for the time being.



"...Oh? What is this? Do you have business with me?" a small, hunched man in black robes said, his beady eyes immediately coming to rest upon me as I approached. He seemed amused; genuinely amused, if I may say so.

Around me were other Iron-class adventurers, all purchasing maps from one merchant or another, having noticed the discrepancy within their guild-provided maps. With that being said, the very fact that the only person who had approached this robed man was none other than myself was a reasonable indicator of his suspicious appearance.

Map merchants were a breed of their own. Yes, they were mainly present in droves on the streets of Maalt, but at labyrinth entrances, as well. Many of them hawked their wares, some claiming to have maps with intricate notes and otherwise hard-to-obtain information. The robed man before me, however, was nothing like the rest. In fact, he simply stood there, occasionally swaying like a stick in the wind. Needless to say, he stood out, as one would expect him to. Anyone who took so much as a glance at him wouldn't think he sold maps.

"...Sell me. A map."

The man seemed somewhat impressed at my sudden declaration.

"Hmm...? How very perceptive of you, to know that I sell maps. Look at your peers! No other adventurer has approached me."

"I do not... Care about your... Observations. Please sell... Me a map."

But of course I had to be curt, for I knew the quirks of this man far too well. If he were to speak to someone he did not know, he would branch off in various pointless segues, before finally disappearing like smoke, not leaving a single trace.

Perhaps this behavior would come across as strange from a supposed map merchant. While many theories had been proposed, I suppose the man simply was not in the business of selling maps to people he did not know. There were, after all, adventurers who would not hesitate to use violence to achieve their means. With that in mind, the man's behavior was perhaps not too difficult to understand.

"...Heh heh... So, you want a map? Here you go... And that will be two silver coins."

Saying so, the man withdrew what appeared to be a scroll made of roughly-hewn paper from the depths of his robes. I, however, was having none of that.

"...I only want a map... Of the first floor. Also... That is far... Too expensive for a map. Let us... Be fair. I will pay... five bronze coins. A fair... Price, no?"

He seemed surprised at my interjection, but immediately withdrew another scroll from his robes, offering it to me.

"...Ho. So, you'll probably make the cut after all... You two little ones there. You'll listen to this man if you know what's good for you..."

"Heh. Five bronze coins it is, then."

And so it came to be that I handed the man my coins with one hand, taking the map with my other. Almost immediately, the robed man disappeared before our very eyes, almost as if he was never there in the first place.

Raiz and Laura, who had been standing wide-eyed behind me all this time, finally decided to give their opinions on the matter.

"Hey, Rentt... Is this map really gonna be okay?"

"I've never seen someone as strange as that before..."

I could hardly blame them for having their doubts, but in any case, I held out our newly-purchased map, displaying its details to my companions.

“...We should... Compare this map... With the one the guild... Gave us.”

The two were quick to cooperate, at the very least. Swiftly retrieving their maps from their bags, we began comparing the two scrolls in detail. The differences were remarkable, to say the least.

“...So, this passageway is caved in? And...this path here has just...changed? Labyrinths can do that?”

“Umm... The cloaked man seems to have written down the locations of many traps and the like... Oh. It would be bad if we took the shortest path to our marked location; it’s a dead end now.”

Such was the continued stream of muttering and relief from the two. Eventually, they both looked up from the scrolls, staring at me instead.

“You’re pretty good, Rentt! If we didn’t have you with us, we’d have surely run in with that old map and gotten lost!”

“Yes! With this map, the test will certainly go smoothly!”

They seemed convinced of my capabilities, if nothing else.

While I did not say it out loud for fear of dampening Laura’s spirits, obtaining a map was only the first step; this alone was not enough to pass the guild’s trials. We had safely sidestepped the first of many gates that barred us from our goal. Perhaps that would be a more accurate image of our situation.

“...The guild is... Known for pulling... Tricks like this. There is no knowing... What is in the labyrinth, as well. Let us advance... Carefully.”

The two nodded eagerly at my words. It seemed that I had been blessed with relatively honest and straightforward teammates.

I could not help worrying about their future, however; a little bit of doubt was a healthy thing to have. While I meant them no ill will, the same could not be said about their future encounters.



“HAAAAA!!”

With a loud shout and a quick swing of his blade, Raiz made short work of the

Skeleton before him. While it was by no means a forceful swing, it was accurate, cleanly cleaving into and shattering the Skeleton's skull. The Skeleton, for its part, did not seem very satisfied at this, and instead continued to amble on, headless.

Jumping out from behind Raiz, I gave my own sword a good swing, bringing its edge through the Skeleton's remaining bones, making it rain bone fragments.

"...Huff... Puff..."

Raiz seemed somewhat out of breath after our engagement. This was, of course, not the first Skeleton to bar our advance, as we had felled countless of its brethren on our way here.

Our formation was a simple one: Raiz was the vanguard, and Laura was the rear. I stood between them, protecting Laura while assisting Raiz with what attacks I could.

The two of them, however, seemed close to their limits. While I could have progressed myself without as much difficulty, that was not the point here: the goal of this test was to clear the guild's trials as a team.

"...Raiz. Are you... All right?"

"Don't...worry. I mean...I probably shouldn't say that. It's getting to me, yeah... For starters, did this part of the New Moon always have this many monsters?!"

Raiz's observations had merit, as there were indeed more monsters in this area than usual. Although the Labyrinth was inhabited by a fair number of monsters, the concentration of said monsters in this area was quite unnatural.

If I had to guess, this was more of the guild's efforts—guild staff must have gone through the trouble of leading monsters to this location. Demonstrating one's combat prowess and stamina was, after all, part of the requirements for becoming a Bronze-class adventurer.

"While the guild... Cannot control... The monsters of the labyrinth, they can... Use fragrances or... People. To lead, concentrate monsters... Into a certain location. That is probably... The reason."

Laura was the first to respond.

“Fragrance...? Ah, yes. Fragrances... Incenses and such, to lead monsters to a specific location...”

“The guild doing it... Is part of the test... Perhaps. But there are... Also people. Who use these methods... To entrap their fellow candidates. We should... Be careful.”

Laura’s previously innocent and cheerful expression turned dark upon hearing my words of caution.

“There are people who do that sort of thing...?” Surprise and sadness tinted her voice.

I suppose she had not wanted to believe that such individuals existed—oh, but they did indeed exist. Death was a force of nature in the labyrinths, after all. Even if an individual had lured or entrapped another to his or her death, the discussion would end then and there as long as they were not caught. There was also the option of letting the labyrinth’s monsters do the job. That way, one did not have to dirty their own hands.

In fact, the use of fragrances to lure monsters to another location was one of those methods, and individuals who specialized in this ability did exist. These events occasionally occurred on a much larger scale, with villages and towns assaulted and summarily wiped off the map; a tragedy of national proportions, indeed. To think that such events were possible if one hired the right individuals...

If memory served, the fragrances in question were originally developed to make monster hunting easier. Somewhere along the line, however, someone had seen fit to pervert its purpose. It was human malice at its purest. But of course, evil existed any and everywhere.

“...Stop,” I said to my two companions just as we were about to turn a corner.

The two of them looked to me, confused. In response, I whispered softly:

“There is... An enemy. There, waiting to... Ambush us.”

With adequately surprised expressions, the two of them whispered back to

me.

“...But Rentt...I don’t sense any monsters!”

“That’s right... And monsters on this floor shouldn’t have the intelligence required to do such a thing...”

Laura and Raiz both raised fair points. Skeletons, Goblins, Slimes—all these monsters were only present in their weakest forms on the first level of the New Moon. No monster on this floor would even be capable of such tactics.

In the most dramatic case, a monster would reappear right before a passing adventurer, but that was all there was to it. I, however, warned my companions of a different danger.

“...The ambusher... Is not a monster. They are... Human.”



“H-Human...?!”

“Why would a human lie in wait for us? Do they want something from us?”

Raiz and Laura, both equally shaken, turned to me for answers. I answered them to the best of my ability.

“There is the... Possibility of that. Yes. But this is... Something else... Altogether. If they really... Needed the two of you for some reason... They would not. Hide their presence... Like that.”

It was a simple observation: if they really did have something to ask of us, they would not be lying in wait in some corner; they would instead approach us normally, as anyone else would.

Among the rules of the labyrinth, there was one in particular that governed monsters and kills should adventurers cross paths, namely that they should not hunt monsters engaged by others without permission. There were, however, no rules on approaching or speaking with fellow adventurers. The very fact they were hidden meant that what they were about to do could only be done if they were hidden—in other words, it was unmistakably an ambush.

My two companions seemed to have reached the same conclusion.

“Hey... You don’t mean...”

“You... You really think...?!”

I suppose we had all come to the same image, and my words of caution had served their purpose. If I had to guess, the two probably assumed that another adventurer was lying in wait to ambush them, but this was not always the case.

There was no denying the fact that there could be other unknown factors at play. It would be foolish to assume that the individual lying in wait for us was not hostile, but I suppose it would be equally unbecoming of us to strike first.

“...Should we... Find out?” I said, my voice still a soft, raspy whisper.

My two companions promptly nodded.

“How...are we gonna do that?”

“Do we just...ask them?”

My response was simple: “We will... Advance in combat formation. You two... Get ready for anything. I will... Go up to the corner myself.”

Saying so, I put one foot forward. My definition of “finding out” was relatively simple: I would approach the place where the ambusher laid in wait, and see if they struck out at me.

I could not exactly leave this role to Raiz or Laura; although they were skilled adventurers in their own right, they did not have enough experience, and they might hesitate when fighting human opponents.

The biggest and most significant reason, however, was that the two of them would die if they were wounded in the ambush. This was, of course, no joke. Taking all factors into consideration, I would probably not die very easily even if I was wounded.

I was, after all, an Undead.

Thralls in particular were known to not die even if their heads were chopped off; they had a strange tendency to cling on to life. In my case, I suppose I would be unable to move if my head was chopped off, but at the very least, I wouldn’t stop moving just because I was stabbed in the chest. Me being a member of the walking dead in this instance played out to my advantage. This was why I

volunteered.

The two of them reached out in protest, attempting to stop me, but I was already out of their reach, walking rapidly toward the corner of the hallway. Upon seeing that, the two gave up on trying to stop me, instead readying their weapons for combat.

A wise choice.

Although they could have cried out or raised their voices in protest, they instead chose to respond in a manner adequate to the situation at hand.

That was an important trait for adventurers to have—all things considered, this world was not a kind place. Death came quickly, often at the heels of carelessness and a single moment of gullibility.

—Just like how it came for me.

I suppose that would be a bad joke.

With those thoughts in mind, I soon reached the corner in question—

“WRAAAAAAAAAHHH!!”

With a loud shout and large movements, an adventurer-like man sprung at me from the side, having hurled himself straight at me. In his hands was a sword, already raised well above his head. The blade was probably meant for me, as his actions spoke for themselves.

Behind him was a man with a bow, and another who looked somewhat like a mage.

As I thought.

A smile flitted across my lips as I narrowed my eyes. My predictions had been spot-on.

Swiftly drawing my sword, I parried the incoming adventurer, deflecting his blade harmlessly.

“...The two of you. Be... Careful,” I said, addressing my companions behind me.

My warnings were, perhaps, not needed after all, for Raiz and Laura’s

expressions were now adequately hardened. They were the very images of adventurers; there were no longer any traces of the doubt and apprehension that had been on their faces mere moments ago.

Their gazes were steeled. To them, all that mattered was defeating the enemy before them. I suppose I still did have my good eye, as these two held great potential.

With that in mind, I, too, steeled myself for combat.

Signaling to Raiz with a nod, I left the enemy swordsman to him, instead rushing toward the archer and mage in the distance. In a well-practiced notion, I slammed my foot down upon the ground. Now blessed with several times the physical ability I had in life, I soon found myself right before the enemy archer.

“...Wha—”

All he could do was stare at my mask as I appeared before him in a flash, an expression of shock and disbelief on his face.

The encounter, however, did not end there. In a defiant display, the archer aimed his previously nocked arrow, intending to shoot it into me at point blank range. I suppose he had some degree of skill. But I simply sliced through his bowstring with a sharp turn of my wrist before he had the chance to release his shot. Steadying myself quickly, I slammed the flat side of my sword into the archer's chest, decommissioning him. He ended up sprawled out on the ground.

The mage, apparently in the middle of a spell, was not prepared for my assault. I repeated what I had done with the archer, and soon, he, too, was incapacitated.

Only one enemy remained.

The sight of Raiz and Laura locked in combat with the enemy swordsman greeted me as I turned around. He was probably the leader, or at least looked the most skilled among his number. A quick inspection of their skills led me to believe as such.

Raiz and Laura, on the other hand, were by no means weak. The fact that they weren't overwhelmed by the man was a testament to their skill. While the thought of assisting them crossed my mind, this was a valuable experience for

them: their first fight against a living, breathing human.

Deciding that this experience was crucial to their growth, I threw out all notions of assisting them, instead silently observing their battle. In the meantime, I made a note to tie up the fallen enemy adventurers, laying them flat on the ground. With this, I no longer had to worry about them waking up and continuing their attack.

Of course, leaving them in such a state raised some other questions... But I suppose they would find their way out of their own mess.

At least, that was what I thought as I stared into the darkness of the labyrinth. There was a presence somewhere out there, silently observing this entire situation.

A short while later, Raiz finally scored a hit, deflecting his opponent's blade with a smooth riposte. Seizing his chance, Raiz lowered his stance, rushing the man's chest with a shoulder tackle. The enemy swordsman, unable to defend against Raiz's momentum, promptly lost his balance.

Laura, not to be outdone, sent a series of earthen projectiles at their foe. Although it would seem like her projectiles would hit Raiz in the back, this was all part of a well-choreographed dance, with Raiz rolling out of the way at the very last second. To the swordsman, it probably seemed like hurtling pieces of stone and earth had simply appeared out of nowhere, with a few pieces cleanly catching him in the gut.

And that, if I may say, was probably the last thing he saw.



"You... Did it," I said to the two, after they had defeated their foe.

"Yeah... Somehow."

"I was so surprised... But why would other adventurers target us...?" Laura asked, still somewhat shaken.

In response, I offered an explanation.

"You were... At the guild, yes? It would be a... Competition. The team that reaches the... Goal first, wins."

There were many ways of interpreting that statement: on the surface, it would seem like simply reaching the goal first allowed for a team to achieve victory. However, that would also mean the teams that came after the first would lose.

In turn, it would not be above the thoughts of certain individuals to assume that reducing the number of participating teams would result in higher chances of victory. At least, that would be how certain candidates would think.

“So...basically, these people were candidates...and they were trying to disqualify us?”

“Unfortunately... So.”

Unknown to Laura and Raiz, individuals like these were common during every test. The guild, for its part, ensured that this remained true for each test with their strangely-worded conditions.

In fact, it was fair to say that the guild’s terms and conditions for rank progression tests were engineered to goad delinquents on, if only because they would be educated and put in their place by more capable adventurers afterward.

I supposed I would leave those points for the end of the test; for now, I would let these two be.

“...In any case. There will be... More. Incidents like this in... The future. Let us advance... Carefully. Do not... Hesitate.”

The two nodded deeply at my words before once again setting off for the darkness of the labyrinth.

Seeing that they were some distance ahead, I stopped where I stood, turning around to address the presence I had felt just now.

“...You should... Take them back, quickly.”

With that, I felt some shadows behind me shift. Satisfied, I ran after the two, soon catching up with them.



After Rentt and his group distanced themselves from the corner of the

hallway, a figure emerged from the shadows. Dressed in black trappings, it seemed to fade into existence from the darkness of the labyrinth itself, looking in the direction that Rentt and his group had departed in.

“That one... He noticed, huh? That’s something, isn’t it? Isn’t he a new adventurer...?” the figure muttered, somewhat softly. From the sound of their voice, it was safe to assume the figure was a man.

Saying so, the man in black walked toward the three fallen adventurers, and was soon addressed by the fallen swordsman.

“You can mumble about your observations later. Get these ropes off me first...”

“Ah, right. Sorry about that.

“But, yes, even though it is your job, you deal with quite a lot, don’t you?” the man in black said, almost as if he were chiding the fallen swordsman.

“Don’t we all? Well, he noticed you, though,” the swordsman said, swinging back with a jibe of his own.

The man in black chuckled, looking at the swordsman with a condescending expression.

“You speak as if you three were not found out yourselves. That robed fellow probably knew, you know? The fact that the three of you were hired by the guild, I mean. The other two... Well, I don’t know about them.”

At that, the swordsman’s eyes opened wide. “Huh...? Are you serious...? Just who is that guy?”

The man in black tilted his head in response, his expression one of contemplation.

“...Who knows? I do have a slight inkling...an image, I suppose. Perhaps it is as she said...”

“Huh?”

“Oh, no, don’t worry about it. Just something I was thinking about.

“Well, then, shall we retreat? Aren’t we down a few teams?”

“Yeah, two teams. To think we were gonna go easy on them... The young ones recently, they’re really something else.

“That guy just now... Think he’ll make the cut?”

With that, the group walked off into the distance, all the while continuing their conversations.



“...In the end... It was unexpectedly... Smooth. The Journey.”

After that attack, we continued defeating monsters as we journeyed on, eventually reaching the area before the designated point without incident.

Even if this was only the first floor, this was the wide and maneuverable Labyrinth of the New Moon. There was a sense of achievement for having come this far, despite the fact that we were only one floor deep.

What stood before us, however, was not a cheer of congratulations or a bouquet of flowers—instead, it was a cold, heavy stone door.

“This door is...that sort of door, isn’t it?” Laura asked, looking in my direction apprehensively.

“Ah... Have you not... Been through this sort... Of door before?”

“Not yet.” Raiz was quick to respond to my question. “It would have been pretty tough, considering it’s only the two of us...”

That, in and of itself, was a wise choice.

The doors they had not been through before, doors that guarded the secrets and eventual progression of an individual through a labyrinth... Those doors were none other than...

“A boss... Room. I have heard... That there were quite a few... On the first floor. This must be... One of them.”

Indeed, this was none other than the boss’s chamber. The layout of boss rooms in particular differed among labyrinths, with some only having one per floor, and others having multiple rooms. Sometimes one would have to pass through these rooms to descend to the lower floors, and sometimes they could

be avoided to no detriment whatsoever.

This time, however, the doors that stood before us did not lead to the lower floors. Instead, it was just one of the many on the first floor of the New Moon.

Yet the area that we were headed for was through these very doors. There was no other way to get to the designated spot, so our course was set. The guild's intent was plain for all to see: to pass this test, one had to pass through this room, defeat the monster within, and head on to the goal.

It was an ornate door, very different from the various doors we had passed through up until this point. The guild, in choosing such a task, was clearly stating that those without the appropriate strength could not become adventurers. Although the statement might seem condescending, it was very much true. As such, even if the test's implications were in bad taste, one couldn't say very much about it.

"What about you, Rentt? Have you passed through boss room doors before?"

Perhaps he was curious about just how much experience his fellow candidate had. I answered Raiz's question plainly.

"Yes, a few... Times."

The room where I had encountered the Giant Skeleton before was exactly one such room. In addition, it was a special type of boss room from which there was no escape until its inhabitant was defeated. Certainly not a type of room that most adventurers would enjoy coming across.

With that being said, I had close to a decade's worth of experience under my belt, and as such, I had more than enough experience with boss rooms in general. Raiz, not knowing this, had asked me such a question, all the while not realizing that it was a mistake to do so.

As expected, Raiz's expression soured upon hearing my response, perhaps feeling that his experience was inadequate. I could not help but ask Raiz a question in return.

"...Are you uncertain...? If so... We could... Bow out."

There was, of course, always a choice. While I wanted to rise through the

ranks quickly and did not want to withdraw, I found myself worried about exposing these youngsters to danger. Although I am in a rush, I was not callous enough to trade their futures for some savings on time. I am, after all, only 25. Surely I have a fair amount of time left...

I paused, wondering a little about how my lifespan had been affected by the fact that I was now undead. There were, of course, no ready answers, and I shelved those thoughts for the time being.

Raiz raised his head at my query.

"I can't do that, not now. If I run away now...I have this feeling that I'll never be able to come back..." he said, an audible edge of resolve in his voice.

I suppose Raiz had a point, as adventurers who had their wills broken just once become weak. In some cases, the adventurers did become stronger after steeling themselves once more, but there were also instances where such a thing simply could not happen. This was perhaps why Raiz said what he had, instinctively realizing this somewhere deep in his heart.

From what little I had seen of his character during my time spent with him, I could already tell that turning back was not an option; me asking after him was just a courtesy. If he didn't want to run and had prepared himself for the trials ahead, then that was all there was to it.

I nodded at Raiz. "I see... Then that... Is enough for me. But... If you are worried. I have... An idea."

"Eh...?"

Tilting my head back slightly, I directed Raiz's attention to the hallway that we had just approached from. Turning, Raiz's jaw dropped—behind us were four adventurers, slowly walking toward the stone-colored doors.

"Those guys..."

"Probably... Other. Adventurers. We just have to... Let them. Go first."

At my words, Raiz's eyes opened wide once more. His jaw, of course, had still not closed.



“...Ha? What’s this? Some kids and a masked freak... How interesting,” said one of the adventurers, apparently the leader of the four-man group.

Raiz, reasonably riled by the man’s words, already had a retort ready. I, however, stopped him, answering calmly in his stead.

“We are... Candidates. As well. I can’t say... I appreciate. Your tone of... Voice.”

“...Kuh. You sure sound like a freak, all right. Candidates, too, you say? Here’s the difference, skull face: we’ll be the ones passing this trial, not you. Don’t think for a second that we’re the same... Hoh? One of those kids behind you is pretty cute if you look closely. How about it, girl? You come with us, and you’ll pass the test for sure—eh?”

The man approached Laura, prompting her to quickly hide behind me, not bothering to answer the man’s questions. Visibly offended by her reaction, the man moved to draw his blade. Mine, however, was already at his throat, its edge gleaming in the dim light of the labyrinth’s halls.

“H-Hey now...?! You stop that. Was justa joke! Yeah, a joke...”

“Is... That so. I do... Apologize. I have a poor sense... Of humor.”

“Y-Yeah... My bad. I won’t pull anything else. So come on, put that thing away...”

“...Hmph.”

Keeping my eyes trained on the man, I slowly lowered my blade, taking a single step back. The man, for his part, sighed with relief, his shoulders visibly drooping. It seemed that he was more cowardly than I had thought him to be.

“Well...? Up ahead’s the boss room, isn’t it? Aren’t candidate groups going in as individual teams...?” the man asked, in a calmer voice.

“...No. Please go... Ahead. We are going... To rest for a... Bit. Then we will... Follow.”

“Haah? Didja not get the note about the first team reaching the end winning? You just gonna let us have it?”

“...Sure. As you... Say.”

“Is that right...? Well, we’ll be going ahead, yeah? You guys! Let’s move!” the man shouted, leading his band of adventurers into and beyond the boss room’s doors.

Raiz, having kept quiet all this time, finally raised a query as the four-man group passed beyond the now-open boss room doors.

“...Was that really okay, Rentt?”

“What... Do you mean?”

“I mean, letting them go ahead first... Didn’t we get here faster than they did?”

Although this was congruent with the description of the task that the guild had issued, there was, once again, something off with the way it was phrased. For the purposes of ensuring this test’s integrity, however, I decided to keep this fact to myself. As far as I could see, neither Raiz nor Laura had noticed this.

And so I said: “...Think about it... For a while. Try to remember... What the guild... Staff member. Said.”

It was Laura who reacted first as realization seemed to dawn across her features. It would seem like she already understood, turning to Raiz with the intent of explaining. But I shook my head, signaling to Laura to keep her thoughts to herself.

Knowing Raiz’s overly honest and straight character, having him think too much over an issue would prove to be an untimely distraction. This was for his own good, and Laura, seemingly understanding this, smiled as she held her silence.

With that, we walked toward the doors. They were, of course, still open. Them being open was by no means strange since this specific sort of boss room wasn’t the inescapable, self-sealing type that I had found myself trapped in before. In fact, we found ourselves in a good position to spectate the battle within from just outside the entrance.

Seeing this, Raiz nodded, apparently convinced that our course of action was correct.

“...So, Rentt, you’re telling me that if I see this, I’ll not be so worried anymore?”

I offered Raiz a simple nod. “Just... Some reconnaissance. Raiz.”

As soon as I said those words, a large monster appeared before the group of adventurers, and before long, their battle with the boss room’s oversized denizen began.



“Well... Then. Let us... Go.” Affirming that the battle within the room had ended, I turned around, addressing my companions.

“Wait, wait, wait! Wait a minute Rentt! Oi! Look... Look at this! That didn’t help at all!” Raiz said as he frantically chased after me.

Turning around, I tilted my head somewhat dramatically, offering a simple response.

“...Hmm. Is... That, really so...?” I questioned, ignoring what we had just bore witness to.

Laura, on the other hand, looked on calmly, sighing as she offered her own assessment.

“...Those guys were weaker than I thought... Not only were they wiped out instantly, they got retrieved, too... Those people just now, the ones in black, they were guild staff members, yes?”

Laura’s assessment was by and large correct. The four-man group that had passed ahead of us did not do very well for themselves in the slightest. Although we had positioned ourselves to observe their strategies and formulate some of our own as we spectated, the four of them had lost before we could even begin our discussion.

Just as we thought we were about to witness a death following a particularly vicious attack from the monster within, two figures, wrapped head to toe in black, jumped in to intervene. Not only did they cleanly dodge the monster’s attacks, but they also made it a point to grab each and every one of the fallen adventurers on the way out. I suppose this was a given, due to the fact that

deaths were explicitly not supposed to occur during the course of the test. Actually witnessing guild staff in action, however, was very much a surreal thing.

While many points came to mind if one were to consider the reasons for their failure, the main factor was that of strength, or, to be precise, the lack thereof. One would have to overcome many traps and the like to reach this point. The adventurers in question probably specialized in scouting or information warfare, which meant that they just so happened to be somewhat lacking in combat ability. With that being said, this was something that could be easily remedied with training. It was unfortunate, but at the very least, they did not lose their lives in the encounter.

I could not help but have my doubts about showing this train of events to Raiz, however. Perhaps it did nothing but add on to his worries. Just to be sure, I shifted my glance toward him.

“...You know, Rentt, I feel stupid for worrying. Even if I’m not that strong... I don’t go down *that* easy, right?”

He held an unexpectedly optimistic outlook. While one could say that Raiz’s declaration was brash behavior, this was not exactly the case. Raiz and Laura were both considerably skilled for their age, even among the many adventurers present in this trial. In fact, they had more than enough in terms of capability and power to pass the test on their own, and I could safely assume they were already in the upper ranges of their adventurer class. This was why I had kept quiet about the relative strength of the boss in this room, since it would serve the two better to have them notice for themselves.

With their spirits now adequately lifted, I supposed there was no longer a danger of them freezing before the monster in question.

“...Well, then. Should we... Get going? It is... Up. To you.”

Looking at them now, one could hardly tell that the two were worried mere minutes ago.

“Yeah! I won’t lose, not like those guys!” “Yes! Why don’t we tell them about how we passed later!” Raiz and Laura exclaimed, raising their weapons into the air.



I must say, though, that things certainly did not go according to plan. Stepping into the boss room, I could not help but feel a little disappointed as I set my eyes upon the monster that awaited us.

If the monster in question had been defeated already, it would take some time for it to reappear. We would, then, be able to pass through this point unhindered. The conditions of the test, after all, were to merely “reach a certain point.”

Although there was indeed a monster in this boss room, and it was true that one could not pass through here without first defeating it, the guild did not prohibit individuals from passing through this room without having personally defeating said monster. Instead, they had kept silent on this point; a loophole that could be utilized by those in the know.

Personally, I would have preferred such an outcome, hence me allowing the group before us to pass. To the starry-eyed likes of Raiz and Laura, I suppose this sort of unscrupulous behavior would shake their adventuring spirit to the core. In light of that, I held my peace, not wanting to shatter their ideals.

If the group before us did defeat the monster, I would have simply passed it off as a happy coincidence. In reality, however, nothing went according to plan. I suppose someone somewhere would have an opinion about all this, something along the lines of how one must put in a fair amount of work in one’s life. Maybe there was some merit to it, but for now I shelved my thoughts.

The monster in the middle of the room was a familiar one; familiar, yet rare in rather specific ways.

“...A Slime? No, a...Big Slime...?” Raiz whispered, apparently moved by its majestic girth.

Despite Raiz’s words, his blade was drawn, his stance steady. He was ready for any sudden movements and attacks; Laura was the same.

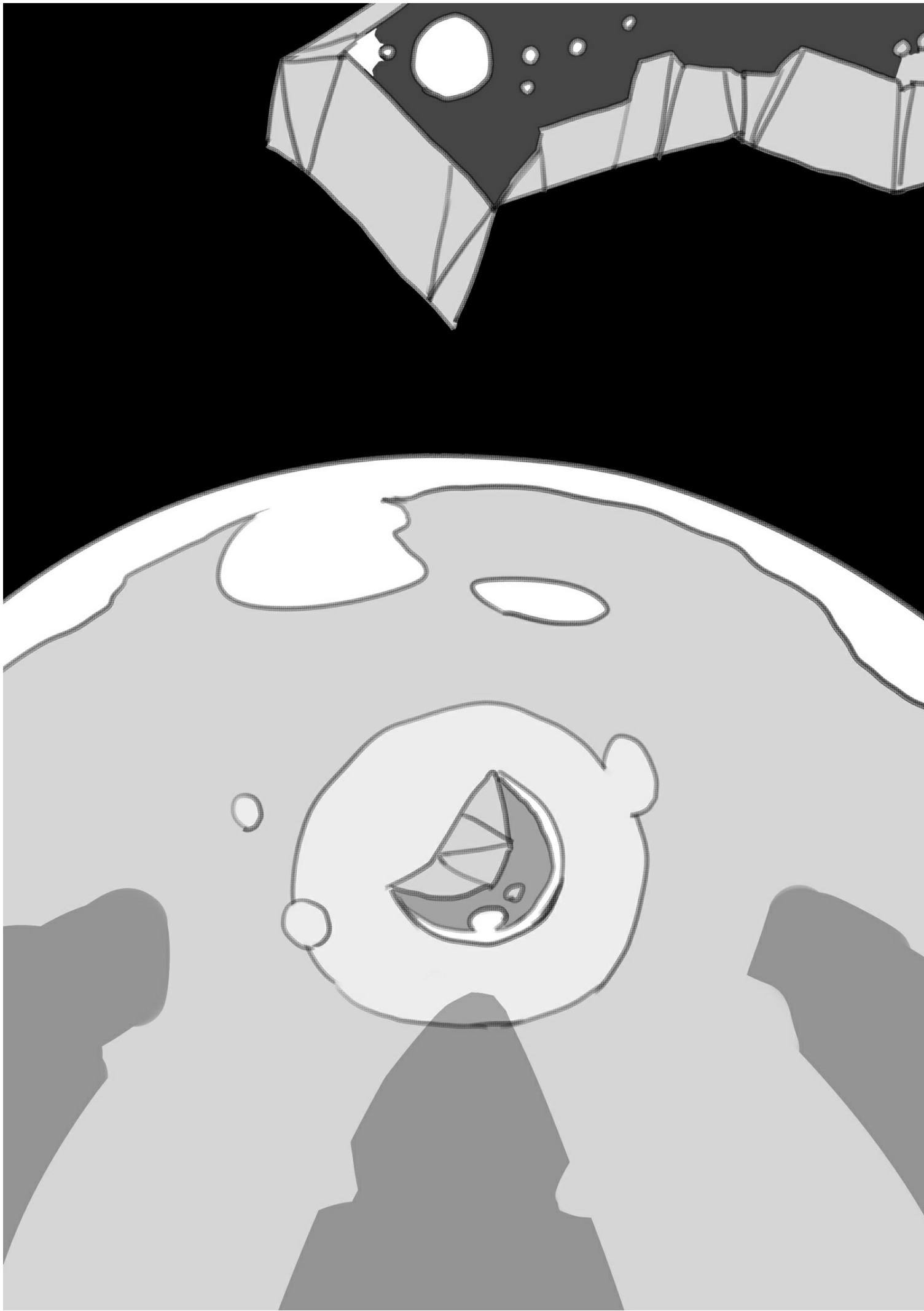
This particular Slime was perhaps several times bigger than a normal Slime. Adventurers, in turn, simply referred to it as a Grand Slime, an upper-class monster of considerable threat.

Although Big Slimes were often seen milling about casually on the deeper floors of a labyrinth, they sometimes appeared on shallower floors as boss monsters. It was, for its part, adequately intimidating, with its large size striking fear into the hearts of adventurers. A monster of its nature was resistant to physical attacks and even more vulnerable to magic. In addition, its sheer volume was not simply for show; if an adventurer ended up in a disadvantageous position, they could easily be crushed in a second.

Taking into account all these factors, it wasn't difficult to see why the guild's attitude toward progression tests was often seen as mean-spirited.

Would the guild take their own test? ...No, I suppose not.

We slowly crept up on the Slime, all the while observing the quiet vibrations in its large body. The Slime, being what it was, looked lovable enough, but this was without the half-digested remains of prey usually found in Slimes this size. Laura, apparently having similar thoughts as we advanced, began muttering to herself.



“I would...like a plush toy that big... Makes you feel that way...looking at it...”
A few other words were lost under her breath.

I gave Laura's mumblings some consideration. Even if one really owned such a toy, finding the adequate space to store it would prove to be quite the challenge. Was she thinking of stuffing the entire toy inside her rented room at the inn?

Finally taking notice as we reached the center of the room as a group, the Grand Slime quivered violently, launching an impossibly huge ball of acid at us in response. A Slime's signature attack, its Acid Blitz, served to signal the beginning of our trial.

The ball of acid was, by visual approximation, at least ten times bigger than that of a normal Slime's. If an adventurer were hit by that, burns would be the least of their worries. Unbeknownst to the Slime, we had already witnessed this attack when the four-man group engaged it in combat; it seemed to be a reflex action the Slime performed whenever something got close to it. It didn't take us long to come up with a countermeasure in our limited discussions, for as long as we dodged away from the acid ball's trajectory, it would be a relatively harmless attack.

The sheer size of the ball, however, meant that it had to be dodged decisively; hesitation alone could lead to partial impact. On this point, I had to express my thanks to the group that came before us, as it seemed that we did get some degree of useful information from them after all.

Having rolled to the side, Raiz ran forward, bringing his blade down on the Slime unreservedly. Although Slimes were greatly resistant to physical attacks, they were by no means invulnerable. If the core spinning in the middle of their gelatinous bodies was damaged, they would still die. Due to this, Raiz's attack at least had a healthy dose of intimidation built into it.

In reality, Raiz aimed for the Grand Slime's core, but a single blow was not quite enough to reach it. Such an attack would have worked in the case of a normal Slime, for as long as one's blade pierced its body and impaled its core, the job would be done. It would be an easy job, at that.

A Slime of this size, however, possessed a higher than usual viscosity than its

normal cousins, and was much more resistant to piercing attacks. The Grand Slime's sheer volume also granted it a solid defense against piercing attacks; a blow that didn't have enough force behind it would never pierce its core.

Raiz, having failed in his attempt, was promptly sent flying by a hand-like protrusion that stretched out from the Slime's giant body.



And so it came to be that Raiz was repeatedly sent flying by the Grand Slime's makeshift arm. We all had our roles; if one were to question mine, it was that of being Laura's shield. More accurately, I was tasked with distracting the Slime as Laura weaved her spells. Magic was a Slime's one true weakness, after all. During such an encounter, a frontline warrior like myself would keep the Slime occupied while the party's mage worked their magic.

While I had intended to perform such a role in the first place, Raiz himself insisted on the role of Slime-harrier during our pre-encounter discussion, volunteering to attack the Slime in order to draw its attention.

I suppose there were many reasons for Raiz's sudden change of heart. It certainly wasn't an easy task to do alone. If I had to speculate, Raiz, who was now ashamed of how he behaved when he first set eyes on a larger version of a regular monster, was seeking to redeem himself. Specifically, he was disappointed in his inability to accurately gauge the monster's strength in relation to his own. In response, he had made up his mind to fight said Slime, with the sole aim of amassing as much combat experience as he could so as to not react the same way the next time he would come across such a monster. If anything did go wrong, the guild's staff would surely step in. This was a much better arrangement than potentially risking his life in an unsupervised encounter.

A sound decision.

Though, expecting the guild to step in and assist should anything go wrong would be unbecoming of any adventurer, but one could see that such was not the case for Raiz.

He was stabbing and striking at the Slime desperately. The Slime was, comparatively, much larger and stronger than he was. Raiz, for his part, did

what he could do to distract the Slime, attempting to strike at its core with every move. He made the most of the situation and chose to do what he was able to do at this point in time.

I could not fault Raiz for the developments that followed, namely the Grand Slime rolling after him in a counterattack after launching him away with its hand-like appendage once more. Raiz just didn't have enough experience, and the Grand Slime was much stronger than he was—that was all there was to it.

I could not sit by and watch Raiz get swallowed up by the Slime, so I turned around, glancing at Laura. Her eyes told me all I needed to know; I suppose she had the confidence to dodge even if the Slime came her way.

Slamming my foot down onto the ground, I rushed toward Raiz and the Slime, the latter of which was getting dangerously close to my companion.

Slimes looked like a viscous blob from all angles, but I personally considered its “back” to be the direction opposite to the one a Slime was advancing. Catching up to the pair, I promptly drew my blade, carving a horizontal gash in its back. With a wet splotch that was neither liquid nor solid in its quality, a section of the Slime was dislodged in the general direction of my blade, raining down upon the chamber's floors.

Although I was much stronger than I was in life, I could not feel much of a difference in terms of resistance, Grand Slime or not. Even so, I could not realistically reach the Slime's core with only a few strikes.

A Grand Slime's core itself was different from that of its smaller cousins: it possessed a greater torque, spinning at a much faster rate to build up its internal resistance against bladed instruments and other melee attacks. But if one had the adequate precision or force, one would easily be able to pierce said core regardless of its defenses. Both of those options were, however, unavailable to me as I was right now. All I could do at this point in time was wrest the Grand Slime's attention away from Raiz and Laura, and it would appear that my attack had done exactly that.

As if responding to the blow, the Slime's core spun in another direction, causing its entire body to roll toward me instead. As I thought, the concept of direction was relatively fluid when it came to Slimes. Perhaps the core itself was

responsible for its general orientation?

I made a mental note to ask this of Lorraine, the resident Great Scholar, after I had returned from this test, all the while retreating from the Slime as it chased after me. I made sure to make off in a direction opposite to that of Raiz and Laura.

With breathtaking speed that one would not have thought possible for a Slime, the gelatinous monster made a beeline for me. More than anyone else, I was aware of the limited space in this room; one would not be able to escape indefinitely. But I had no intention of escaping, as there was no such need.

Having recovered from his previous exertions, Raiz readied his blade once more, rushing toward the now-distracted Slime. Positioning himself directly opposite of me, Raiz infused his blade with his spirit aura, slicing into the Grand Slime's wobbling mass.

Now being attacked from its front and back simultaneously, the Grand Slime, as if exasperated, quivered intensely once again. Before long, we were both staring at familiar, hand-like appendages, the Slime having seen fit to generate two at once in response to our blows. They were the very same type of arm that had sent Raiz flying earlier, but the speed of the appendages now was markedly slower, probably from the strain of keeping two such projections up at once.

Raiz, for his part, was now able to dodge the Slime's arm attacks.

On the other side of the Slime, I hardly had any issues keeping up with the Slime's flailing arm. Maybe I could even fight this Slime toe-to-toe on my own. I would be unable to land a decisive blow, however, and it would end up being a battle of attrition that would quickly grow tiresome.

I suppose there was merit in honing a particular set of skills, specifically, my ability with attack-type magic. Yet another topic to discuss with Lorraine upon my return.

"I'm ready!"

The exclamation echoed through the room. Laura seemed to be done with her incantation, the very same incantation for a spell she had been weaving from the beginning of this encounter.

Simple spells and the like could often be executed with short chants. To deal with a strong opponent, such as this particular Grand Slime, it went without saying that a more powerful spell was needed. This was why Raiz and I had been buying Laura the time she needed. While I was supposed to have been protecting Laura from the Slime's attacks, I ended up joining the fray, as well; such was the unpredictable nature of boss battles.

All's well that ends well; a little too soon to say, I suppose, but as far as I was concerned, the fight was over.

At Laura's signal, Raiz and I jumped backward, disengaging from the Slime. I wasn't quite sure if Laura had the luxury of ensuring we were no longer in the blast radius, but before I knew it, she was already standing before the Slime, staff raised. With a deep breath, Laura belted out the final words of her spell.

"GRAND! PROX!!"

With those words, great tongues of fire several times larger than her leapt forth from the tip of Laura's staff. The spell's flaming tendrils hurtled toward the Slime at breakneck speeds.

While a Grand Slime would usually constrict and wring itself up to avoid such an attack, this particular one, having been distracted by Raiz and me all this time, did not manage such a maneuver. In the next moment, the Grand Slime found itself engulfed in a sea of flames, having taken the brunt of Laura's attack head-on.

Although the Slime was hardly wounded by the edges of our blades, it didn't have a defense mechanism against magic. The impact caused a vast part of its body to melt away, momentarily exposing its core. If left alone in this state, the Slime would soon regenerate, erasing all traces of damage done to itself. Perhaps this was what made Slimes monstrous and intimidating; but then again, it was hardly a threat to us in this state.

Nodding in approval at Raiz, I looked in the direction of the Slime's exposed core. We both understood what had to be done.

Finishing off a boss monster was seen as a heroic achievement among adventurers. Looking somewhat reluctant to do so, Raiz hesitated, as if doubting his own contributions to the battle. Eventually relenting, he readied

his blade, rushing toward the Slime as he thrust the instrument cleanly through its exposed core. In the very next instant, the tension that held the Grand Slime's body together vanished, causing it to lose its form. The Grand Slime, falling apart, was now nothing more than a puddle of liquid and some gelatinous fragments.

The labyrinth would reclaim its fallen denizen in time. I, however, had other ideas, withdrawing some familiar conical flasks from the depths of my enchanted pouch. Handing one each to both Laura and Raiz, I turned to them, offering an explanation.

"The fluids... Of a clear Slime... Like this one. Are worth... Quite a bit of coin. You two should... Collect some, too."

They were probably expecting a celebration of sorts, as both Raiz and Laura stared at me with blank expressions, taken aback by my words.

"... Even if we were to... Split it. There would still be a lot... For each of us. We will split... The rewards. And buy ourselves... A good meal."

The two, now adequately convinced that the lifeless mass before them was worth its weight in gold, quickly got down on their knees, gathering up the Slime's fluids with my provided flasks in hand. I suppose their naïveté made them lovable in their own way.



While we were busy collecting the remains of the fallen Grand Slime, a group of adventurers passed us by. I suppose they had been waiting in the shadows this whole time, intending to pass through the boss room without much effort on their own after another party had defeated the monster within.

A wise choice. They would one day become good adventurers, for there was a certain kind of cunning that adventurers had to possess.

Raiz, however, shot the adventurers a most disagreeable gaze. Perhaps he wanted to lecture them on the perceived unfairness of this situation and other slights; Laura, on the other hand, simply smiled, tapping Raiz a few times on the shoulder.

Laura, who was much faster on the uptake, had already realized a few of the

many unsaid rules of adventuring, and she did not seem all too bothered by a group progressing on the back of our effort. I wasn't just letting them go ahead of us for no good reason, nor was I doing so out of charity. The test's rules specified that the first group to reach the designated point would win, but it was still in my interests to allow them to pass ahead.

The reason was simple, and if my approximations were accurate, would soon be demonstrated. The leader of the party who waited, for his part, led his companions out of the room with a smile on his face. It was a smile of satisfaction, of having reached one's goal after hard work. The others in his party were the same.

As soon as they had taken a step out of the boss room's doors, however...

Pssht!

With the sound of escaping air, a steady stream of smoke engulfed their party, fogging up the doorway in the distance.

A trap—yet another one of the guild's machinations.

"...As I... Thought," I said, standing up. Laura turned to me for answers.

"Did you know this would happen, Rentt?"

"...Yes. Being in front... Of the goal. Is the second most... Dangerous thing. When it comes to... Labyrinth exploration. The first is... Letting your guard... Down."

"...I suppose that's right..." Laura nodded at my words.

Raiz, however, stared at the smoke-engulfed adventurers with a puzzled look on his face. That very same smoke was now creeping toward the center of the room, and by extension, us.

"Oh... Laura. Could you... Blow that away... With some wind... Magic?"

"Yes, of course. That would be the best course of action... Breeze!"

With a single word, a warm, but steady stream of wind flowed forth from the tip of Laura's staff, dispersing the creeping smoke. Although the spell was not strong enough to attack monsters with, it was an easy spell to control and master. Soon, the gas in question had been ushered into a far corner of the

boss room.

While we had safely sidestepped the trap with this gesture, the adventurers in the doorway, who had been caught unawares, were the ones who took the brunt of the smoke. Under normal circumstances, we would have dispelled the smoke immediately, but Laura wasn't exactly in the best shape. Maybe it was due to our intense battle, or the effects of what small amounts of gas had managed to come our way, but she had trouble even maintaining the light in the staff, regardless of her innate talents with magic.

After a short while, the smoke cleared.

"I... See. It was that kind... Of trap."

"Sleeping gas...or something similar. How frightening... If they were attacked now, it would be over," Laura said, looking at the fallen adventurers. Each of them was now sound asleep on the floor of the labyrinth's halls, a view that greeted us in the dissipating smoke.

Laura, for her part, still had not let her guard down. Despite her fatigue, she already had some spells primed to deal with any more potential smoke traps. I, on the other hand, enchanted my body with the Shield spell, keeping an eye out with my blade drawn for any monsters or impending threats.

Raiz, looking at the sleeping adventurers, mumbled to himself. "...If we went ahead, would we have ended up like that, as well...?"

The incident seemed to have instilled some capacity for thought in Raiz. I nodded in response to his query.

"I am... Afraid. So. These... People. Simply came by... At the right time."

One could argue that this was inhumane; unfair, even. These very same adventurers, however, had no qualms about using us to defeat the boss before progressing. By that virtue, the action of us using them to spring a trap should be forgiven, if not permitted in the first place.

"Ugh, then tell me beforehand..." Raiz grumbled.

"... If you are able... To think. To come to... Conclusions, yourself... Then you have grown into... A better adventurer. Well... In your case, Raiz... You have..."

Laura. So perhaps that is... Fine.”

Although I did not want Raiz to suddenly lose all his innocence and become a cynic, it was clear that Raiz’s simple nature would one day become an obstacle to their development. Luckily for him, Laura seemed to understand my lessons relatively well. She had already grasped the concept of being suspicious of other individuals, adventurers or no.

I suppose there was always the option of leaving all the thinking to Laura, with Raiz simply fighting on the front lines. At the very least, however, I hoped that Raiz would one day have the capacity to understand the many thoughts that undoubtedly passed through Laura’s mind.

Expressing my views to Raiz, he agreed, somewhat sheepishly.

“I guess... Hey, Laura, I’m not all that great with this thinking business... But if you think I should know about something, tell me, and I’ll do what I can to think about it myself.”

“Of course. But Raiz...you don’t have to push yourself into thinking too hard. I’ll work hard on your behalf, too.”

Watching over the two, who both had smiles on their faces, I could not help but reminisce about my youth, as well. But I didn’t have a girl my age accompany me on my adventures back then.

Lorraine...?

Possibly... Yes, she did accompany me, but something about that comparison was not quite right. Lorraine and I were both relatively... Maybe pure was the wrong word here. In any case, we were problematic and strange individuals ourselves.

In any case, we still had to complete the rest of our journey.

“...Well. We should... Get going soon. I assume that... There are no more traps. We should still... Advance carefully. Nonetheless.”

The two nodded at my words. Their determination was written across their faces. Laura and Raiz were not keen on failing the trial just steps away from the finish line. Although they looked like any other simple-minded adventurer when

we had first set foot into the halls of the New Moon, they now looked more hardened, although not yet seasoned.

A respectable amount of growth in such a short time, if I had to say.



“Glad you could make it! You’re all here for the Bronze-class trial, yes? Congratulations! You’re the first party to arrive here,” said the man, apparently a member of the adventurer’s guild.

I observed him, but failed to find any odd points; his expression didn’t seem unnatural, either. Just to be sure, I asked for his guild-issued identification. Verifying it to be the real thing, I sighed, thinking that this was the end of the test. With this, there would be no more traps, and we could finally heave a collective sigh of relief.

Upon seeing my reaction, the staff member laughed. “Haha! Got you good, huh? I guess you’re tired of all this... But yes, this is the designated point.”

“So... Are we done? We pass the test?” Raiz asked.

“Well...technically. I won’t say we don’t have anything else up our sleeves, though... Either way, here are the badges that prove you have reached this location. Here’s one for you...you...and you. Three total for the three of you. Hand this to the guild receptionist back in Maalt, and the three of you will be officially promoted to Bronze-class.”

Counting out the badges in question, the staff member handed them out. They were little metal things, no bigger than one’s little finger. This, too, was probably intentional, seeing as it was an easy object to lose, and we would have to guard it with our lives...or just handle it with great care.

Although the guild had casually mentioned that the first party to reach this point “wins,” it didn’t say anything about passing the test; yet more troublesome wording on their part. The correct interpretation of this was for the safe return of the badges in question to the guild back in Maalt.

Laura, as if remembering Sheila’s words, thought out loud to herself. “...Come to think of it, it was a competition of sorts, so we had to get here before everyone else to win...”

“Ah, yes. Since you are the first ones here, the guild has decided to award you with some promotional items, to recognize your victory over your peers. There’s enough for all of you—here you go.”

Saying so, the staff member offered each of us a healing potion, in addition to a convenient tool pouch made of leather with a sewn-in strap so that it might be attached to one’s waist or thigh. As it happened, the holder was the perfect size for the potion we were just awarded. Potions and tool holders like these were important items for adventurers to have. They were expensive, though, costing several silver coins a piece. Adventurers who were just starting out undoubtedly had to save up for such purchases.

Laura and Raiz were adequately happy, having received such valuable items as prizes. Laura, however, received the items with a somewhat complicated smile on her face.

“As I thought... We do not pass just because we won, right...?” Her voice was barely audible.

“Eh?!” Raiz’s eyes opened wide in realization. He quickly recovered, placing a hand on his chin as he thought about the situation at hand.

“...Ah... The lady at the guild said we win...if we get here...not ‘we pass’... Ugh, what a mean trick...”

It would seem like Raiz had come to terms with his thoughts.

Personally, I did not think that the trick in question was too mean-spirited or difficult. This much was to be expected for a progression test of this caliber; Bronze-class adventurers *were* expected to know their way around adventuring. It was with this aim in mind that this test was designed, so that the adequate lessons would be imparted into the participating adventurers.

Many of the traps that had been set could easily be avoided as long as one had given it some thought. I could deduce that more severe and debilitating traps were laid in higher-ranked tests. Those tests were set up to ensure that their participants would fail, and the measures taken were dramatic enough in their own right. Compared to that, the Bronze-class progression test was easy.

In any case, the test in question was an important point in any adventurer’s

life. At the end of the day, they were to walk away with a deeper understanding of what would be required in their adventuring careers from here on out.

“I see you have it all figured out! It’s as you say. But, you have all been through a lot to get to this point. Strictly speaking, all of you have done enough to pass. The order in which the parties arrived to this point hardly matters more than turning in a completed request before its due date. That is one of the absolute basics of adventuring. Barring that, everything is permitted. Well... almost everything.”

Basically, if we arrived here at the last second, we still would have qualified. The test had many annoying points, that much I could say, but at its core, it was a simple affair.

Upon hearing those words, Raiz and Laura both sighed, evidently relieved. Having experienced a similar feeling during my time, I couldn’t help but feel a little nostalgic.

With that, the staff member smiled, bidding his goodbyes. “Well, then! Good job so far. You’ve all worked hard. All you have to do now is report your results to the guild back at Maalt. Be careful on your way back.”

None of us present took the staff member’s words at face value. Of course there were traps and the like waiting for us on the return leg of our journey. Having come this far, it would be strange if we didn’t expect that. This was the meaning that we grasped from beyond the staff member’s friendly smile.



“URRAAAHH!”

Furrowing his brow as a loud voice rang out to his side, Raiz reacted, almost instantaneously.

“...I was WAITING for you! TAKE THIS!” With a furious retort of his own, Raiz swung his blade, perfectly knocking out his attacker.

“As expected, there was a trap here as well...” Laura said, an exasperated look on her face.

I couldn’t blame her since we were standing at the entrance of the Labyrinth

of the New Moon. Overcoming various other trials and tribulations, we finally made it back to this point.

But immediately after we had stepped out into the daylight, yet another one of the guild's hired goons were on us, and Raiz reacted accordingly. One more of the guild's traps, of course.

"It doesn't end until we report our results to the guild, right?"

The entire experience proved to be extremely educational to Raiz: he no longer hesitated, nor bemoaned the realities of his situation. He was quite tired of the guild's tricks, though; that much was written plainly across his face.

As expected, we encountered many other similar events on our way back to Maalt. Having seen countless traps and survived multiple ambushes up until this point, the smile of the guild's staff member sealed the deal for Raiz. More than ever, he understood what had to be done, as well as how it would not benefit him to be too trusting of others from here on out.

"...But...have we not reached the end? This is everything...right...?" Laura asked, her voice tinged with uncertainty as we stood at the stagecoach pickup.

If they let their guard down and did not monitored the coachman closely, there was a possibility that they could be ferried elsewhere.

"No way... I have to think about carriages, too...?"

"That means we can't relax until we get back to Maalt... No, back to the guild's reception counter..."

They were, as expected, reasonably exasperated. While I understood how they felt, this was precisely what the test was designed to do. To accurately assess the potential of an individual, they would have to overcome many, many trials.

With that being said, I didn't think the guild had any more traps and ambushes lying in wait. Having come this far, the chances of us failing were close to zero.

But of course...that would be what the guild wanted one to think. I resolved to not let my guard down.

“...If... You remained alert. And careful... The two of you now... Would probably be... All right. Let’s... Go.”

The two responded to my words with surprised expressions; apparently, they didn’t expect praise from one such as myself.

“Hey, Rentt praised us!” “...It’s a little embarrassing,” said Raiz and Laura, laughing.

Their embarrassment, seemingly contagious, caused me to quicken my step.



After that interaction, our party advanced cautiously but steadily. In the end, our return to Maalt was uneventful. The coachman, being the same individual who had ferried us here, smiled as he reassured us of a relatively uneventful journey after taking a short glimpse at my mask. As promised, he took us back to Maalt safely. While there were people who acted suspiciously around us in Maalt, our actions and movements indicated that we were sufficiently alert. Understanding that, the individuals in question soon scattered, leaving the path back to the guild clear.

Said individuals were hired by the guild, as well. They were tasked with stealing the badges of adventurers foolish enough to let their guard down as soon as they had returned to Maalt. Unlike their colleagues in the labyrinth, they were merely tasked with stealing, not all-out attacking; even the guild had a heart, at least for candidates that had made it this far.

After a short while, we finally reached our goal: we now stood in front of the adventurer’s guild.

“...It was only a short while, but it felt like an eternity...” Raiz said, with an expression and tone of voice that hardly suited his age.

“It is strange, no? To look upon this building once again... It feels like it’s been a long time.” Laura, apparently in a similar mood, had the exact same expression as Raiz.

I, however, did not have time for their emotional reunion with the guild hall.

“...Let’s go,” I said, immediately stepping into the guild’s halls.

The two quickly followed after me in a hurry, apparently used to my habits already. Their behavior made me feel like adventuring in a party once in a while wasn't all that bad.

"...I wanna check. Is this where we drop off the badges?" Raiz asked, an abundance of caution in his voice and mannerisms. Sheila, suitably amused by this, looked at Raiz with a twinkle in her eye and a smile on her face.

"Haha. I see you've grown! Yes, this is the place."

Without further ado, the three of us handed over our badges to Sheila, who proceeded to check every single one, holding the small metallic objects up to her eye.

"...Yes. Congratulations! From this point on, the Bronze-class rank progression test is truly over!" Sheila said, as she started clapping.

The sound caused all the adventurers in the guild's halls to join in, laughing and cheering at our success. It was a warm and peaceful atmosphere, for they, too, understood the significance of such a test. Their claps and cheers signaled acceptance and a well-deserved congratulations for their juniors.

Those who did not pass the test were also present, but their expressions were somewhat conflicted. After this, they now understood what to expect when they took their next test, and perhaps one day it would be their turns on the podium.

While the overall population of Maalt's guild was somewhat peaceful and accepting, not all the adventurers present were of the same character. Some stood in corners, looking at us as if we were not deserving of our rewards. Their numbers were few, however; Maalt's guild was known for raising well-mannered and just adventurers. The black sheep were few and far between.

"So...are we Bronze-class adventurers now?"

"Well..."

Just as Sheila was about to finish her sentence, a man stepped out from behind her, handing her a piece of paper. Looking at us, the man smiled, nodding as he did so.

“These three are all right. Here you go—their party report.”

“Ah... Yes. Right... Hmm. No problems here,” Sheila said, skimming through the document.

Raiz, not understanding the sight before him, asked for an explanation.

“What’s going on?”

“Umm...” Sheila, seemingly unable to explain, held her silence.

“...That man... Has been. Following us... From the start.”

“Eh?”

“R-Really? I didn’t notice him at all...” the two said, shocked.

The smiling man approached us as he offered an explanation.

“I’ve been observing you this whole time. The test isn’t only about adventurer skill; we have to be sure of your character, as well. There’s no way to judge you for how you really are, only your performance during this trial. Well...there are cases where we withhold promotions should the candidates do something really unacceptable... Which is why I was following you and watching over you all the while.”

I recalled the group of adventurers that had rushed into the boss room before us. Yes, it would be most distasteful if they had advanced in rank, as well. They were only a little rough around the edges, so they didn’t seem like adventurers who would commit crimes. Me letting them pass ahead of us may have reflected poorly upon our party. It could even be construed as us willingly observing the suffering of others.

In any case, those four were not too much to worry about. They may have provoked us, but they didn’t actually act upon their threats.

As for me drawing my sword... I suppose him placing his hand on his blade was merely another threat; he would have lowered it immediately if I showed any signs of resistance. He was calm, almost incredibly so, as I held the sharp edge of my blade close to his neck, the one who came across as the leader of the group. If one observed closely, one could discern the finer points of their acting; his mannerisms gave him away.

That was all good and well, I suppose.

The man continued: “And so, with the report that I handed to Sheila just now... Well, many things are written about your party, but mostly that you three have no problems whatsoever. The test is centered around the safe return of a badge either way, so the three of you, not having committed any particularly damning actions, all qualify. So, basically...you three pass! All of you made it!”



“We...made it...? We made it! WE MADE IT! Hey, Laura! We made it!!

Raiz’s voice, at first one of disbelief, slowly increased in volume as the reality of the situation hit him. Laura, too, was soon caught up in the celebrations.

“Yes! We did it Raiz! It wasn’t a mistake to go against what my parents said and leave the village after all...!” Laura said, joy evident in her voice.

The contents of her exclamation, however, left me feeling somewhat uneasy, but that was a concern for another time.

Come to think of it, many adventurers came to towns like Maalt to get away from rural villages. I, too, was one of them, and was hardly in a position to lecture Laura for her life choices. The fact that they were here right now spoke for itself that they had enough skill to survive, and that was that.

Even if one were to attribute part of their success to luck, it was undeniable they had successfully risen to the rank of Bronze-class largely due to their virtue and hard work. As Bronze-class adventurers, their earning power was significantly increased, markedly over that of the average, run-of-the-mill adventurer. Even a farmer who owned his own land, crops, and tools in a village couldn’t hope to make more than an adventurer of this caliber.

If they chose to return to their villages in the future, they would be able to do so while dressed in all sorts of finery and riches, which was more than enough of a reason to be happy, I suppose.

As expected, I was pleased at the outcome, as well. I had spent most of my life as a Bronze-class adventurer, unable to progress any further. In many ways, I was greatly familiar with this particular adventurer rank. With this, I would

once again be able to accept requests that I did in the past, as well as work toward becoming a Silver-class adventurer, the next step in my career.

My current life as an adventurer was satisfactory—no, more than satisfactory. This could very well be the peak of my career, and I would continue on, not stopping for a moment until I finally reached my lifelong goal of Mithril-class. It was a great milestone in my second life as an adventurer.

There were still a myriad of problems present, namely my suspicious-looking robes, my apparently immovable mask, and the fact that I currently had the body of an undead Thrall. Well, minor hindrances in the grand scheme of things; I had to view them that way.

Is it really all that bad to have a single, sentient Undead walk the streets of Maalt?

Deciding to entertain my own question, I stood still, thinking about the implications of such an event...

Suppose a shambling Thrall walks into the market square of Maalt, his body full of holes. He then stops at a stall, engaging the shopkeeper in casual conversation.

"I... W... Would. Like one... Apple. Please..."

"A'right, here you go! That'll be one bronze piece... Yep, one bronze piece. ...Say Rentt, you're full of holes again today, aren't you?"

"Yes... I am... Undead... After all... Ha... Haha...."

"Haha! You're killing me Rentt!"

That would probably be how the conversation would play out.

...Is that such a bad thing?

Probably not the best of images...but not exactly one that was wrong in any way. Unlike most other types of undead, I did not rampage about terrorizing townsfolk. Take that old lady over there—would she care if I were a Thrall full of holes, or a walking sack of bones? No. No one would care at all.

Realistically speaking, however, all of that would end the moment someone screamed and called for the guards. I would then bid a sorrowful goodbye to

this cruel word.

Hahaha...

I found it difficult to laugh at the imaginary scenes of carnage in my mind.

I decided to shelve those thoughts for now since I wouldn't have much to worry about if I continued down my path of Existential Evolution. If Lorraine's studies were to be believed, I would one day be able to walk in the light once more. All I had to do was work at my labyrinth exploration. As long as I did what I was supposed to do, I would be able to evolve, collect monster ingredients to fund my adventures, and complete many requests from clients and eventually go up in adventurer rank.

Indeed, I would truly be hitting two, perhaps three, birds with one stone... That is, if everything went according to plan.

More importantly, I should finish the Bronze-class rank progression process. Although we had all already qualified, there were still minor details to work out. While I was familiar with these details and processes, Raiz and Laura were not.

As if on cue, Sheila turned to face us.

"For the three of you who have successfully made it to Bronze-class, a replacement of guild-issued identification is required. To be precise, your current iron-colored cards will be replaced with bronze-colored ones, much like this one right here."

Saying so, Sheila held out what appeared to be a Bronze-class adventurer card in her hands. The name written on said card, however, was interesting to say the least. This card belonged to a certain "Guild Guildar" who apparently belonged to the Maalt adventurer's guild.

Seeing the confusion on their faces, Sheila quickly offered an addendum to her explanation: "...Of course, this is a sample for illustrative purposes, and the card belongs to a fictional person. But 'Guild Guildar' is the official fictitious person that all adventurer guilds use to annotate their sample cards with."

Although I wasn't interested in the least in what Sheila had to say, her tales of Guild Guildar apparently captured the attention of Raiz and Laura. I suppose it was a rarity in their eyes, but did they not see this very same name when they

were presented with their Iron-class cards?

“Yeah, well, I really thought that somewhere out there someone was called this when I got my first card...” Raiz said, scratching his head.

I suppose the staff member who had tended to him back then was not as descriptive as Sheila, or they simply took pleasure in tricking young adventurers. It wasn't necessarily a harmful trick, or something that would hinder their careers.

Sheila continued her speech.

“Bronze-class and above adventurer identification cards are usually enchanted with certain magics to prevent forgery, so it will take about one to two days for you to receive your updated documents. It should be ready the day after next, but for now, you may continue using your current identification cards. And do not worry, you will regardless be able to accept Bronze-class requests in the meantime.”

The anti-forgery magics in question didn't make it easier to identify said card's owner so much as they were intended to be a deterrent against fraudsters claiming to be adventurers, stealing cards and writing their own names on them. But of course, these magics were not impregnable. If a skilled magician or the like set their mind to it, it was very possible to forge and illegally edit guild-issued identification. This was part of the reason why so many suspicious individuals of questionable background were part of the guild's roster. This resulted in the guild being seen as an organization of questionable morals.

Now, these anti-forgery enchantments became more complicated with each adventurer rank. For example, Lorraine's Silver-class identification card, having been closely examined by the owner herself, was deemed forgeable, provided that one had the time and money to do so. One also had to have adequate knowledge of the techniques involved. That was what Lorraine had to say regarding this topic. The same applied to Gold-and Platinum-class cards.

Mithril-class cards, on the other hand, were enchanted with extremely powerful wards and spells to the point they were almost impossible to forge, let alone edit. Mithril-class adventurers were living treasures of the guild, after all. The guild would do everything it could to prevent illegal forgeries of such cards.

But Lorraine declared it wasn't entirely impossible, and that she herself could probably do something about it if she put in the adequate amount of time and research. I reminded Lorraine to never actually set about such a task, especially since I had no idea what would happen if Lorraine just decided to make such a card one day due to a flight of fancy.

It seemed Sheila was mostly done with her explanations now. Although she had quite a few things to say, the jobscope of a Bronze-class adventurer didn't exactly deviate too far from their Iron-class counterparts. The main difference was in the nature of the requests taken. Bronze-class adventurers were expected to engage more with their clients, particularly on assignments that required active escorts. Said adventurers would then need to learn the appropriate etiquette and business laws that governed the land.

All this was written in the thick handbook that sat on the receptionist's counter. Lectures and other means of sharing information were available at the guild to those who needed them, and at a low, affordable price, too.

But I suppose that was neither here nor there. More importantly...

"...Raiz. Laura," I called out to my two companions. Sure enough, they soon turned to face me.

Although the two of them had gotten used to me in a relatively short time, their joyous faces didn't display a hint of understanding for what I was about to say. The corners of my lips curled downward, but little could be done. We were nothing more than a last-minute party arrangement to begin with: two parties grouped together by the guild for the express purposes of taking the Bronze-class progression test.

I wasn't about to complain about this arrangement now of all times, but at the heart of it, my tendencies to adventure alone still remained. It was time for us to part, now that the test was finally over.

"What's up, Rentt?"

"What is it?"

"...We have all worked... Hard. It was... Fun. We have had... Our ups and downs. While I do not... Know. What kind of... Adventurers, you two would

become... I will never. Forget about... What we achieved. Today. Thank... You.”

The two of them didn’t seem taken aback in the slightest. More than surprise, it was a calm sense of acceptance. Maybe they both understood that we would have to go our separate ways eventually, and responded to me with expressions that were a mix of relief and satisfaction.

“...No, that’s for us to say, isn’t it? I feel like we’ve just become proper adventurers today, and you’re the one who helped us achieve that, Rentt... I thought that adventuring was all up to skill and power, but now I know it isn’t like that. You taught us that. Thanks, Rentt... *I’ll* be the one who never forgets. I’ll remember the things you taught me today and build my skills on that foundation. If we ever work together on another assignment...I’d be happy to party up again.”

“Mister Vivie... If possible, I would have wanted you to stay with us forever...but that’s not something we should be saying, right? I think I understand, somehow. I understand that you are...different, Mister Vivie. I don’t mean that you look different, but your goals, your purpose, is different... Like you are headed to a faraway place, unknown to us... I am sure you would not reach that point with us, as that it is for you alone to reach.

“You have taught us many things, Mister Vivie... Not only did you watch over us in battle, but you gave us opportunities to grow and gain valuable experience, all the while supporting us. We could see that. In turn... We also knew that we would be going our separate ways once the test was over. Even so, although this party is now over, and only lasted for a day, you are always one of our party members, Mister Vivie. So if anything ever happens, if there ever is a chance...please do group up with us again, Mister Vivie. Thank you for everything.”

I was surprised by their words. To think they saw through my intentions within such a short amount of time. I thought of them as young adventurers that I should guide, but that wasn’t entirely right. I remembered various instances where we looked out for each other, encouraging each other along as we progressed on our journey. At the very least, I now felt Raiz and Laura’s encouraging words giving me a reassuring pat on the back.

One day, I would definitely become human again. I could not lose that hope, of all things.

“...I apologize... For being unable to... Party up with... you. It is not a question... Of me disliking you two... Or a matter... Of strength. I have... Circumstances. Of my... Own. If, one day... My problems are... Resolved, then... I will definitely... Tell you more about... Myself. Until that time... We should all aspire... To be great adventurers.”

With that, we shared a handshake, the two of them smiling as they held my gloved hands in theirs. Despite wearing gloves, it wasn't too far-fetched to think my hands felt strange under the leather. Even so, they said nothing, grasping my hands firmly.

I didn't think they had somehow deduced my condition, that I was an Undead. But they now understood that I had circumstances and problems of my own.

Raiz and Laura, having finally finished up with everything else they needed to do, made their way out of the guild hall, heading back to their rented rooms for a well-deserved rest. Walking with them to the front of the building, I waved before turning to head off in the direction of Lorraine's home. As I did so, however...

“...Mister Rentt!”

A familiar voice rang out from behind me. The voice belonged to none other than Sheila—and I could not help but feel surprised at what I heard.

The way she called out to me, the way she said my name—it was almost as if she was addressing someone she had known for a long time...

Chapter 2: Contract by Magic

Sheila's expression caught my eye as I turned around. It was deathly serious, enough for me to realize that something had finally gone wrong. It didn't seem like I would be able to talk my way out of this situation easily.

Not having much of a choice, I walked toward the guild's front door once more, stopping right before where Sheila stood.

"...Did you need... Something from me?"

Although my speech was still somewhat halting, it was a vast improvement from the guttural sounds I previously produced during my time as a Ghoul.

Likewise, Sheila's voice was far from normal. It was clear that she was troubled, burdened with something she just couldn't say.

"...Y-Yes. There is something I would like to ask you... If possible, could you follow me to this room over here...?"

It seemed Sheila had no intention of discussing this in public.

There were many ways to interpret this: at the very least, she wanted the matter we were about to discuss out of earshot of the various adventurers milling about in the guild. If I had to guess, Sheila already figured out who I was, along with the fact that "Rentt Faina" had registered as an adventurer twice. For some reason, she kept this secret under wraps, so maybe Sheila understood that I had some deep, personal reason of my own for doing so.

Of course, this didn't automatically mean Sheila discovered the fact that I was an Undead. As to whether Sheila would keep that secret... That was another matter altogether.

If I, as a human, had registered under a false name... That was something that could possibly be forgiven. Having registered under a false name, however, *and* as an Undead... That may be unforgivable in its own way.

What should I do...?

It was a difficult situation. Judging from Sheila's expression alone, I understood there was no walking away from this encounter. If I refused to speak with her now, it would merely serve to complicate matters. Perhaps I could get by with a minimal explanation, but to do this, a conversation with Sheila was inevitable.

"...I understand. Where should... I go?"

"Ah...! Thank you. This way, if you please..." Sheila's expression lightened up a little at my response.

Despite her generally apologetic demeanor, I resolved to explain as little as I had to—but what if she asked me to take my robe off? Did I have sufficient excuses for how I looked? I would attempt to convince Sheila as much as possible without revealing the fact that I was an Undead.

Steeling myself, I followed Sheila into the guild's halls once more.



After being led into a part of the central guild hall that was off-limits to all but guild staff, I was ushered into a small room, with Sheila closing the door behind me. Other than Sheila and myself, the room was empty.

After probing around the room and checking its confines, I discovered that it was mostly free of magical tools that could record conversations, nor were there any strange magic circles in place. Such tools were expensive to begin with, even for a well-funded organization like the guild.

Of course, Lorraine had a tool capable of such. She kept her fair share of secrets from me, and I was not about to ask where she had obtained such a thing. Maybe she got it as compensation for her aid in a clandestine matter or something; that was the most reasonable explanation for it.

"Well, then, Rentt... I suppose you, of all people, would know what I am about to ask, yes?"

Sheila's words had a strong edge to them. She wasted no time in getting to the point. Although her tone of voice wasn't hostile, it was strict, as if she would immediately see through any sort of lie. This was apparent in the way she had emphasized my name; but in the end, I knew what she was about to ask, and

why I was led here.

And yet, there was no way I could simply tell Sheila about everything that happened up until now, nor was I intending to do so. I knew, for my part, that Sheila wouldn't be satisfied with such a bare-bones explanation.

This was why I decided to explain most of what happened, leaving out certain crucial details, or at least glossing over them. I had to be able to control the flow of the conversation, so I answered Sheila's question with one of my own.

"...Before we go on... I would like to... Affirm. One thing... Did you lead me here... In the capacity of a guild... Staff member. To tell me that you... Would not find fault. With me signing up... Under another name? Is that why... We are here...?"

"...I am the one asking the questions here, Rentt. Originally, that is a violation of the rules and cannot be tolerated. As such..."

I knew what Sheila was about to say. Although the guild's rules were rather porous in various aspects, registering under multiple names was against said rules, on the surface of things. This was why a member of the guild would not simply forgive such a thing. Similarly, me standing in this room would be a relatively pointless venture, given how this conversation would turn out.

Negotiation was no longer my concern—I decided to be realistic about the matter at hand.

"If I cannot... Have that guarantee. Then I will be... Taking. My leave. And then I... Will not. Show my face here... Ever again. How about... That?"

It would not affect me much in the long run since I wasn't about to give up on my dream of becoming Mithril-class.

I already had another solution: I would simply move away from Maalt, and register again at a guild elsewhere. As I have mentioned many times before, the guild's rules were porous at best; there were too many holes in them to count.

Although registering and starting anew from Iron-class was troublesome, I suppose I had no other choice now that it had come to this. Changing how my mask looked, or minor details like the color of my robes wouldn't be hard either, hence my statement.

Sheila, however, opened her eyes wide at this, panicking.

“W-Wait! That isn’t...”

“Sheila. I am... And have... Been. Afflicted by a big... Problem. Even if... It is with an organization... Like the guild. I do not... Want to be stabbed. In the back. So... At the very... Least. I need to understand... That I will not be... Persecuted. For what I have to... Tell you. Otherwise... I will refuse. To say... Anything. Of... Course, I would have you... Sign a magically... Binding. Contract... So you keep... Your word.”

“Rentt... Did something that terrible truly happen to you?”

It seemed Sheila didn’t think my actions were the result of a life-changing incident. Maybe she was under the impression that I was only changing my name, just as I had changed my appearance with a robe and mask.

Reality, however, was very different. I would probably never be able to show my body to any living human for the rest of my life. There was no knowing if I would be hunted the very next day should I do so, possibly even by the very same adventurers that I had dined and explored with before.

Under these circumstances, there was no easy way for me to explain exactly what had befallen me, but this wasn’t a matter of me not trusting Sheila. The problem laid with her affiliation: Sheila was, before anything else, a staff member of the adventurer’s guild. She had a moral responsibility to protect the safety of Maalt and its denizens; should she ever come across anything that would threaten this safety, she was to report it to her superiors, then oversee the process by which said thing was removed. This was why the adventurer’s guild existed in the first place.

With that, what I could tell Sheila was limited. She had her obligations, and I had my reasons.

The only reason I told Lorraine was because of her relatively isolated social position and eccentricity. Other than that single exception, I decided to not speak of my condition to anyone else, and this held true for the case of Clope the blacksmith, as well.

But Sheila was a different question altogether. This was no longer about

personal preferences or how well I had gotten along with her in life; all this didn't change the fact she was in a position that had certain social obligations.

I nodded at Sheila, awaiting her response. Sheila, for her part, closed her eyes, appearing to be lost in thought for quite some time. Finally opening them, she stared straight at me before saying something that caught me completely off guard.

"Rentt... To tell the truth, I have not reported what you did to the guild. I could not be sure it was you. I did, however, discuss my concerns with the staff member who followed your party today, so they know of my thoughts on the matter. In any case, about how you registered twice and all that—I don't intend to say a thing, so..."

...A most unexpected development.



"...Are you surprised?" Sheila asked, looking up at me with a somewhat bitter smile on her face. I nodded in response, at a loss for words.

Of course I would be surprised. Sheila was a staff member of the adventurer's guild. One did not simply march into the guild, register, and become a staff member. Unlike registering as an adventurer, one had to overcome a series of difficult tests and selection processes to even be considered for a position.

Guild staff were obviously paid a relatively higher salary than most, and unlike adventurers, they didn't have to expose themselves to danger on a regular basis. It would also be easy for a guild staff member to net a capable adventurer for themselves in time; so goes the common wisdom in these lands.

Due to these factors, a position within the guild was a popular and highly desired posting for young women in general. A woman in such a position wouldn't want to be fired from their position, so guild staff members in general were often fiercely loyal to the guild. They would thus keep the guild's secrets and report any bits of information, no matter how small, to the guild the instant they learned of anything. Such was the status quo.

But Sheila had not reported my activities to the guild. It was impossible for me to not be surprised.

“It goes without saying that I would not want to be fired...” Sheila continued. “But then, the guild is not as strict with its employees as the rumors would have you believe. If anything, the guild paints in broad strokes, and seldom cares too much about the small details. That is the current tendency and trend of the organization. I am sure you can see that from the rules concerning multiple registrations. In fact, the reason for young female staff members working so hard to appease the guild is not because they do not want to get fired, it is because they would like the guild to introduce a good husband to them. Well, that is the implication, anyway...”

That was the first time I had heard of anything of the sort. Was it not easier for a staff member to pick out and approach a capable adventurer on their own? Sheila, as if sensing this, continued her explanation.

“Well...if you did find one in a place like Maalt, then sure... But most high-ranked adventurers gather in the large cities, right? If one is not transferred to a prestigious location like that, one would never meet with a capable adventurer to begin with! So they all work hard to get transferred to the capital...and then put on all sorts of finery and go looking for husbands—that is the trend, either way. Of course, I don’t have any ambitions of the sort, so me not reporting you to the guild does not really cause that many problems...”

Now that I thought about it, highly-ranked adventurers, such as those of the Gold, Platinum, or Mithril-class, would definitely be found in the capital, or at least in large cities. In order to be transferred from such locations, staff members would have to work extra hard to appease the guild. This was taking into account that it was difficult to become a staff member in the first place, as it would be a competitive environment among those who had been selected. Surely appeasing the guild was an important thing.

Yet, Sheila doesn’t desire this...? Is that really true? I couldn’t help but arrive at such a question.

Male staff members of the guild did seem a little more carefree and occasionally more careless than their female counterparts. I suppose that was because they didn’t seek promotions or transfers to big cities. While they might have such intentions, the big cities were filled with skilled adventurers, but their salaries were probably paltry compared to the city big shots. Perhaps, to these

men, it just did not matter as much.

These observations added some weight to Sheila's monologue of the guild's internal situation. Sheila's apparent disinterest in a transfer was another issue in and of itself.

In fact, if this was all part of an elaborate ruse that ended with Sheila reporting everything she heard here to the guild, my hands would be tied, and I would be caught and executed. Not a good way to end the day.

It was not like I didn't have a speck of trust for Sheila; I had known her for quite a long time, but not quite as long as Lorraine. Although I couldn't trust her unconditionally at this point in time, she was an extremely trustworthy and reliable member of the guild to work with.

Going by my gut feeling alone, I felt that she was not lying to me. However...

My doubts seemed evident to Sheila, who answered with a statement of her own: "...Well. I know you would not just trust me that easily. I completely understand that. I am employed by the guild, and have ethical obligations to follow, after all... All that is true. That is why I prepared this in advance..."

Saying so, Sheila withdrew a rolled-up sheepskin scroll from her uniform pocket, holding it open before me. The surface of the parchment was marked with all sorts of glowing lines and complex-looking letters. I could tell exactly what it was just from a single glimpse.

"...Magically binding... Contract. I see. You... Really. Brought one with... You."

A magically binding contract, as its name suggested, was a specific kind of magical tool. It was a contract that bound the signees together with arcane means. It was a convenient and versatile tool, created with specially-sourced sheepskin parchment and ink. All one had to do was pen the details of the contract, then have both individuals sign it. Should either one break the contents of the contract, they would suffer a penalty of sorts.

The value of these contracts greatly varied, taking into account various factors such as the details of the contract and the strength of the penalties involved. What Sheila was holding in her hands was of average value, about two places below the most expensive type, and two places above the most basic. For

normal purposes, a parchment of this quality was more than sufficient, and the penalties it could inflict were also reasonably heavy. Sheila had obtained the most expensive kind of parchment for this sort of purpose.

I could see that she was serious about this discussion.

“Rentt. I don’t know what kind of problem is haunting you...but could you please tell me? I only want to help. This does not concern my relationship with the guild...it only has to do with you. You are the reason I am the person I became today. If needed, I will write my name down on this parchment without hesitation... I also have a solution in mind for the staff member that I discussed this with today.”

Perhaps telling Sheila herself was acceptable, given that she had come armed with a magically binding contract. As for the other staff member whom Sheila had talked to...

Sheila couldn’t just undo her conversation. It seemed near impossible to have him keep the secret all to himself. But Sheila continued.

“...Well, you see, the staff member in question is actually my brother. This was why I was able to so easily talk this over with him... But even if I were to tell him to keep it to himself, it would not be much of a guarantee. If it must be done, I could easily take this contract to him, as well. All he has to do is add his name to it, and even if he refuses, I have my ways...”

I did recall Sheila mentioning something about her brother, quite a long time ago. To think that both of them had ended up in the adventurer’s guild; I found it somewhat surprising.

It wasn’t too strange for me to not know of this, though. Guild staff sent on missions to observe monsters and their population amounts, along with members who did more clandestine work such as observing progression tests, usually never showed their faces as a rule. The fact that he had appeared before us at the receptionist’s counter was probably due to curiosity, as he couldn’t help but wonder who exactly this strange adventurer his sister had taken a liking to was. At least, that was my educated guess. Either that, or he was one of those individuals who enjoyed putting his older sister on a pedestal. It probably wasn’t too kind of me to think that way of someone I didn’t even

know, though...

Sheila's next statement, however, put that assumption to rest: "My brother will be transferring to the capital as of next week. Unlike me, he is on a sort of elite career path, with this being his last job in Maalt. There was probably no other chance for him to meet with you, so this was why he wanted to see you for himself. He didn't want to pointlessly worry."

I suppose this was why he showed his face. He was going to be working in another location anyway, so it most likely mattered little to him. If he was transferring to the capital, the possibility of him being sent out on such combat-oriented assignments again was slim. If anything, he would be eventually aiming to climb to the rank of guild master, or something along those lines. Sheila's decision to stay in Maalt may have simply been to allow her brother to go in her place.

Concluding her explanations, Sheila posed a question to me: "So, that is how it is... What about it, Rentt? Will you tell me about the situation that has befallen you? Having an adventurer's guild staff member on your side is a very useful thing when you are in trouble, you know?"



Honestly speaking, despite Sheila's repeated assurances and apparent sincerity, I still had my doubts. I mean, Sheila had been suggesting this to Rentt Faina, a human. Former human. Would she go back on her word if she found out I was now an Undead? There was no telling, and I couldn't shake that feeling.

However...

Sheila had gone through the trouble of preparing a magically binding contract. The fact that I still doubted her was an insult to her resolve. And it would be difficult to go against the terms expressed on such a contract, but not impossible. There were many ways to undo it or escape from it, but none of them were easy or trivial.

In fact, I already understood exactly how serious Sheila was about this entire matter from the very moment she had produced the scroll. Even if the contract were broken in some way, there still remained the question of the penalty.

Exactly how heavy would it be?

“...Personally. I would like to... Believe you, Sheila. You might think I am... Nitpicking. On details... But what would you... Have the penalty... Be?”

Sheila stared straight at me, immediately offering her response.

“I have no intentions whatsoever on breaking this agreement, so any penalty is fine. Even if it means making me quit the adventurer’s guild, or turning me into a personal slave... Anything. It’s fine.”

Personally, I felt that both of those penalties were excessively heavy. While I was concerned about being hunted down as some sort of rare monster, stripping Sheila of her position as a guild staff member after everything she did to attain it was nothing short of cruel. As for turning her into a slave... That was simply absurd. For one thing, the ownership of slaves wasn’t legal here.

As I thought about what would be a more reasonable penalty, Sheila had already laid the scroll out on the table in the middle of the room. She started writing before I could say anything in protest. Shortly, Sheila held the scroll up before me. Written in clean letters on the parchment were the following words:

“Should this contract ever be breached, Sheila Ibarss will voluntarily resign from her post at the adventurer’s guild and all related organizations. In addition, she will also perform the necessary procedures to give up her free will and rights in a territory where slave ownership is recognized, summarily handing over her ownership rights to Rentt Faina.”

No, no no no. This was too much. It was impossible for me to sign something like this...!

Although I wished to voice my protests, the contract was already written. We would have to purchase another parchment to set new terms and set this one aflame.

At least, that was what I wanted to say, but I wasn’t blind to the determination in Sheila’s eyes. This was what she was willing to give up just to hear what I had to say, and it appeared Sheila made up her mind on this matter a long time ago. Apparently I no longer had a say.

The fact that she dragged me into this room and patiently stood here as I

endlessly hesitated, and now this contract... There was no way I couldn't affirm with her, at this rate.

Sighing, I turned to Sheila. "...I understand. Let us affirm... The contents of the contract... And then sign it. I will tell you... Everything. After that."

Sheila finally smiled in response to me relenting.

"Yes! I will write down all the other appropriate terms now, just hold on for a second..."

And so Sheila explained and discussed the relevant details, perhaps a little too happily, and finalized the contents of the contract. Confirming that everything was in order, Sheila penned out the rest of the contract with astounding speed, the feather quill in her hand waving to and fro like a flag in the wind.



"Well, then... I have no... Choice. I will... Tell you."

Although I felt somewhat coerced into all this, the other terms of the contract were all fair and reasonable. Even then, having someone in the guild who cooperated with me was something I could hardly pass up on. But would any living human follow through should they understand my current situation...?

That was my biggest worry. Barring Sheila, would such a person even exist? That was the reality of the situation.

Maybe this circumstance was inevitable. Be as it may, I found myself somewhat at peace with the current situation.

But where should I even begin? It was a difficult subject no matter how I approached it, but maybe it would be easier to start from the very beginning. Part of the contract stated that Sheila may not reveal my true identity to anyone without my written consent, so I suppose there was no longer a cause for concern.

Sighing, I slowly lowered the hooded section of my robe. The most convenient thing to do was to remove the robe entirely, but I didn't have the courage to do so in front of a young woman. Either way, just seeing my face alone would be enough of a shock to most people.

Although I didn't exactly have a hole in my head, the flesh on my face was rotted and, in some places, still dry. Compared to when I was still a Ghoul, though, this was a lot closer to being human—for an Undead, anyway.

“Wha...?! T-This... What is...” Craning her head in a mixture of confusion and fear, Sheila slowly walked around me, peeking at me from various corners.

Standing before me once more, I changed the shape of my mask to show Sheila my face. If I had to say, this was the most visually impactful spot on my being since the lower half of my face was nothing more than teeth, half-rotted gums, and a somehow intact jawbone.

Lorraine, being a monster scholar and all, was very used to sights like this, and didn't seem all too surprised. Sheila, on the other hand, didn't seem to be taking in the sights all too well. Her face was now a pale shade of blue, and her knees seemed to shiver as she sat down on the ground, no longer able to stand.

“...Are you... All right?”

Although I asked after her kindly, the paleness in Sheila's face hardly faded. I suppose she was too shocked to speak.

“...You see. Maybe it was... Better. To not have asked... At all. I look monstrous... No?”

Sheila shook her head rapidly at my words. “That's not true!” she shouted, before continuing on in a softer voice.

“...That's not...true. I had no idea, Rentt... No idea that something so...awful happened to you... But I hated not knowing anything even more. I am surprised, but...I am glad I know now...”

I was relieved Sheila didn't scream at me to pull my hood back up.

“Well...? What do you... Think?”

Sheila paused before answering.

“...How do I put this...? You seem very injured... No, *gravely* hurt... And you cannot be cured? But there are healing magics, or high-quality potions... What about the Church? The priestesses should be able to do something...”

It looked like Sheila didn't understand the full extent of my condition. I had no

choice but to explain.

“No... It is not like... That. I have become... A monster. This body of... Mine. Is that of a... Thrall.”

Although I explained it so quickly, and in simple terms, it seemed to have taken Sheila quite a while to wrap her head around what I just said.

“Eh? That is... What?”

I continued my explanation.

“A while ago... As you know, I went... Exploring. In the Labyrinth... Of the Moon’s Reflection. I found an... Uncharted area... And went in myself... But then suddenly encountered a Dragon inside... And died. When I woke up... I had become a... Skeleton. So... Having no choice, I defeated... Other monsters there. And then through... Existential Evolution... I evolved... Changed. And now I’m a Thrall... What do you... Think? Interesting story... Right?”

A self-deprecating way of saying it, but I couldn’t deny it was actually somewhat interesting. I smiled wryly in spite of myself.

“No... Something like that happened...? No...” Sheila, still speechless, shook her head slowly. But this was the reality of it.

The average person would never believe such a tale to begin with, so a reaction like this was nothing short of what I expected. Judging by Sheila’s reaction and current condition, I assumed she needed some time to come to terms with what I said.

“I... Understand. That you are confused... Having heard such a thing... Out of nowhere. So... Take a while and... Think. About it from my... Perspective. Do you really think... It is all right. To cooperate with... Someone... Something, like me? Of course... I have no intentions of... Hurting people. All I want to do... Is to keep working. As an adventurer. I suppose it is difficult... For you to suddenly... Trust me. Although we have signed... A contract. If both parties agree... It can be undone. In any case... I should be going back... For today. You should think about... If you can trust me. As a person... That is.”

With that, I turned, intending to leave the room.

If Sheila refused to cooperate with me, for whatever reason, then all I had to do was undo the contract, and undertake the appropriate preparations to leave Maalt behind. There was no need to drag Sheila down with me; she had her own life to live.

In such an event, having told everything to Sheila meant that staying in Maalt could lead to my arrest. All I had to do was migrate to another region which wasn't much of an issue at all. As long as I was prepared to cut off all my social ties, I could very easily live on my own. As for Lorraine... I suppose she would come with me, provided I asked nicely.

Then—

“Please, wait!” Sheila shouted once more, as if to stop me from leaving.

I turned around, looking at Sheila in the eye.

“I... I believe you. I believe *in* you, Rentt... Even if you did become a monster...you wouldn't hurt people... I mean, you've always been so kind, Rentt! So I... I'll cooperate. I will work with you,” Sheila said, in a voice that was almost pleading. Slowly, she staggered toward me, grasping my hands with hers somewhat forcefully.

“Rentt... From now on, if you ever have any problems with the guild, talk to me about it... I'm sure... I am sure that I would be able to help...”

With that, Sheila finally relaxed her grip, looking up at me with a faint smile on her face.





click

With a familiar sound, the door opened to reveal a familiar space, and an equally familiar face from within. It was the face of a woman whom I had known for a considerable amount of time. Logical, messy, and occasionally prone to playing annoying pranks on others, but overall a gentle person—

Lorraine.

“...Hmm? What do we have here? You have someone with you, Rentt? How rare. Don’t tell me—you’ve made your move on her, eh?”

Judging by the slightly crooked smile on Lorraine’s face, one would suppose she was joking. But I could sense a strange tension in the air—or maybe I was just tired from the events of the day.

The person Lorraine referred to was none other than Sheila Ibarss, a member of the guild who was currently standing behind me. After our discussion of the matters at hand, I had mentioned to Sheila that Lorraine was privy to my circumstances, as well. Upon affirming that I did live with Lorraine as a temporary arrangement, however, Sheila insisted on coming along for a conversation of sorts. That’s not to say I didn’t inform Sheila of said arrangements before. While she was not surprised then, she seemed lost in thought now, a complicated expression on her face as she followed behind me.

What exactly is Sheila thinking about?

I, for one, had no idea. But we were nonetheless in agreement that a conversation with Lorraine was due posthaste, so off we went.

Besides Lorraine and Sheila, the first person to know of my true identity was the adventurer Rina Rupaage. Clope and his wife, Luka, most likely understood that I was under some sort of extenuating circumstance or another, but chose not to pry. The two had their own positions in society to consider as well, being part of a business that had connections to the local government and church. Perhaps they figured out that I had become an undead monster, or perhaps not; there was no way to tell.

In any case, I would regale Clope with my tale another time. As for now, I chose to appreciate their hospitality and silence. Their favor would not go unpaid, though. While I certainly did intend to act on it sometime in the future, now was not the time.

A statement from Sheila jolted me out of my thoughts, and back into the situation before me.

“No, Miss Vivie. Rentt has not done anything to me. However, we did...speak, about some things. Specific things.”

While that seemed to be enough for Lorraine to understand the gist of what happened, I didn’t think Lorraine understood the extent of Sheila’s knowledge from those words alone. It was up to me to disclose such information, and I didn’t expect Lorraine to perfectly infer my intent.

Sensing that this was not a conversation to be had at the door, Lorraine took a step back, as if to welcome us in.

“...Is that right? In any case, do come inside. It is somewhat messy, but make yourself at home.”

There was something off about Lorraine’s statement—why was it this messy? I cleaned and arranged her home just before I left for the progression test. It was unnatural for it to be in such a mess again in such a short time, even if I took Lorraine’s habits into account.

At least, that was what I thought...



In the silence of the abode, Lorraine’s magical timekeeping device whirred and clicked at regular intervals. Said device was worth its weight in gold, as commonly, only nobles and the wealthy could afford such a specialized magic tool. And yet, Lorraine had one, for reasons unknown.

Given its girth and general size, I assumed Lorraine built it from scratch in her spare time. As usual, I found myself in awe of Lorraine’s odd sense of practicality. In a sense, Lorraine was capable of many things, maybe even everything...

Except for chores and other domestic pursuits. The reason for this escaped me, but I did have some ideas. After all, I did assume responsibility for Lorraine's house chores at some point in time in the past, and then simply continued doing them. That realization, accompanied by a somewhat sinking feeling, permeated the entirety of my soul.

...Perhaps this was a thought best left for another time.

"...Well, then. Let us speak. So, you heard...certain things from Rentt, you say? Allow me to be blunt: just exactly how much have you heard?"

Lorraine's seemingly normal question was accompanied by a stern tone of voice. The atmosphere immediately took a dark turn, surprising even myself. Turning to Sheila, I was equally surprised to find a previously unseen expression on her features. There was a certain light in her eyes, as if she made up her mind on one thing or another.

"...Well. I heard from Rentt that he has become...a monster. And that he doesn't attack people..." Sheila responded, her voice soft and occasionally unsteady. I felt a mix of emotions behind her simple words. As to what exactly they were...I had no idea.

Lorraine, as if immediately understanding the situation, snorted with laughter.

"Hmph! That is everything, is it not? And yet you followed Rentt home in such a fashion? Did you not feel endangered?" Lorraine asked, leaning forward.

Sheila, on the other hand, shook her head. "No... No, not really. Rentt was going to your home, so it did not seem suspicious in any way."

"Is that not only because you lack a sense of danger? Think about it; Rentt is an Undead, and I am a scholar with a dubious reputation at best. Well, at least here in Maalt. And then what would happen if a young girl, say, of your age, wandered into the den of a monster and a witch? Perhaps you would be thrown into a cauldron of sorts and steamed alive... Or maybe we would devour you where you stood. Is that not the common assumption on the streets?" Lorraine said, referring to herself as a man-eating witch for reasons unknown.

Although Sheila understood that this was a joke of some kind, she was now

evidently uncomfortable. Her face tensed up as she forced a well-practiced guild staff smile onto her face.

“No, of course not... I would never think of you as a witch! Even I know that you are a well-respected scholar, Miss Vivie.”

“Just ‘Lorraine’ is fine... But no. You see, that is merely how it looks on the surface. To tell the truth, I sneak out to the streets of Maalt every night, seeking out vulnerable young girls and preying on them for their blood. A most delicious taste, yes, and good for one’s health, too. Did you know that it does wonders for one’s complexion?”

Lorraine’s expression did not seem to match up with her casual jokes. I found myself unable to read Lorraine’s intent since her words seemed almost threatening. In the next moment, however—

“...That is what Rentt has become. Do you really understand?” Lorraine asked haltingly, ending her statement with a forceful curve ball of a declaration to Sheila.

Lorraine was expressionless as she spoke. She was neither angry nor hostile, dropping the fact as if it were the most normal thing in the world. One would think that such questions were the norm in this abode by Lorraine’s appearance alone.

I felt a primal sense of fear rising up from deep within me upon realizing Lorraine’s perspective. To her, the guild staff member who sat across from her was not human, but merely an object to be dealt with accordingly depending on how they answered the question at hand. Perhaps this was a natural response to things, given our circumstances.

Cruelty... It was a cruel look. This was how Lorraine looked when faced with a monster on one of her expeditions. If I had to guess, her mind was now filled with various methods of eliminating the target before her.



In a conversation I had with Sheila after this incident, she revealed to me that she never felt so intimidated in her life. Sheila, being the guild staff member that she was, didn't have much in the way of field combat experience. She wasn't entirely devoid of it, as all guild staff members receive basic combat training as part of their program. She was able to defeat Goblins, Slimes, and the like with some assistance from her more combat-oriented peers.

But in those moments, Sheila felt pure fear. She had only seen monsters from afar up until this point, and they were now prancing about before her, with their eyes meeting hers, making their intent to kill clear. Here, Sheila found herself finally understanding why adventurers sometimes involuntarily held their breath before monsters. Although she logically knew that these monsters had to be slain, the conflict of duty and fear in her heart threw her emotions into disarray.

But that was relatively normal, and not much of a problem. What truly scared Sheila was the presence of a certain fragment in her thoughts, though it was small: the ability to take the life of another living thing before her in the name of necessity. She had chosen to justify such thoughts by thinking of the benefits slaying monsters would bring to humankind. Much like her peers, she couldn't afford to hesitate when taking another life, as long as it was for her own benefit.

Sheila's combat training experience taught her that much, and that was why she now found herself rooted in place. Staring straight into Lorraine's eyes, Sheila understood. This was the very same expression she had leveled against Goblins and Slimes in the Labyrinth. She did not, however, expect another human being to look upon her in the same way.

Sheila had no choice but to understand that Lorraine would eliminate her if the latter found her response to be anything less than satisfactory. It wasn't necessarily murder since that was only possible when the other party recognized their victim as a human being.

Lorraine's eyes, however, spoke of something else.

To Lorraine, this would be nothing more than a simple act of disposal. She could easily set a variety of objects on fire and reduce them to ash, human or

otherwise. Even Sheila understood that Lorraine had the capability to erase another being's existence without the slightest hint of hesitation. After all, Lorraine was an adventurer, and an experienced Silver-class one, at that. One had to answer carefully; that was most likely the singular thought that flowed through Sheila's mind right then.

Steeling herself once more, Sheila's lips parted.



"I...understand."

It was a small, almost inaudible response, much like the flickering flame of a small candle before a storm. This flame, however, continued to burn in the face of adversity.

"I understand."

Sheila's repeated response now brought with it a certain degree of force; her voice was now louder, and more audible, but it was directed more at herself than anyone else. That was how it sounded to me.

Lorraine, finally understanding Sheila's intentions, smiled, her features softening at last. "...I see. In that case, there will be no problems."

Sheila seemed ready to collapse at those words.

"You must understand, it is not in my interest to terrify young girls. But, in any case, it is late. Shall we have dinner?"

Upon hearing her words, I slowly began to realize why Lorraine had previously said and acted the way she did.



"... Rentt... I've heard the stories, but you're really good at cooking, aren't you...?" Sheila said, a complicated expression on her face.

The lone table in Lorraine's home was now adorned with a variety of dishes, meals that I had prepared for Lorraine and Sheila. It wasn't anything too special. To me, this was classic home-style cuisine, something I was used to preparing. Personally, I felt the food in question tasted acceptable at the very least.

I suppose male adventurers who had knowledge on the culinary arts were few and far between. After all, few adventurers had the stamina to prepare their own meals after an exhausting day of hunting monsters in the Labyrinth. They would be ready to fall face-first onto their beds.

Adventurers, for their part, usually made much more than a merchant or a peddler, so even if they were to eat at a tavern or eatery every single day, it would hardly dent their income. This made adventurers who were well-versed in food preparation quite rare.

Female adventurers, on the other hand, often aspired to be hired on by the guild as staff, and for that very reason practiced cooking in their free time. There was no such trend among male adventurers. It was more common for male adventurers to dedicate their lives to climbing the adventurer ranks. One may argue that it was easier for either gender to carve out a career as an adventurer; to me, they each had their respective challenges.

I, however, had picked up my cooking skills back in my home village, from the same herbalist who taught me my other survival skills. Thinking back on it, I often assisted with preparing meals while she was busy synthesizing some sort of medication. She would also occasionally toss some herbs into the pot for good measure. It was a perfect learning environment for future herbalists and the like, and while it did equip me with a general knowledge of plants and herbs, I also ended up learning how to cook along the way.

“One Rentt per home—society should be that way, you see. He does everything, mostly for free, as well... But there is now a fee. I suppose you could say that I pay my dues in...that fashion,” Lorraine said, pointing toward the bottle I held in my hands.

It was the very same bottle that had been enchanted with preservative magics: the bottle that contained Lorraine’s blood. A single drop of it was all that I needed for my dinner.

Sheila’s face once again turned a pale shade of blue upon hearing that the bottle I carried with me at all times contained blood. I suppose this was why Lorraine said what she did in the conversation prior.

“I see... A Thrall *is* a lower-class Vampire of sorts, so...”

It seemed Sheila was quick to come to an understanding of the situation.

I was, for all intents and purposes, a monster seated at a human's dinner table, licking blood from the mouth of a bottle. To the average passer-by, I probably seemed more like a masked man licking a reddish fluid from a small rod that was lowered into an innocuous bottle. It wasn't an intimidating sight, perhaps more eccentric and strange.

"That is the state of affairs, yes. That aside, am I to understand that you two have signed a mutually-binding magical contract?" Lorraine asked, casually steering the conversation toward discussing the minute details of the contract between Sheila and me.

There was no obligation for me to tell Lorraine of the specifics, but given that we were all in on the secret now I supposed it was better to speak of it with all parties present.

I nodded in response. "...Yes. It is basically... A contract that... Prohibits Sheila from saying... Anything about what I... Really am."

"Hmm... I am curious about the specifics, yes. Perhaps we should leave that for after the meal. Trivialities, really," Lorraine said, spooning a portion of her meal.

Sheila, on the other hand, eagerly withdrew the sheepskin scroll from somewhere within her guild uniform.

"I have the contract right here. Would you like to see it?" she asked, offering the scroll to Lorraine.

Lowering her spoon, Lorraine accepted it, unfurling and holding it up to her face.

While we had already signed the contract, and it largely didn't seem to have any problems, Lorraine was specifically skilled at checking documents and the like for loopholes, which was exactly what she was doing. I personally didn't feel Sheila would willingly violate the terms of the contract, but the possibility of her subconsciously revealing information was indeed a risk. It would also be unfair to Sheila if accidental slip-ups resulted in her leaving the guild.

But a more sinister thought crossed my mind: I couldn't discount the

possibility that Sheila could be mind-controlled by a mysterious third party sometime in the future. Such magics did exist somewhere in the world, and while those with a strong will could resist such an attempt, the weak would be mentally broken, and easily forced to divulge any information they held.

If such an event did come to pass, both Sheila and I would be in a disadvantageous position. Thus, having someone like Lorraine go through the contract was essential.

Lorraine's disposition and skills contributed greatly to our purpose. The contract was magical by nature, and was best scrutinized by someone who had an in-depth knowledge on magic and the like. Lorraine wasn't a lawyer or official of the law by any means, but the extent of her knowledge was more than enough to verify the validity of the contract at hand.

It didn't take long for Lorraine to fold up the scroll once more, apparently ready to deliver her verdict.

"...At a glance, I suppose there are no obvious issues. There are, of course, a dozen issues I could nitpick on. That aside, this looks mostly fine, as long as Sheila herself does not speak of Rentt's so-called secret to any external parties. The main consideration here, then, would be an event wherein you are involuntarily controlled by some sort of invasive magic... In which case, I suppose you would have to give up your current life and become Rentt's slave."

"Is there nothing... That can be done about... That part of the contract...?"

"Well, all magical contracts of this nature suffer from similar problems. In the hypothetical event that Sheila ends up being controlled by magic against her will, and ends up on the road to slavery as a result of the contract's binding effects, then all you have to do is cancel the contract from your end, Rentt. If she does, in fact, become your slave, her ownership rights are automatically transferred to you anyway, so you can resolve the issue from there. Either way, there seem to be no issues with this part of the contract."

Personally, I felt those very details of the contract had a dozen problems of their own. For some reason, though, it apparently worked from a logical perspective, and that was that.

"In any case," Lorraine continued her explanation, "should such an event

really come to pass, you could skip all the troublesome paperwork and just cancel the contract with a mutual agreement. What I had just mentioned was merely a worst-case scenario...”

Lorraine’s worst-case scenario was severe indeed. In the event of Sheila being controlled, and the magic being so strong that it could not be dispelled, the contract would carry out its effects, and we would have to live with the results. Under normal circumstances, I suppose one didn’t have to go that far in planning for a worst-case scenario. My circumstances, however, were far from normal. Lorraine’s sense of caution was warranted, to say the least.

“As I was saying... This secret is now shared between the three of us. We must each do our part to ensure that said secret is kept. As Rentt intends on continuing his adventurer career, your role is particularly important, Sheila, so we are counting on you, in more ways than one.”

“Yes... Of course, that is what I intend to do, but...”

“But?”

“It’s just that, Rentt has been...standing out a bit too much recently...” Sheila said, glancing in my direction.

“Did something out of the ordinary happen...?” Lorraine turned to me with an eyebrow raised.



“There are...several reasons.”

“Oho. Several?” Lorraine tilted her head slightly as Sheila attempted to continue her explanation.

I suppose Lorraine herself could understand why I would attract attention as I currently was, but I didn’t realize there were *several* reasons contributing to this fact.

“Well... First, there is the problem of his appearance... Although, I would not call it so much a problem, I suppose. There are many robed adventurers...and many more dress just as strangely at the guild, so...”

A fact of the guild that was more than obvious to me. Even I was aware of the

fact that I stood out as much as the next adventurer.

However, a combination of factors in my appearance complicated matters. Specifically, a mask made of bone and my pitch-black robes. My wrinkled skin, visible in some places, didn't help matters much either. I suppose I ranked somewhat highly on the scale of strange appearances.

Lorraine nodded, apparently agreeing wholeheartedly.

"Yes, verily. If memory serves, were there not some more strangely dressed individuals? Like that one man clad in rainbow-colored clothing...with a big feathered hat on his head. Is he doing well?"

"...Ah! You must be referring to Augurey. He set off for the capital a while ago...saying something about how the wind was calling to him. He was skilled, yes, but he was a strange one... The guild has gotten quieter without him around."

I, too, knew of this Augurey. In fact, I got along with him pretty well, having participated in some of his last-minute parties, as well as the tavern conversations that came after. Contrary to his flippant appearance, his skill as an adventurer was formidable.

Similar to me, Augurey's singular problem was that of his appearance. As Lorraine accurately described, he stood out far too much with his flamboyant getup. I had even witnessed monsters swarm around him more than once. Monsters were living things, just like us, so the violent combination of colors must have been particularly eye-catching to them.

It was common knowledge that monsters followed Augurey everywhere he went, be it the forests or inside the labyrinths. As a result, both he and I were mainly solo adventurers, if only because no one was keen enough to party with someone who could attract monsters to them just by standing still. Compared to that, my appearance was much more normal—subdued, at the very least.

To think that he went all the way to the capital...

Adventurers were known for being flexible when it came to their base of operations, so farewells or goodbyes were always around the corner. Even so, I couldn't help but feel somewhat lonely at Augurey's departure. We were

comrades in solo adventuring, if I had to say, but I suppose that was how things were in these lands.

Sheila continued her commentary.

“No matter what, Rentt’s appearance contributes to him standing out, at best. Again, I wouldn’t really call it a problem... But, he did go and defeat some Orcs immediately after registering, and then went on to pass the Bronze-class progression test with flying colors... Under normal circumstances, I suppose we would just assume that Rentt was a skilled swordsman prior to becoming an adventurer. However...there have been a few incidents of new adventurers going...missing, as of late...”

Sheila’s commentary suddenly took a strange turn. Perhaps it was eye-catching for me to have defeated Orcs and advanced in rank in such a short time, but these instances were by no means rare. Even new adventurers could have been skilled in various fields, martial or otherwise, before registering with the guild. All they had to do, then, was study for and adequately pass both parts of the progression test.

Sheila’s mention of new adventurers going missing, however...

Why would I be connected to such an issue?

Meeting my gaze, Sheila continued on.

“The authorities are looking for the perpetrators... Of course, we simply assumed they had fallen to monsters in the labyrinth at first. But, if that were true, other adventurers would have found their remains by now... So therein lies the problem. We have found nothing, and new missing persons cases keep popping up...”

A fallen adventurer’s body could simply be absorbed by the labyrinth after they had fallen, or consumed by monsters. In such a case, however, their clothing or pieces of equipment would be left behind. Organic matter was absorbed at a faster rate than inorganic matter by the labyrinth, but even if their bodies were absorbed, guild-issue adventurer identifications were enchanted with the appropriate magics to ensure their longevity. Even if one found nothing else, one would eventually come across an adventurer’s identification card.

I heard tales of some cards being recovered decades, even a century, after the owner's death, but new adventurers do not venture to such depths for this to occur. Should they fall, their cards would be recovered relatively quickly being closer to the entrance.

Having an adventurer completely vanish in the labyrinth, card and all, was highly unnatural. This was further exacerbated by the frequency at which it was occurring recently.

"Someone could say it was just a coincidence, that the fallen adventurers' cards had been dropped into a corner someplace... That is also possible. Actually, that is certainly the most likely explanation. However, the frequency at which they have gone missing is far too high to be natural. We have no proof, of course, but it is indeed strange. One common possibility that the guild arrived at was that some unscrupulous individual has been targeting new adventurers specifically...either by attacking or kidnapping them..."

I suppose the guild had a point. New adventurers were disappearing at alarming rates, and their remains couldn't be found. If the rate was more reasonable, perhaps the guild wouldn't have arrived at such a conclusion. One could even assume the perpetrator was targeting new adventurers, killing them, and stealing their belongings; that was entirely possible.

"Even if they are new, they are still adventurers; they do not fall that quickly, nor that easily. It would be possible for a high-ranked adventurer to do them in, of course... But the guild has observed no strange behavior from any of the higher-ranked adventurers in Maalt thus far..."

"I see. So to summarize: if one was pressed to look for a culprit, the skilled, and yet strange-looking Rentt would be the most likely individual to point one's finger at?"

Sheila nodded at Lorraine's conclusion. "That is exactly it. To make things worse, he advanced to Bronze-class so quickly... There is no shortage of individuals who spread unfounded rumors of him due to jealousy or envy."

"Jealousy...?"

A strange emotion rose up from within me upon hearing those words. I never once thought of myself as someone to be jealous of. Rather, I should be the one

being jealous and envious of the people around me.

Realistically speaking, I should probably be more upset at the fact that certain individuals had pinned a crime I did not commit upon me. But instead, I somehow felt strangely delighted.

To think, other adventurers are jealous of my achievements...!

Lorraine looked at me with an expression of distaste.

“Oi, Rentt. It is hardly time to be gloating over your achievements. If this goes on, I would not find it strange to see you being lynched by an angry mob. Of course, the guild probably would not make any strange moves on you with such flimsy reasoning...” Lorraine didn’t seem very confident in her own words.

Sheila, turning to Lorraine, immediately addressed her concerns in a somewhat flustered manner.

“O-Of course! Rentt may look strange, but he does good work as an adventurer! The guild would never mistreat an adventurer who is beneficial to the cause.”

“...Am I to assume that if Rentt were of any other personality, he would be quickly gotten rid of? How terrifying.”

I suppose I couldn’t blame Lorraine for interpreting it that way, as the guild’s perspective on the value of individual adventurers could indeed be a fearsome thing. But that was just the reality regarding the ways of the world.

I personally contributed my fair share to the guild as of late; not only did I return with the promised Orc materials in the allocated time, I had also packaged them in a way that preserved their freshness. Adventurers who were capable of such a task were few and far between—in Maalt, at least.

While the typical skilled adventurer could kill an Orc without much issue, adequately preparing the meat for transport was another matter.

“In any case... Those are the reasons for your precarious position, Rentt. Do be careful...”



Following our conversation, the three of us sat and discussed potential

countermeasures, only to find that there were no simple solutions to the problem at hand. I suppose this was how it would turn out from the start, but Lorraine took extra care to warn me about the missing adventurers case.

Although we couldn't come up with a concrete solution, we eventually decided that I should, at the very least, refrain from exploring the labyrinths for a period of time. I didn't find this to be a very practical suggestion, being a monster that sought to advance to another stage of Existential Evolution. If it were for a few days, I would manage, but days would stretch to weeks, and weeks to months... Hardly a positive prospect.

There were monsters in the forests, mountains, and elsewhere beyond the town, but labyrinth monsters were still the most efficient to hunt. The labyrinth brought with it a wide range of conveniences, from being able to estimate a monster's strength by the floor it lived on, along with the fact that certain floors were only populated by certain kinds of monsters. Conversely, monsters in the wild were somewhat irregular and unpredictable. One never knew what would be found in the hills and the like. Therefore, hunting outside the labyrinths was decidedly inefficient.

But I was not keen on being blamed for some mysterious incident simply because other adventurers were jealous of my progress.

Taking all the above factors into account, we eventually decided that I would stay put for a short while. If the situation still did not change after that, I would return to my prior activities.

In the event of my return to exploration, it was decided that I should have a party member with me in the name of safety. However, it was also possible that I would undergo Existential Evolution while fighting monsters in the Labyrinth. Existential Evolution wasn't something I could control; its involuntary nature meant that any party member I brought with me would have to know of my circumstances. This narrowed down the pool of candidates considerably.

While teaming up with Lorraine or Sheila was the first thought that occurred to me, both of them weren't practical companions, for an assortment of reasons. Lorraine had her daily work to tend to, and couldn't always accompany me to the labyrinth. Sheila, of course, had her work as a guild staff member, not

to mention the fact she wasn't exactly part of the guild's combat roster.

It would seem like there was no real alternative to me exploring the labyrinths alone, although I suppose a short rest wouldn't do too much harm.

In any case, I could easily wait a few days. If I didn't set foot in the labyrinth for a while, the suspicions surrounding me would dissolve gradually. That was the plan, anyway.

I was still able to take on other assignments that didn't involve going into the labyrinth, much like the busywork I was used to dealing with in life. Those particular skills hardly left me, and those types of assignments were never in short supply. I suppose there really wasn't too much to worry about.

There was also another reason for me holding back on the exploration for now: I had unfinished business in Maalt, specifically with the blacksmith, Clope. A considerable amount of time had passed since I placed my order, so maybe it would be ready by now. Such was the impression I got when I occasionally stopped by his workshop after my recent labyrinth excursions.

With that being said, there was only one way to find out: a trip to Clope's was in order.

Chapter 3: A New Weapon and Newfound Strength

“Oh, you’re here, huh? I know what you’re lookin’ for. It’s done.” Clope’s hardened features softened slightly as he greeted me, the edge of his lips curling up in a slight grin.

Glancing to a corner of the shop, I followed Clope’s gaze. Sure enough, my eyes came to rest upon a single, gleaming sword, its edge a bright hue of silver.

I suppose it actually was done, as this was the very sword I had requested from Clope.

“Is that... My sword?”

“Yeah.” Clope nodded in response. “Mana, spirit, divinity... It’s been forged to handle all three. Quite the amount of materials it used, too... But we managed to obtain enough, one way or another.”

“I will offer... Compensation. For any additional... Expenses.”

Having known Clope for a long time, I was familiar with his principles, especially when he would absorb additional costs if they weren’t quoted in advance. Because of this, I offered paying my fair share.

Clope, however, dismissed my words with a wave of his hand, thinking for a short while before offering a response.

“...Hmph. You’re always like that, aren’t you? I get it.” Clope nodded, as if accepting my proposal.

“Oh, yeah... It’s one thing to make it, but this is a special blade, see. Not just anyone can use it, so I’d like you to try it out. If there’s anythin’ you’re not satisfied with, we can fix it up. It is one of my blades, an’ I put my all into it, after all... But a weapon for the thrice-blessed is really somethin’ else. There’s no knowin’ what could happen,” Clope said, staring straight into me.

Clope did have a point. Though adventurers capable of utilizing both mana and spirit did exist, those that could use all three abilities, divinity included,

were exceedingly rare. Just being able to use all three equally in a way that was practical in actual combat was virtually unheard of. A request of this nature would be a challenge to any blacksmith, even those well worth their salt. It was more than natural for Clope to request that I test out the weapon. I'd be surprised if he didn't.

I agreed with a curt nod.

"Should I just... Head down to your courtyard... In the back?"

Customers who visited Clope's establishment were often invited to test out their arms there. It was an open space, with more than enough room for me to swing a sword. I supposed Clope would ask me to go there next.

Clope snorted. "Oh, so you knew of that already? That's exactly it. This way."

Standing up, Clope seemed amused that I asked such a question. Maybe it was to be expected, given that I already knew his answer. With the sword in hand, Clope led me into the back of the store, passing through some familiar doors. Following behind him, it wasn't very much of a walk at all.

Before long, Clope handed the sword to me, and I accepted the piece with both hands. It had a good grip, as if the sword had a life of its own, and was choosing to stick firmly in my palm. It would have been impossible to make something this well-fitting if Clope didn't already know of my habits and preferences in life.

There was no mistaking it: Clope made this for me knowing exactly who I was.

Perhaps my evolution into a Thrall isn't such a bad thing after all. That thought resonated in my mind as I tightened my grip on the instrument.

It was a markedly different feeling; not too different from when I was a Ghoul, but a definite departure from when I was still a Skeleton. I had the flesh on my hands to thank, as they were no longer dry, but considerably thick pads that, still, were not very alive.

Regardless, the tactile feel and grip I had on objects was slowly returning to how it used to be in life. That was a good sign, indeed.

"What do you think of the handlin'?" Clope asked.

“Pretty... Good. I would like to... Test it out. Give it a few... Swings.”

“I see. Well, any target is fine, eh? I’ll cart a wooden dummy here, just give me a bit.”

After a short while, Clope returned with a wooden dummy of sorts, setting it up in the middle of the courtyard. There were many kinds of target dummies, even ones with bamboo armor. An unarmed wooden one was a basic, yet simple choice. If I had in my hands a legendary weapon made of Mithril and Orichalcum, maybe something fancier would be warranted—for example, a dummy with metal armor and fittings. The weapon I ordered, however, was nothing of the sort, so I supposed a wooden dummy was fine.

Although it was a special order, it was a normal weapon in most other aspects. If I tried to cut through metal with it one too many times, I would undoubtedly damage its edge. Though, this wasn’t taking into consideration the fact that this particular sword could be enchanted with mana or spirit. I wouldn’t have to worry about damaging the blade then, although I had no intentions of damaging it on a test dummy in the first place.

Readying the sword, I steadied my stance, giving the weapon a few good swings on the spot. I had to ensure its weight and center of gravity was accurately tuned—all standard procedure, of course.

This was what I always did after accepting a newly-forged order from Clope.

Not noticing any problems, I enveloped the sword in a magical aura, bringing it down upon the dummy. It was a light, almost effortless stroke, and with a clean, splitting echo, the sword sliced through the wood.

Clope didn’t attempt to hide his surprise.

“...Hey hey hey, what’s this? You’ve gotten a lot better, huh?”

The point of comparison in this case would be none other than myself, or at least, when Rentt Faina still drew breath. While I did have some skill in life, what I had just done was beyond me. I could split wood, but it was by no means a clean cut. If I had to describe it, it would be more of a hacking action, similar to clubbing the dummy with a metallic object rather than slicing through it with a sword.

The split pieces of the wooden dummy, on the other hand, spoke for themselves. The surfaces had been sliced through cleanly, a testament to the quality of the weapon, and, more importantly, an indicator of the wielder's skill.

Compared to what I could do back then, my skills had grown vastly, to a point where I could take reasonable pride in my progress. It was in moments like these where I could tangibly feel and understand just how far I had come; it was an achievement to be proud of.



Of course, this was only the first of many tests; I didn't custom-order a sword that could utilize all three of my innate abilities just for show. I had much more to do, so I should give every single possible combination a try.

Clope, understanding my intent, promptly switched out the fallen dummy for a fresh one. As he finished up his preparations, I began channeling my mana into the sword, enveloping its blade with my aura.

Most adventurers skilled in the way of the sword utilized either mana or spirit—sometimes both. It was a standard of the trade, so to speak. I wasn't capable of such overly complicated feats with my magic. Enhancing my physical blows with magical strength was the extent of my abilities, and the resultant blow had more than enough bite in it for my purposes.

There was even more to all this: mana, and the magic it is woven into, also has the ability to preserve a blade's sharpness, prolong its longevity, and, more importantly, slice through hard materials with ease.

With yet another test swing of my new weapon, I found my blade almost slipping through the dummy before splitting it in two, a decidedly smoother experience than my first attempt. The myriad capabilities of magic were fearsome. There was hardly any strength in that swing, but it cut true nonetheless. Upon closer inspection, I discovered there wasn't a single bit of wood stuck to the blade's edge. In fact, the swing left an impossibly smooth surface on the parted halves of the dummy.

Magnificent.

With this, I would be able to make short work of rock-type monsters in the

deeper levels of the labyrinths. I was more than satisfied with my new weapon.

Next was a test on the applications of spirit. Once again, Clope set about replacing the wooden target dummy.

I didn't instruct him to do so per se, Clope simply did the chore himself. Maybe this was to be expected, given that we've known each other for the past decade or so.

Withdrawing my mana aura, I took a deep breath before proceeding to infuse my sword with spirit instead.

In theory, the benefits of spirit were somewhat similar to that of mana and magic, such as a spirit-infused blade remaining sharp and durable even with long periods of use. There were, however, other phenomena that could be observed if one utilized spirit in certain ways.

Once again, I lifted my sword, swinging it down and into the dummy. Immediately after the blade began parting the wooden dummy, I released the spirit aura in my weapon. With a loud, splintering shriek, it promptly exploded, raining down wooden bits in Clope's courtyard.

This was one of the many applications of spirit: the controlled explosion of a target once the blade breached its flesh. In some ways, one could say that spirit was more destructive than the common applications of mana.

The two uses contrasted significantly with each other; where practitioners of magic favored utilizing elemental enchantments on their blades to strike at monsters' weak points, practitioners of spirit simply destroyed their targets with brute force. These could be considered different methods to solve a problem with, each with their own appropriate functions.

Personally, I preferred to tackle Slime-type enemies with spirit, while Goblins, Orcs, and the like were easily dispatched with magic. Ultimately, it was down to individual preference.

Last but not least was the application of divinity. It was an ability that brought about effects significantly different from the previous two, and yet, I found myself unable to describe exactly what it did. Even most individuals who could channel divinity, commonly priests and such, were hard-pressed to explain how

their own application of divinity worked.

Furthermore, swordsmen who were capable of infusing their weapons with divinity were incredibly rare. Commonly known as paladins, they were often tasked with being the public face of the Church or other religious organizations, and didn't interact with members of the public very often. It was only natural that the specifics of channeling divinity through a sword remained somewhat unknown, or perhaps mysterious at best.

Even so, I suppose the time-tested tradition of simply infusing one's blade with divinity worked—and that much I could do.

Divinity was said to be a kind of otherworldly power originating from the gods, or other lesser spirits. As a result, practitioners instinctively knew how to use their abilities, even without established theories or methodologies. There were still ancient institutions dedicated to the research of such techniques and skills, but that was knowledge I didn't possess, nor had the means to obtain.

In any case, this made testing simple. Without further delay, I channeled my divinity into the weapon. The first thing to consider when channeling divinity was if the weapon could take the strain of such a feat, for divinity had the power to cleanse and return an object to its original form.

However, this meant weapons forged with alchemy and other magical means would be promptly undone by the nature of divinity itself, forcibly returning to its base materials where it would eventually become a few lumps of ore. To prevent such a thing from happening, the services of a skilled blacksmith were needed. Most blacksmiths were incapable of forging weapons that could withstand the channeling and use of divinity, though.

Clope, on the other hand, was a first-rate blacksmith. My weapon displayed no irregularities as divinity surged through it, its blade encased in a soft, shimmering glow.

Turning to the dummy once more, I raised my sword, conducting yet another test of its abilities. The amount of resistance, or lack thereof, was surprising. There was hardly any friction as the blade slipped through, even when compared to my usage of magic. I suppose this much was to be expected of the gods and faeries; its capabilities were truly distinctive.

But the other effects of divinity made it a challenging ability to field.

“...Hey. Something’s growing outta that dummy...” Clope said, looking down at the fallen halves of the wooden target.

Curious, I approached the pieces, only to see sprout after sprout spring forth from the fallen dummy’s pieces.

Was this yet another example of divinity’s restorative capabilities having unintended consequences? I was just as confused as Clope.



“...Have you seen this... In other wielders’... Swings. Before?”

“No, nothing of the sort. They say that the abilities of each practitioner differ depending on what granted them said powers to begin with... So, where’d you get your divinity from?”

“I repaired... An old shrine. Near where I lived... In the past.”

“Huh. Quite the pious act, eh?”

“There was... Not much meaning. To my actions. I just felt... Like it.”

In reality, I repaired the shrine in my free time as I couldn’t bear looking at it stand in a state of disrepair. I suppose the average passer-by didn’t stop and think they would try their hand at repairing a broken shrine, which was why it fell into disrepair in the first place. The shrine was unfortunately taken for granted... At least, until I fixed it.

“Regardless of the reason,” Clope continued, “I s’pose that’s where you got that divinity of yours from? That old shrine.”

“...Yes.”

“Then we can assume that some sort of plant faeries lived in that shrine...or something like that. That’d be why your divinity and its aura has such an effect. Remember that priestess-saint that came to Maalt ages ago? They said she was blessed by some god of healing, cures people of minor diseases just by touching them. Yours...would be the plant version, if I had to say.”

Clope’s explanation made a fair amount of sense. While I did recall having caught a glimpse of the priestess-saint from afar a long time ago, I wasn’t feeling particularly well that day, and didn’t remember much of the incident.

If I had to put it into words, the strength of one’s divinity was directly proportional to the strength of the being that granted it. I remember reading such a passage from one of Lorraine’s books.

To think I would have a knack for healing plant life, of all things... It didn’t seem like a very useful ability to have.

Clope, as if reading my mind, drew my attention to the sprouts once again.

“These sprouts are blessed, y’know. They’ll produce wood with divine properties if grown. Could I have ’em?”

“I do not... Mind. They might just... End up as regular old... Trees, you know.”

“That’s mighty fine with me, too. A hobby of mine, y’see. Maybe they’ll grow into strong trees that bear divine branches...or not. Rare stuff, nonetheless. I don’t know ’bout you, but I haven’t heard of any plant faeries-blessed saplings for sale lately.”

Clope’s words had some historical truth to them, for it was said that humanity no longer received as many blessings from gods and faeries of the woods in recent times. To top it off, human-elf relations had been deteriorating as of late, when, if memory served, the two races once interacted on relatively cordial terms.

—A thought for another time.

I found myself somewhat surprised by Clope’s gardening habit. Perhaps it was just something we never spoke of before. As I stood, Clope set about replacing the target dummy yet again, this time with a small grin on his face. While I was familiar with some of Clope’s hobbies, I suppose he really did have a soft spot for gardening somewhere in those fire-tempered hands.

To think that one with his face would have such a nurturing hobby. Unbecoming of me to say such a thing, yes, but Clope’s markedly improved mood was undeniable.

Having finished preparing the dummy, Clope approached me, gesturing to it with a free hand.

“Well, this is enough, isn’t it? We packing up soon?”

I stood for a while, thinking about Clope’s question. There was one last thing I hadn’t tried yet.

“...Magic. Spirit... Divinity. What would... Happen. If I channeled everything into... This sword?”

“Now look here...” Clope’s previously content grin turned into a bit of a grimace as he put a hand to his chin, closing his eyes in deep thought. “You ever

hear of anyone doing something like that? 'Cause I sure haven't. Maybe someone somewhere can. But look here...we don't know what'll happen if you go and try it."

"...Is it for the best if... I did not try it?"

As Clope said, those who wielded all three aspects were somewhat rare, let alone an individual that can safely utilize each one in combat. We could narrow the pool once more if we thought of the hypothetical number of persons who could safely channel all three elements into a single instrument at once. There was a tremendous amount of focus required for one to even channel any single aspect into a weapon. Channeling all three at once may indeed be too much for even a skilled adventurer.

Even so...

"Were there not some... Spirit arts. That involved both... Magic and spirit?"

"That. What did they call it... Mana-spirit Fusion Arts? You have to train quite a while to do something like that, see. Even you know that only a few are capable. But, well... This one'll prob'ly take two of those at once without issue. But if you throw divinity into the mix...even I have no idea. If you really want to try it, then at least start with a twin aspect Fusion Art. And with this, not your new sword."

Mana-spirit Fusion Arts were a complicated affair, as they involved the simultaneous channeling of one's mana and spirit reserves, enchanting both the sword and wielder. This granted the wielder immense destructive capability and stamina. Few individuals could use this in a practical fashion, and the draining nature of the application made it difficult to control. An explosion could very well occur if any mistakes were made, so it was risky to even attempt training oneself to use the technique. It wasn't difficult to see why individuals capable of using the technique were few and far between.

...But I was of a different physical nature. I probably wouldn't die even if my head was sent flying someplace. Similarly, injuries to the body could probably be shrugged off, as well. While I wouldn't say it is safe for me to be practicing such a thing, it wasn't as risky as it would be to a normal person.

The sword that Clope held out to me was the piece that I was using up until

now: the sword capable of channeling both spirit and magic. If I injected divinity into it as well, it could very well shatter, so I posed my concerns to Clope.

“Well, it isn’t too expensive if that’s what you’re asking. Considering what you’ve paid for your new sword...I’ll just write it off as an expense.”

Not wanting to look a gift horse in the mouth, I picked up my old sword, handing my newly-forged piece back to Clope. I was to channel both magic and spirit into the instrument—that very same mana-spirit Fusion Art in question.

In theory, that’s what I was supposed to do; in practice, it felt impossibly difficult. It was like I was trying to put more things into a box that was already filled to the brim. The box in question felt full and stuffed, and to make things worse, the flow of both aspects within said box was unstable. It was likely that disaster would surely happen if the contents of the box somehow spilled forth.

From what I knew of the technique, the disaster in question involved an explosion somewhere in the wielder’s body, evident enough from the failings of the brave pioneers before me.

I didn’t have much time for idle thought. As soon as Clope was done with his setup, I thrust my blade into the ill-fated wooden dummy. With a deafening crack, the dummy exploded violently upon coming into contact with the tip of the blade. The force and scale of the explosion was nothing compared to the spirit-induced explosion I demonstrated earlier. I could only stand on the spot, stunned as I continued staring at the aftermath of my attack.

Clope was apparently doing the very same thing.

“...If you ever mess this up, you’re going to become like that,” he said, his words slower and more deliberate than usual.

Clope was right; it was a power that came with considerable amounts of risk. It was also excessively tiring—a single attempt at the technique felt like I spent the entire day practicing.

“Just lookit that... And you still want to add divinity to it? Now see here... You don’t need me to tell you it’s a bad idea...”

Clope had his misgivings, but I already made it all the way to this point. There was no choice but to move forward. Even if I failed, this body of mine ensured I

wouldn't die.

Of course, my body could very likely be blown to bits and spread across Clope's courtyard, at which point I would simply have to tell Clope the truth, and have him gather my body parts. After that, it would only be a matter of healing myself with divinity.

Though, I had no idea if such a thing was even possible, or if I was capable of healing such great injuries. I couldn't even begin to picture Clope smiling peacefully as he picked up my scattered body parts from the ground.

This wasn't simply a gamble; a strong attack required a fair amount of preparation and sacrifice. At the very least, I would like to be able to practice in a safe location, such as this one.

This was another step toward my goal—I had to become a Mithril-class adventurer at any cost. No matter what it took.

To that end, I had to grow stronger. If there was even the slightest hint of possibility, then I would do well to explore that path. It would surely be fraught with dangers and great risks.

“Well...try it if you really want. But if it looks bad, you stop right away, y’hear...?”

The problem, really, was being unable to stop when one needed to while channeling. For now, I shoved that thought aside.

Having decided upon the course of action, Clope fetched yet another dummy, setting it up as I stood with my sword still in hand.

It seemed that this was the last dummy available. I felt somewhat guilty for using up all of Clope's supplies, but this was a necessary evil. Such services were included in the overall fee I paid when ordering my weapon, so I might as well make the best of it.

Focusing once more, I channeled mana and spirit into the sword, just like I did moments prior.

But this was easier said than done since the weapon already felt unstable as-is. I could hardly imagine it would be possible to channel anything else through

the blade. Despite this, I set about doing what I decided.

Steeling myself, I activated the reserves of divinity within me, forcing it to flow into the blade. I could see the familiar white aura creeping through the blade, although it seemed to have a hard time blending with the other auras present.

I should have expected this, but even though I was somewhat disappointed, I was also relieved. But my relief didn't last very long.

Crack.

With that innocuous sound, a series of cracks spread through the blade. Though small, I understood all too well it would only be a matter of time before it spread to the rest of the weapon. Just my combining of the auras in such a fashion could trigger a backflow in which the combined auras would forcibly flow back into me, before spectacularly exploding. For a moment, I caught a mental glimpse of that future—

This is bad...

Even Clope, who was standing a safe distance away, was aware of this.

“Hey, hey! You swing that sword right now, or you stop! Hurry!” Clope shouted, waving his arms wildly.

If I stopped now, however, the experiment would end without any results. I only had one choice: I had to swing this sword down immediately.

With that, I brought it high up above my head, bringing it down decisively in a single stroke. There was little, if any, resistance, much like when I channeled both mana and spirit simultaneously.

Yet I was momentarily confused, for nothing particularly exciting was happening—until the target dummy started creaking, quickly collapsing into itself in a self-consuming spiral.

This reaction continued until the dummy was reduced to a tenth of its size, finally dropping onto the ground harmlessly. At the same time, wide cracks

spread through the entirety of the sword I was holding, and in an instant, the weapon crumbled into a heap of scrap metal.

Thanks to the sword's sacrifice, however, I avoided a potentially fatal backflow accident. If I had to guess, that unstable vortex of energy was thrust completely into the dummy, and was safely dispersed after my blow.

Approaching the fallen object, I picked it up, inspecting it with a curious eye. This was all that was left: a compressed, almost ball-like piece of wood. It seemed like an immense force crushed and folded it repeatedly from the outside, before finally surrounding its entirety and compressing it into the ball currently in my hands.

If this was the effect of combining all three aspects...what effects would it have on a monster, or even a human?

It was terrifying to even think about such an event.

Approaching me cautiously, Clope stared at the ball of wood in my hands with a somewhat complicated expression. Picking up the barely-intact hilt of the destroyed weapon, Clope sighed as he turned to me.

"...No good—completely gone. Nothing left to salvage, either. Maybe the one I've forged for you could withstand such a technique... But. I wouldn't try it, either way. If you insist on Fusion Arts, limit it to mana and spirit only."

"What would I do if... That did not work on... My target?"

Although my tests felt like significant achievements, I was slashing at nothing more than a wooden dummy. With the exception of the final test, the results shown by my prior swings could be easily replicated by an adventurer of the Silver-class level. I suppose I couldn't really call common techniques like these my trump card.

"I get what you're trying to say...but you ever consider what'd happen to your sword after you do something like that?" Clope, looking at me with an exasperated expression, offered an almost immediate rebuttal. He held up the ruined hilt of the weapon I was holding a short while ago.

Again, Clope was right; if I did insist on using such a move, it would be a one-off, after which I would be unable to continue fighting. It was a problem worth

mulling over.

“Well...” Clope continued, “you could bring several swords with you and use them as disposable weapons. Even if you bring a bunch of cheap ones, they would at least have to withstand both mana and spirit... If not, they might just snap immediately. Of course, if you did do something like that, it’ll cost you. Immensely.”

“I suppose... That is true. But then... How about... Throwing knives? I would be able to... Use them as a projectile... Weapon.”

If I could do something of this sort, I would suddenly find myself with many more strategic options while exploring. Even if the weapons involved couldn’t withstand the auras channeled into it and disintegrated, the chance for backflow was low, given that the object would be far away from me by then. In such a case, these knives would have to be disposable since they would just be rendered useless after a single attack.

“I wonder... Wanna find out?”

As always, I found myself appreciating Clope’s generous gestures. He soon returned with a cheap knife I could use.

Unfortunately, the experiment ended in failure. Maintaining the mixture of mana and spirit seemed impossible, as it would fade once it left my hands. Needless to say, I didn’t bother with attempting to infuse it with divinity.

If I only channeled a single aspect, the weapon might be able to maintain its aura until impact, or else it would have to be used in close-quarters combat.

The chief takeaways from this set of tests were that I now understood the effects of channeling mana and spirit through my new weapon, in addition to the utilization of mana-spirit Fusion Arts. That, and the channeling of all three elements wasn’t only risky, but would completely destroy a weapon, therefore I would strive not to use it with expensive equipment of any kind. Also, Fusion Arts were resource inefficient; they weren’t attacks to be used on a regular basis.

That about summed it up.

I felt I gained a fair amount of knowledge, but I was also now aware of the

fact that powerful attacks often came with great consequences to the wielder, reminding me once again of the complexities of the world. Adventuring was hardly easy in any shape or form.

Despite all this, I had a trump card to use in absolute cases and situations—the proverbial silver lining. I wouldn't dream of using these attacks unless I was faced with a strong enemy, or if my life was in serious danger.

As for the mana-spirit Fusion Arts, I felt confident I would eventually get used to the toll it took on me, maybe even up to a point where I could use it daily without many ill-effects. For this to happen, however, much practice was required. Practicing my weapon-destroying trump card would end up with me destroying a weapon every time I attempted it.

According to Clope, a weapon forged from copious amounts of Mithril or Orichalcum might be able to withstand the forces involved, but naturally, I hardly had the funds for such a venture.

In any case, all I could do now was work with what I currently had and continue my steady upward climb. Such was the conclusion I arrived at, once again being uncomfortably jolted back to reality.



After paying Luka, Clope's wife, the remaining payment owed for my sword and other services, I stepped out of the store. Although Luka's gaze suggested she had something to say, she held her peace for now, and I, for my part, looked back at her with an ambiguous expression. Although, I intended to return her concern with a smile.

But this was difficult, as the current state of my face made it physically impossible for me to form a smile at all. To make things worse, the skin on the lower half of my face was decidedly missing.

While I pondered over my unfortunate inability to smile, Luka seemed reassured for some reason, responding with a small smile of her own. Did my otherwise ambiguous expression somehow convey the words I wanted to say? I could only hope.

My next destination, having collected my weapon, was none other than the

guild. I had every intention of starting work as a Bronze-class adventurer as soon as possible. Now armed with a newly-forged sword, I would surely be able to progress through the labyrinths at an even faster pace... Is what I would have liked to do. Lorraine and Sheila warned me to stay out of the labyrinths for a while, and to be honest, this greatly troubled me. Though, I suppose my circumstances were complicated enough as-is. Even if I did look suspicious, and depending on who you asked, terrifying, I would like to avoid being thought of as a kidnapper.

I couldn't help but wonder when I would trudge through the labyrinths again.

All things considered, kidnappers and adventurers with ill-intent were all too common in labyrinths. Most adventurers were of respectable strength, and could utilize mana, spirit, and divinity. If one was captured and enslaved, they would certainly be sold for a large sum of coin.

While the Kingdom of Yaaran (which Maalt was in) outlawed slavery due to the history and pride of the ruling class, it was more of the exception than the norm. In fact, many kingdoms in these lands often turned a blind eye to the slave trade. One could claim that the trade was fueled by the perverse few with the unquenchable desire to control the lives of many; but alas, this was not quite the case. Some societies across the lands simply became unable to function without a slavery system of some sort.

For example, in dangerous industries such as ore-mining, it was difficult for employers to reach specified resource quotas without utilizing slave labor. In fact, some individuals were forced into slavery, often as a result of large debts. While they gave up a part of themselves, and with it some of their freedom, they would at least be able to maintain a shred of dignity by working away what remained of their debt. But it wasn't uncommon to hear of individuals being mistreated simply because they were slaves. While formal laws didn't exist in many kingdoms, the visible abuse of slaves was often not tolerated.

Personally, I didn't know which was the greater tragedy; it was generally a sad state of affairs.

It was easy to see why slavers and kidnappers chose to target adventurers since they were so physically strong, in addition to their ability of using magic or

Spirit Arts. The slavers, for their part, didn't even have to look too far; all they had to do was enter a labyrinth and do their hunting. The potential criminals would have to deal with the guild and strong, virtuous adventurers. On the other hand, they could also seek the cooperation of adventurers with dubious morals; such was the way of the world.

It would be naïve to think the only enemy of adventurers were monsters—reality was a much harsher mistress. This was why the rank progression tests were incredibly strict, part of the purpose being to weed out such undesirable elements.

However, the slave trade was prohibited in the Kingdom of Yaaran, so kidnappings and similar incidents occurred on a much smaller scale. I couldn't doubt that it still happened on these lands, and while I didn't have any concrete sources, I could at least say that such occurrences were rare.

This was exactly why the recent spate of disappearances had the guild on alert. Considering my strange appearance, I supposed it was easy to point the proverbial finger at me. Some might even go out on a limb and claim that I was behind it all, which was why I had to avoid the labyrinth, instead turning my attention to various odd job requests.

I was somewhat skilled with these odd jobs in life, and didn't find them difficult, but my thoughts were constantly haunted with the desire to undergo Existential Evolution. At the very least, I would like to evolve into a being that could show its face safely around normal human beings. As I currently was, I was unable to dine at restaurants and taverns. I have dined at Loris's establishment on several occasions, yes, if only because Loris accepted my circumstances. And I only did this when there were no other customers present, while also out of sight of Loris's wife, Isabel.

While Loris thought my skin was simply some sort of prop when he first saw it, he quickly understood that it was real after a single touch, quickly withdrawing his hand. I explained it was due to an unfortunate curse, and as far as I knew, Loris accepted my explanation. I didn't think that being a talking monster ever occurred to Loris.

If I did evolve in the future, all I had to tell him was that my curse was lifted by

a passing priestess-saint, and that would be all there was to it.

Such were the thoughts that flooded my mind as I stood, looking at the request boards in the guild's halls. There were a variety of odd jobs, from requests for a sparring partner to simple assistance for the transport of heavy items.

As I continued peering at the listings, bits of a nearby conversation drifted into my ears.

"I already said no, pal. Can ya go bother someone else? No one's gonna go to some rural hole in the ground like that!"

"B-But...! I'm begging you! Please, please, you have to help!"

It was in the general direction of the guild reception's counter. Upon closer inspection, the conversation appeared to be between a seemingly veteran adventurer and a flustered youth in his early twenties.

From what I had heard, the circumstances were thus:

The youth, in his desperation, was personally approaching adventurers in the hopes they would take up his request. The adventurer he was speaking with was refusing. It was also easy to guess why the adventurer was refusing to take up the task, seeing as most requests were simply left with the guild and pinned up on one of its many boards. The fact that the youth was personally doing this was suspicious enough. The request was probably already posted, but was not taken on by anyone due to its troublesome nature. Perhaps it involved long-distance travel? If this was the case, it was no wonder that the request still sat unfulfilled, and it wouldn't be strange for the adventurer to reject the request to begin with.

However...

"You persistent bastard... If you don't shut up right about now..."

Maybe the youth's persistence had touched a nerve. Whatever it was, the situation was about to take a dangerous turn.

And so I decided to intervene.

"...Hey."

“What...? Who the hell are you?” the adventurer said, shifting his gaze from the youth to me.

His eyes were dilated and his expression wild; I could tell he was about to drag the youth off into some back alley or another, before engaging in acts of unbridled violence. That hostility was now directed toward me, the strange individual who got in his way.

To tell the truth, I felt like I had to intervene. Even though Maalt’s adventurers were known for their morals and sense of ethics, this only applied to those who were primarily based in Maalt. This veteran adventurer in question wasn’t familiar, so it was highly likely he was a drifter of sorts. This also meant the odds of him engaging in acts of violence toward the persistent young man were predictably high. It was quite difficult to watch on and do nothing.

“...Is it not obvious... From my appearance? I am an... Adventurer.”

“Ha. Is that right? Well, what does this high ‘n’ mighty adventurer hafta do with me?”

“I would appreciate it... If you left the young man... To me instead.”

“Wha...?”

Staring at me with a baffled expression, the adventurer seemed even more surprised when I placed a silver coin into his palm, leaning in as I did so. “...I thought you... Would be in a mood to... Agree.”

Upon hearing my words, a crooked smile spread across the adventurer’s face. “Oh, is that right? Well, that’s all good then. I’m gonna have some good wine with this, so do whatever you want with him!”

With that, the man turned and walked straight out the doors of the guild.

Although it wasn’t necessary for me to have paid him, he would have surely stayed around to grumble if I simply demanded the young man’s release. If I left the adventurer to his own devices, the outcome would surely be troublesome. Avoiding such a thing was probably worth at least one silver coin.

The young man, on the other hand, seemed even more distraught. Perhaps it was to be expected, given that the adventurer he begged for help from left him

in the dust.

“Ugh...!” A pathetic expression indeed.

With the situation resolved, I had the option of simply going back to what I was doing; but I was now one silver coin short. With that in mind, I turned to the youth.

“You were... Asking him to take on... A request of yours, correct...?”

“Eh...? Yes... What about it? Ah, don’t tell me...you would like to accept my request in his stead?!” the young man asked, his face brightening up instantly.

I shouldn’t get his hopes up prematurely, for I was hardly as strong as I would have liked to be at this point. Judging by how the previous interaction between the two went, I could deduce that the request in question was too dangerous, even for a veteran adventurer.

So I responded accordingly: “I cannot... Promise anything. But... I will at least listen to what... You have to say. Come.”

Saying so, I turned, walking out of the guild hall with a brisk step.

There was no way of telling if anyone else overheard the previous conversation between the youth and the adventurer, so I wanted to discuss this matter elsewhere, lest my actions appeared suspicious.

To tell the truth, I always wanted to do something like this at least once. But there was no way of knowing if the youth would follow behind me, however. He could still be standing there, mouth agape.

“Ah, yes! Wait for me!” the youth said, before running after me. I suppose it worked out after all.

Turning to him as he caught up to me, I informed the youth of our next destination.

“There is an... Eatery. Nearby. Let us head there... First.”

With that, I walked off briskly once more, the youth following close behind.



“Well... Then. What kind of request... Is it?”

The eatery we headed to was none other than the Red Wyvern Pavilion, run by the ill-fated, now presumably retired ex-adventurer, Loris. Me visiting his establishment at such an early time of the day was rare, and most other shopkeepers didn't bother hiding their involuntary repulsion when someone like me stepped through their doors. Loris, for his part, was incredibly grateful for my assistance, and always welcomed me with open arms. It was at times like this that I, too, felt a deep sense of gratitude for Loris's hospitality.

In return, I occasionally treated all diners present to dinner on my visits, which drew more customers to Loris's restaurant. It was a mutually beneficial arrangement. I could afford to do this much nowadays, as I was no longer having to scrape every single bronze piece together to make ends meet.

"Will... Will you really help me...?" the youth seated across from me asked, a somewhat apprehensive look on his face.

I couldn't just agree without first hearing the details.

"I cannot... Give you an immediate... Answer. How about you first... Tell me what needs to be... Done. I will decide after... That."

Was I being too cautious? Trust did go both ways, however.

Although the greater half of adventurers in these lands were capable individuals, they still failed requests occasionally, or sometimes withdrew from a request they already took on. A good adventurer was responsible about the types of requests they accepted in the first place, minimizing failures and withdrawals. Practicing good adventuring ethics would draw more repeat customers to said adventurer, eventually even specifically asking for them via the guild, or in person.

As for myself, I had my doubts about having a trustworthy reputation, given how I looked. Even so, I suppose everything had to start from somewhere.

"O-Oh... Is that how it works? I'm sorry..." The youth nervously apologized.

Regaining his posture shortly, he took a deep breath.

"...Well you see, the situation is..."

And with that, I finally began hearing the specifics of this peculiar request.



“I live in a small village to the east of Maalt. It’s a village near a lake...Ruiness Lake. It may be in the middle of nowhere, but it’s a nice place...”

I suppose the veteran adventurer turned down his request because of its rural nature. Ruiness Lake, too, was by no means large. I vaguely remembered its geographical location with respect to Maalt.

“Todds... Village? Was that... It?”

Upon hearing his village’s name, the youth broke into a wide smile. “Y-You know of Todds Village?!”

He was probably as surprised as I was that I could remember the name of such a rural village. While I couldn’t possibly know the names of each and every single village in the general vicinity of Maalt, I did make an effort to learn a little bit more of the surrounding areas. It just so happened that Todds Village in particular was known to me, and for a specific reason, at that.

“I... Suppose. If I recall... That village hosts a... Strange festival of some sort. I’ve... Heard. That much. Always wanted to go... At least once.”

If memory served, the festival involved the local villagers setting small wooden boats adrift on Ruiness Lake. Then, a young woman with magical aptitude and considerable beauty would be chosen from among the village’s population, and offered to the Lord of the Lake. However, the offering wasn’t an actual sacrifice by any means. Local legends spoke of how a maiden was offered to the Lord of the Lake in ancient times to protect the village from a disaster. The villagers merely continued the custom ever since.

If I had to guess, this Lord in question was probably a monster of some sort. Not all monsters were hostile toward humans, after all. In fact, there were some monsters that peacefully co-existed with humans in some capacities. The monster living in the depths of Ruiness Lake would probably be one such monster, I thought.

But the youth had a difficult expression on his face.

“Well, yes...that’s true. However...that very festival is the problem...” he said in a faltering voice.

“What... Do you mean?”

“Well... I suppose you understand that we’ve been going through the motions of offering sacrifices to the Lord of the Lake, as usual. But...”

Of course I knew that much. What the youth had to say next, though, genuinely surprised me.

It would seem that the Lord had, as of late, begun to consume the sacrifices.



“...Is it really all right...?” the youth said, swaying back and forth from the motions of the horse carriage.

He probably meant to ask if I truly should have accepted his request. Perhaps a little late to be asking such a question, given that I was now on a carriage with him, en route to Todds Village; in fact, we were close to the end of our journey.

Maybe it seemed strange that I was so eager to leave Maalt, but in reality, the village wasn’t too far away, requiring only half a day’s worth of travel by carriage. The fact that the veteran adventurer refused to take on the request indicated that he didn’t normally operate out of Maalt.

To me, as one who did operate out of Maalt, Todds Village wasn’t an excessively rural location. Even Maalt was a frontier township in and of itself. If anything, it was the scenery that didn’t really change much at all.

“I do not... Mind. Although I... Agreed to follow you, I have not formally... Taken on your request. After all... You yourself told me that... I could appraise the situation first. Carry out the request if it seemed... Possible. If not... I would give up. Right...?”

It was exactly that. I ended up following the youth without formally agreeing to his request.

To be absolutely honest, it seemed impossible for one such as myself to “do something” about a monster like the Lord of the Lake. While it was true I was stronger than I used to be, I was still very much a realist at heart, and I had no intentions of picking fights I couldn’t win. One lives only once... An ironic thought, coming from me.

It would seem strange for me to make such a trip, then. Why travel when I was certain I was of no match for the monster in question? Well, defeating the monster wasn't what the youth asked of me. Instead...

"Yes... If you can save Amiris, my sister...then I am willing to do anything. Even if you cannot promise the same, I am grateful you are willing to at least try..."

As he said, he wanted to save his sister, not for me to engage in any heroic monster slaying.

Yes... If I recall, the youth's name was Ryuntus, and, as he stated, his sister was Amiris.

The problem was this festival in question...and the sacrifices it involved. According to Ryuntus, the "sacrifices" so far were mostly ceremonial; the girls involved never lost their lives.

This all changed a month ago when the sacrifice who was set off to the middle of the lake apparently never made it back. And while the sacrificial festival was normally held on an annual basis, the Lord of the Lake now demanded a sacrifice every ten days.

I wondered how a monster that lived in a lake could demand sacrifices... Ryuntus, sensing my confusion, went on to explain that the Lord in question had Kelpies under his command, monsters that left marks on the doors of the sacrifices the Lord desired. Kelpies themselves were monsters that lived in lakes and the like, and resembled horses with scales. They were also extremely strong monsters...

"Is the Lord of the Lake... A large... Kelpie?"

Ryuntus shook his head. "It's said that the Lord lives even deeper in the lake. The Kelpies are...well, something like his familiars, I suppose..."

To make strong monsters like Kelpies bend to its will... Did such a fearsome monster really exist?

While I had my doubts, Ryuntus claimed the Kelpies didn't attack anyone in the village. They simply journeyed in, left a mark on a door, and left.

"Is that... Still the case, now?"

“Well, no... Everyone’s afraid now, and we all stay in our homes at night... But there will surely be a mark left on someone’s door come the morning.”

Although I didn’t want to be suspicious of my potential client, I couldn’t help but find Ryuntus’s words...strange.



“Well, it seems like we’re here,” Ryuntus said, peeking out of the carriage before alighting altogether.

I followed soon after, and was greeted by a scenic view. I supposed this was somewhere near Todds Village.

“Big Brother!”

A young girl flew into Ryuntus’s arms as soon as his feet touched the ground. Judging by her looks, I would say she was young, maybe 15 or 16. Upon closer inspection, she was quite a beautiful girl, with eyes of glinting sapphire. The very image of a potential sacrifice, if Ryuntus’s words were to be believed.

—A joke I would only make if the sacrifices in question weren’t actually consumed by the Lord. Given the current circumstances, a statement like that would be in poor taste. The very thought of young girls dying because of this tradition was hard to swallow.

“Amiris! Why have you come all the way out here? Isn’t it dangerous?”

Ryuntus hardly seemed to be in the mood for a family reunion, and I could understand why, given the circumstances.

We arrived a short distance away from Todds Village. While the gates were well within view, the path leading up to it was surrounded by forest. One couldn’t guarantee the path would be free of monsters, so it was certainly a dangerous journey for a young girl to make on her lonesome. It was, however, all too common for girls living in rural areas to venture into wooded areas alone for some reason. It was understandable that Ryuntus came across as somewhat over-protective of his sister, in light of recent events.

It was plain to see that Ryuntus cared for his sister deeply, and was willing to journey all the way to Maalt for a chance at saving her life.

“But you just suddenly vanished, saying something about going to the city... Oh, who is that person over there...?”

Amiris narrowed her eyes, staring in my general direction. Her gaze was cold; it was easy to see she was suspicious of my presence. I felt somewhat discouraged—to think that someone who just met me would view me this unfavorably!

But, I understood why she felt that way, for I was a strange, skull-masked man in a black robe with a sword slung behind his back. I’d be surprised if Amiris welcomed me with open arms.

Ryuntus, however, quickly offered an explanation in my defense.

“Ah, this person is going to save you from becoming a sacrifice, Amiris! He’s an adventurer named Rentt. He’s a Bronze-class adventurer, you know?”

Ryuntus placed me on quite the pedestal. Perhaps this was to put Amiris at ease. He went through the trouble of fetching an adventurer all the way from Maalt for the express purpose of protecting his sister, after all.

But Amiris didn’t seem impressed in the slightest. Her suspicious gaze remained as she pulled her brother off to a corner, speaking in whispered tones. A conversation she did not want me to hear, no doubt.

Alas, such measures were futile, given the sharp hearing I was bestowed with ever since I evolved into a Thrall. I stood still and listened calmly.

“Big Brother, have you been tricked again?! I’ve told you so many times not to get involved with strange-looking people in the city!”

“B-But... Mister Rentt is a great person! He helped me out of a bad situation in the city, and he even offered to assist with the situation going on now...”

“All lies, Big Brother... How could you even hope to afford a Bronze-class adventurer? You know how poor we are! Why would a Bronze-class adventurer come all the way out here with just any old request?”

“Listen... It wasn’t a request I had the guild just put on the board. I personally asked him to come here with me...”

“You’ve been lied to again... *Sigh*. They could get angry if we simply dismissed

them now... What a situation you've gotten yourself in! Well, I'll take care of it, Big Brother. All you have to do is follow my lead. Ugh... I can't help but worry about you! What will you do with yourself when I'm gone...?"

What a conversation, and not a pleasant one by any means. I had no means of cheating anyone, or robbing my clients of their coin, so it wasn't difficult to see why one would make such an assumption given Ryuntus's character. But those were some big accusations, nonetheless.

Apparently finished with their discussion, Amiris approached me, addressing me in an excessively formal manner.

"Adventurer...Rentt, yes? Thank you very much for accepting my brother's request, and for making the journey to our village."

"Well..."

I wanted to tell her not to worry about such things, but I was interrupted before I could go on.

"However, the Festival of Offering has been an uninterrupted tradition in the village since days of yore. I could not possibly hope to end the tradition because of my own selfish desires. As such, I would greatly appreciate if you forgot about this entire conversation and returned to Maalt..."

Unlike her brother, Amiris had a good grip of the world at large.

Ryuntus, still standing some distance away from us, gestured wildly, presumably asking me to convince his sister otherwise. I apparently didn't have much of a choice otherwise, so I turned to Amiris.

"I accepted a... Request. From Ryuntus... The only person who... Can alter the terms... Of the contract. Is Ryuntus alone."

"But..." Amiris turned around, angrily glaring at her brother. Ryuntus only shook his head in rapid denial. Giving up, the girl sighed. "I understand... If you are to stay at the village for a while, then you may stay at our home. However, you are not to interfere with the festival. I have chosen to become a sacrifice of my own free will."

Is that right?

While I had my own suspicions, I simply nodded, not wanting to complicate things further.

“...Well, then. I am in... Your care.”



“You really helped me out there, Rentt... You’ve now seen firsthand how stubborn my sister is! See, my sister is so stubborn! Once she’s made up her mind, there’s no more room for discussion...” Ryuntus shook his head.

Having made my way to his and his sister’s home, we were now seated and engaged in discussion. The topic of the conversation was obvious: we had to come up with a course of action relatively soon.

“Look at... What your sister. Is saying... How would I save her... Like this? What will you do...?”

“Well... I actually had a plan from the start...”

“Oh...?”

An unexpected development. One would hardly think Ryuntus had it in him to carry out any kind of decisive action, let alone formulate a plan.

Ryuntus continued: “Amiris will be sacrificed at the lake the day after next. The process is simple: she will be placed on a small boat of sorts and float out to the center of the lake. However, there will be three other boats present, as well; escorts for the sacrifice, if you will... All you have to do, then, is get on one of those escort boats.”

“... I, of all people. On the boat?”

I assumed the role of an escort was a rather important one. Ryuntus, however, simply continued with his explanation.

“Well, you see... Those tasked with escorting the sacrifice are required to wear masks. All you have to do is take the place of one of the escorts, and there shouldn’t be any problems. In fact, I’m one of the escorts, being the sacrifice’s brother and all that. All you have to do is replace one of the two remaining escorts, then...”

“I see. You have really... Thought this through.”

Unexpected, indeed. The plan seemed like it could actually work, and that was the most surprising part.

“Those tasked with guarding the sacrifice will be waiting by the lake before the festival begins. During that time, there won’t be any guards, which is to be expected since the escorts are there... And they’re just normal villagers, Rentt. So, basically, adventurers like you...”

Ryuntus ended his explanation there, looking somewhat apologetic. I understood his sentiment—even if I could easily knock out the escorts in question, they were still his fellow neighbors.

I nodded, finding the plan acceptable. Ryuntus, for his part, seemed relieved at my response.



This undead body of mine doesn’t desire sleep or rest, even into the depths of each night, so I couldn’t help but feel bored, having to wait for daybreak. Rising from my bed, I made to leave the room. A breath of fresh night air didn’t seem too bad of an idea. As I placed my hand on the door, however, I felt the presence of a living being behind it.

Sitting on a log outside their cottage was Amiris, who had apparently been staring at the stars in the night sky all this time.

“What... Are you doing?”

“Eh...?” Amiris seemed surprised at my sudden intrusion. “Ah, Mister Rentt... Is something wrong? It’s pretty late...”

She turned toward me, some tears still clinging to her face. It was to be expected, I suppose. Contrary to what she said during the day, Amiris was evidently afraid of her impending fate.

“I... Could not. Sleep. I see you are... The same.”

“No, I...”

“You were... Crying. Filled with sorrow over... Your destiny. Of becoming a sacrifice...”

Amiris could only stare at me blankly when confronted with my blunt words.

She probably wasn't expecting a stranger like myself to make such declarations. Though, if I gave her the chance, she would surely offer one witty rebuttal or another. This was why I continued with my monologue.

"Do not... Fear. There is no reason to be... Sad. I will do... Something about the... Situation. When there is a will... There is. A way."

There was no basis for what I just said, other than the personal experiences that I picked up over the course of my short life. Although becoming a Mithril-class adventurer was impossible for me in life, I had died and was reborn as a monster, granting me an unexpected opportunity at fulfilling my dream. Maybe then I would be able to do something about this sacrificial festival, and protect this girl's life.

Again, I had no basis for my assumptions, but I couldn't dispute the possibility of such a thing. I, too, couldn't find a way to put this possibility into words.

"Are you...serious? About helping us...?"

"Of... Course. I am serious. You should also... Not do anything rash. Think about your brother. If there is even... A flicker of hope. Then struggle... Fight back. That is all... I want to say."

With that, I turned around, walking back into the cottage once more. I had no way of knowing how Amiris would take my words, so this all could have been for naught. Just as I stepped through the doors, however...

"Thank you... Thank you very much..."

And those were the last words I heard that night.



"Quite... A depressing atmosphere. This village."

I set out for a sightseeing trip the very next morning, intending to take in the sights of Todds Village. As the festival was the day after this one, I found myself with some free time on my hands.

The village itself, while bustling with activity, didn't exactly seem like a happy place, if the villagers' expressions were anything to go by. It was a reasonable reaction, I suppose, given that a previously benign festival had now become a

death sentence for the sacrifice involved. If there was anyone who was happy about being sacrificed, it would be quite a sight to behold.

“It’s not as if we have a choice. No one in the village wants a festival like this.”

Turning around, I was greeted with the sight of Amiris.

“...I see you have... Changed your tone. Quite a bit.”

Amiris sighed in response. “There isn’t much point in pretending anymore, right? Big Brother was very happy this morning. You said something to cheer him up, didn’t you? Just like you said something to me. There were no traces of our home being run-through, either... So I guess you’re not going to cheat or steal from us or anything like that.”

As expected, Ryuntus’s expressions were far too easy to read. I had no intentions of searching their home for valuables, so to think Amiris was this suspicious of me... It was truly saddening. But then again, this was how adventurers were normally regarded.

Though, there was now the fact that Amiris behaved around me in a notably different way after our previous conversation. If nothing else, I should be grateful for that.

“I will thank you for... Trusting me.”

“I don’t trust you that much... Though, I guess I trust you enough. But...are you really gonna do something about it?”

“...Perhaps.”

Amiris’s expression was as unreadable as my response was vague.

“...Then...I won’t expect much out of you. But if you can really do something...then I’ll fight, too. Is that acceptable...?”

A satisfying response.

“...Yes. That is... Acceptable. By the way... There seems to be quite... A lot of. Outsiders. In this crowd...”

With the conversation brought back to more mundane matters, Amiris’s expression softened, eventually returning to a more normal state.

“Yes. The villagers are more generous with their expenditures during the festival... Most of the outsiders are probably traveling merchants. It’s a small village, but not necessarily a poor one...”

“...I see. Is that man over there... One of those traveling merchants?” I asked, pointing to a man seated on the ground with a mat.

A textile merchant of sorts, bales of cloth were neatly stacked before him. What caught my eye, however, was his physique. The man was more built than the average individual. I supposed being a traveling merchant was more physically demanding than I thought.

“Yes, he is a traveling merchant that visits often.” Amiris offered a quick answer to my question. “His wares are a great help, and he even visits the village when no festivals are being held.”

“Is that right...?”

One occasionally hears of good-hearted merchants like him in rural villages. The merchants weren’t necessarily saints; it was sometimes a symbiotic relationship. In return for their wares, villagers would sell the merchant their harvested crops at cheaper prices. In that sense, I suppose both parties profited off each other.

Amiris continued guiding me through the village. According to her, the atmosphere in this village was nowhere near this brooding in the past. It only became this way after a sacrificial villager lost their life in what was supposed to be a harmless ceremony. From what I was told, the villagers were more than eager to put an end to the practice, but they feared reprisal from the Kelpies or the Lord of the Lake itself. All they could do, then, was continue the so-called tradition.

Quite the burden this village was carrying, but maybe they truly had little choice in the matter. After all, if this village had as much military might as Maalt, the Lord could easily be defeated, and the tradition ended permanently.

For such a small village, however... That didn’t seem to be a valid option. This was precisely why I wanted to do something about the problem at hand.



The festival was beginning. Crowds gathered by the side of the lake, with many of the people holding candles. The crowds were looking in the direction of a few whimsically decorated boats, adorned with a fair number of glittering trinkets.

On this day, a young girl would sail to the center of the lake on one of those boats, becoming a sacrifice to the Lord of the Lake. The villagers naturally felt their fair share of guilt.

Reality was stark, however: should a sacrifice not be provided, the village would come under attack, either from the Lord or the Kelpies under its command. All the villagers could do was close their eyes and apologize. This was probably their only course of action. What else were a few villagers from a rural village to do?

Amiris, who was due to ride on one of the boats on this very night, stood a short distance away from the decorated boats on the lakeside. Dressed in robes woven from glittering fabric, the bright colors cut a sharp contrast to the ceremonial makeup on her face. She was undeniably beautiful.

She was to board the boats with her escorts, before setting off toward her final destination.

Standing around her were two figures, watching over her. Originally, there should have been three—at least, that was what those familiar with the festival would think. The role of a Sacrificial Escort, however, was decidedly a supporting one. Originally, any number of escorts was acceptable. Most villagers were usually selected for the role against their will.

“It still seems a little risky, this entire business... Will we be found out?” Ryuntus, one of the escorts, said.

“No guarantees, Big Brother... People usually only look at the sacrificial maiden during festivals anyway... It’s probably fine,” said Amiris, the sacrifice in question.

“...You two are... More relaxed. Than I thought you... Would be,” I said to the pair.

“Only because you’re here, Rentt! I’m counting on you!”

“Exactly. Although...I probably won’t expect much out of you.”

In some ways very similar, yet very different in others. What a strange pair of siblings.

Thankfully, the festival’s proceedings went on without much issue, with Amiris herself stepping toward the boats as the village elder blessed her with the appropriate rites.

“Let’s go, Rentt...”

I followed closely after Ryuntus. Although he provided a detailed explanation of the ceremony, I left most of the complicated steps to him, copying his actions where I could. Fortunately, our party seemed to have escaped close scrutiny, with Ryuntus, myself, and Amiris successfully boarding the boats and sailing out toward the center of the lake.

Although several villagers regarded our smaller than usual number of escorts with strange gazes, no one in particular raised any complaints. I suppose they, too, were mentally exhausted from this entire business of sacrificing one of their own on a regular basis, and were unable to say much more in protest.

After some time, our small fleet reached its destination. We were well out of sight from the villagers, having sailed a long distance from the shore.

“Is this... All right?”

“Yes, I think so.” Amiris was quick to respond. “This is the middle of the lake, after all... And the Orb is glowing. This is definitely the place.”

Amiris held up her palm; in it was a crystalline ball of some kind, apparently a mystic artifact passed down by the village. It had the ability to glow when brought to the center of the lake.

It was by no means a complicated object. Even Lorraine would most likely regard it as a silly trinket. To the villagers, however, it appeared to be a valuable treasure, one that was essential for the festival.

“Originally, the escorts weren’t supposed to guard the sacrifice at all... Their role was to retrieve this Orb, then leave the sacrifice behind...”

Ryuntus’s explanation made some degree of sense. If I had to infer, the

original condition of having three escorts in the fleet was to ensure that no single person absconded with the treasure.

In any case, we reached our destination.

“...So. The Lord of the Lake... Will appear here?”

“According to the legends, it—”

Just as Ryuntus attempted to answer my question, the previously still surface of the lake was disrupted by a series of unnaturally rough waves.

“Something’s coming...!”

Panicking, Ryuntus squatted down in his boat. “...Hold on... You’re... You’re joking, right...?” he whispered under his breath, staring at the monster before him.

But I understood why he said such a thing. The Lord of the Lake that appeared before us was none other than a Kraken—the very same kind of Kraken that, under normal circumstances, could only live in the wide, open seas.



“Ugh...! What... What is this?! How can we defeat it? How’d it even get in this freshwater lake...?!” Amiris shouted, her boat rocking violently in the waves.

While I felt the same way, I couldn’t falter. Adventurers didn’t give up.

Turning to Amiris, I proceeded to issue my instructions: “Amiris... You switch. To Ryuntus’s boat.”

“Are... Are you serious?! You’re going to fight...against that?!”

An incredulous expression; I expected no less. Any typical person would question my sanity. Yet I have stood face-to-face with a Dragon in the past. Was there anything greater to fear?

Back then, all I could think of was escaping. Now, however...

“Quickly, now. Amiris. Switch... Boats.”

I jumped off my boat, running along the water’s surface. Grabbing Amiris off her sacrificial craft, I threw her into Ryuntus’s boat, readying myself for the battle to come.

“Ehhh?!” A simultaneous reaction from the sister who was thrown, and the brother who caught her.

I, however, didn’t turn around. Instead, I drew my sword, facing the direction of the Kraken. I braced myself, getting into a combat stance as I held up my blade.

One may question why I was standing on the water. See, I had asked Lorraine to craft such a magical tool for me before I journeyed here. It turned out, however, that she had something fit for the purpose all along.

Lorraine, who was interested in the festival, had wanted to come along, but she was unable to do so as she had to compile some documents for a client. Upon hearing that my destination this time was a lake of sorts, however, Lorraine merely handed the relevant magical tool to me, and that was that. As expected of Lorraine—alchemists were great friends to have.

“Rentt! Don’t do anything crazy! If... If it’s impossible, I’ll just give up and become a sacrifice, so...!”

I was grateful for Amiris’s concerns, but I couldn’t concede to her sorrowful wails, not after coming all this way.

Tightening my grip, I slammed my foot onto the water’s surface, propelling myself, blade and all, into the Kraken’s grasp.



It was...large. A fact I was made to understand as I approached the Kraken. Its body and tentacles were covered in slime, and if I had to guess, it was at least ten meters in length.

Compared to the variants that inhabited the high seas, however, this one was on the smaller side of the spectrum. According to what I had learned from some books, oceanic Krakens were capable of folding gigantic ships and vessels in two with a single strike, and were typically 30 to 50 meters long. That should have been their normal size.

This one was smaller—a lot smaller.

A flurry of incoming tentacles jolted me out of my thoughts. The Kraken saw

and now sought to crush me.

Given the number of tentacles, it was quite the task to dodge each and every one of them. They weren't impossible to dodge, however. Thanks to Lorraine's specially-manufactured water-stepping boots, I found myself able to move easily, treading atop the water's surface as if it were solid ground.

Without warning, the Kraken opened its mouth, apparently intending to launch something at me. Quickly stomping on the lake's surface, I dodged to the side, only to see that I had narrowly avoided a large fireball, the projectile causing steam to rise up from where I was just standing.

"A Kraken... Spitting Fire?"

A strange combination.

Laughing at the absurdity of the situation, I propelled myself forward once more, finally closing in upon my target. With a mighty leap, I brought my sword over my head, slicing down on a tentacle with a savage horizontal slash.

As I did so—

Riiip!!!

This was hardly the sound an invertebrate would make when cut.

"Wh... What?! What is this? The Kraken...!"

I could hear Amir's voice over the waves; she seemed surprised.

"Why...?" Even Ryuntus had something to say.

I supposed they would feel that way. The Kraken I swung my blade through promptly disappeared. In its place remained a large piece of cloth, and a wooden vessel several times larger than the sacrificial boats we had used. This vessel was crewed by a few men.

This was no Kraken.

"You bastard! Don't mess with us! Kill him! KILL HIM!!!"

Pointing at me, the men shouted animatedly before sending a number of arrows and magical attacks in my general direction.

They were far from skilled. Easily avoiding the incoming attacks, I launched

myself into the air once more, landing on their vessel with a single leap. In a series of familiar motions, I knocked out the men one by one, eventually sheathing my sword.



“So... What...? What is...all this?” Amiris asked, still visibly confused.

“These are the... People. Who have been... Making unreasonable demands. Of the village. Also, Amiris... Isn’t this man familiar... To you?” I asked, pointing toward one of the now-subdued men.

Finally noticing, Amiris gasped in surprise. “The... The traveling merchant!”

“That is correct.”

“But...why?”

Ryuntus and Amiris stood staring at me, unable to believe their eyes. In response, I gave the restrained merchant a good kick in the side with Lorraine’s specially-manufactured water-stepping boots.

“Answer... Her.”

Slowly, and somewhat unwillingly, the traveling merchant began talking.

According to him, the merchants had caught wind of the festival, and before long decided to profit off it. Their methodology was simple: they would pretend to be the Lord of the Lake and kidnap whatever sacrifice was offered, before selling her off as a slave or commodity. To this end, the men had a mage cooperating with them, as well as a merchant who was familiar with underground slave trade routes. Although they were originally just a traveling merchant and his escort, they were overcome by greed, and they had decided to exploit the people of this village.

The vessel itself was a simple fishing boat borrowed from another village on the lake.

The marks on the doors were also left by the men in question, not Kelpies. Due to the collective fear that had fallen over the villagers, no one came to realize this fact.

Quite an intricate enterprise...

The illusion of the Kraken was just an image projected onto the cloth by the mage. The tentacles, too, were nothing more than ropes controlled and moved by magic. It goes without saying that the fireball from the Kraken's beak was nothing more than a regular fireball, a measure taken to deal with the escorts who accompanied the unfortunate sacrifices. This was apparently the first time the fireball failed to work. Of course, the entire image of a Kraken spewing fire was laughable at best.

Although these men had planned their evil deeds with considerable effort, they clearly weren't strong enough to stand up to anyone who had more strength than a frightened villager.

"Then...what of the girls who have been 'eaten' up until now...?"

The merchant answered Ryuntus's question truthfully: it would seem that they were all in the ship's hold. While they had been kidnapping girls for the past two or so odd months, they only intended to make a sale once they reached a certain number, much to the fortune of the now-rescued girls.

"Rentt... Did you know...? From the start?" Amiris asked.

"Well... It was suspicious... To some degree. In my personal... Experience. The true Lord of a place... Would never suddenly decide... To become unruly or... Unreasonable. Also... When we passed by... This traveling merchant... In the village. I noticed... The smell. Of blood."

This was very much in accordance with the fact that I was an Undead who subsisted on blood—not that I could explain it to Ryuntus and Amiris.

In any case...

"With this... The mystery. Is solved... I take it the request... Has been fulfilled. Adequately?"

"Of course!" "Yes!!"

The siblings' responses were almost simultaneous.



Finding the merchant's explanation satisfactory, we set sail for Todds Village, only to be greeted by a predictably large uproar. Amiris, who was supposed to

have been sacrificed, was alive. With her were the kidnapped girls, and the traveling merchants, bound from head to toe.

Upon explaining that we uncovered the truth behind the recent incidents, the villagers thanked me profusely, and even offered to report the incident to the guild so that I may be recognized for my efforts.

I politely declined.

On the surface, I claimed this was due to the nature of the request, that it wasn't accepted through formal guild channels and as such, wasn't something I could take credit for. In reality, I just didn't want to be connected to this kidnapping incident. If word got out that I busted up a kidnapping slaver ring, it would only serve to place more suspicion on me. Even if I did resolve the incident in question, I could easily be suspected of "solving" a problem I was "responsible for" in the first place.

I was suspicious-looking, though there was little I could do about that. In any case, I decided to not do anything unnecessary. The villagers, convinced I was just being modest, were quite against this at first, but I have Ryuntus and Amiris to thank for convincing them otherwise. The siblings thanked me profusely, but maybe I was the one who should be thanking them instead.

The villagers suggested for the festival to be redone, if only to properly express their gratitude to the Lord of the Lake. It would be a much simpler affair, with no more sacrifices like Amiris floating out into the depths of the lake. Despite its simplicity, the atmosphere in Todds Village was now markedly different; no longer sullen, but instead bright and full of hope. If memory served, this was how the festival was supposed to be in the first place.

In the midst of the celebrating villagers, a small speck on the far corner of the lake caught my attention. A translucent maiden on the back of a Kelpie... The true Lord of the Lake, or possibly an elaborate illusion of the light. In an instant, they were gone, with silence once again returning to the lake's surface.



"You're leaving... Honestly, you should stay a bit longer..." Amiris said as she stood before the horse carriage.

“That’s right... And the festival has been extended, too!” Ryuntus continued.

I just shook my head. “I am... An adventurer. Much work remains... To be done.”

Due to the fact that my little excursion to the lake didn’t count as an official job, I found myself facing down a few administrative deadlines. The guild wouldn’t have many good things to say about a Bronze-class adventurer who didn’t do meaningful work, and this meant a quick trip back to Maalt was in order.

“How is it that you do good work, but you don’t want to be credited for it? It’s just...strange.”

“Is... That right? Things like this are... Not as rare. As they seem to be. In any... Case. I will be going now.” I placed a hand on the carriage’s door handle.

“Rentt...!”

I turned around at the mention of my name, and without warning, Amiris flew into me, her lips pecking the side of my face...

Or, should I say, my mask.



“Wha—Amiris...?”

I could hear Ryuntus’s quivering voice.

“What? It’s a gesture of thanks, okay?!” Amiris said, her face a deep shade of red.

A warm little exchange, indeed.

“A little... Surprising. But thank you, Amiris. A kind... Gesture. If you ever find... Yourself. In Maalt, do visit... Me. I will be your guide, then...”

“Okay...!”

“You take care... Too. Ryuntus.”

“Yeah. Thank you so much, Rentt... I’ll definitely visit the next time I’m in Maalt...!”

Nodding, I waved at them, finally boarding the horse carriage. Its destination was none other than the township of Maalt.

For some reason, it almost felt like a lifetime had passed since I stepped through its gates...



“Wait, don’t tell me, Rentt. You went all that way to charm the heart of a little girl?”

A dinner with Lorraine was in order after my long departure from Maalt. Lorraine’s words, however, nearly made me spit out my meal.

“...Do not be... Silly. Lorraine. Nothing of... The sort.”

“A joke, Rentt. But you see, that girl definitely...”

I knew what Lorraine was about to say, so I stopped her mid-sentence.

“She will forget. About someone... Like me. Soon enough.”

Such was life for a wandering traveler.

The girls of rural villages had their own brand of happiness, as they would one day find a suitable partner in their village, get married, and most likely have children. The very picture of a rural villager’s joy.

Needless to say, from the very beginning there was no place in such a happy picture for the likes of me.

Lorraine sighed, gesturing at me with her utensil as she spoke.

“You, Rentt...should be punished gravely for your sins.”

It was regrettable, to say the least. Truly regrettable, but...

This was just how things were.

I would still offer them a guided tour of Maalt should those siblings ever visit; it was the least I could do.

Chapter 4: Dragon Blood Blossom

“I suppose I should... Accept a proper request. This time,” I said as I stood by my lonesome, staring at one of the guild’s many request boards.

Although I resolved the incident at the lake not too long ago, that request wasn’t filed through official guild channels, and it wasn’t something I could take credit for.

I have to get my act together.

I continued my search...

“One right here...”

My eyes stopped on this particular request. It was nothing noteworthy since the reward for completing the request was a single bronze coin. No wonder it was left on the board as-is; one could earn more coin by slaying a Goblin.

But what, exactly, did this request entail?

My interest piqued, I examined the rest a little more closely, only to find that it was by no means a simple task.

“Rentt...? Are you thinking of taking up that request? We would be most grateful if you did...”

Turning around to the source of the familiar voice, I saw none other than Sheila, who had apparently been on receptionist duty this entire time.

I only visited the guild during its more quiet hours, so there were few, if any adventurers in the hall at this time. Sheila, too, didn’t exactly have much receptionist work to do, hence her wandering over to where I stood.

“The reason why... This request. Still remains here... It is not a matter of... Compensation, isn’t it? More of... The request’s details.”

“Yes. At a glance, a single bronze coin isn’t very much, but seeing who requested it, it does make sense. It is a tradition of the guild, after all.”

This tradition was the offering of a single bronze coin as a reward. This was something done by individuals who needed an adventurer's aid, but couldn't afford to offer a large sum of coin as a reward. I suppose one could say it was something quite similar to volunteer work. Requests like these have been common from the establishment of the guild itself, and new adventurers often learned of this tradition from their seniors.

Clearing her throat, Sheila continued.

"However, even though there were adventurers willing to work on a pro-bono basis, the contents of the request are...a little..."

"To gather... A Dragon Blood Blossom. A difficult request... Around these, parts. Very difficult."

A Dragon Blood Blossom was a flower with crimson petals as red as blood. It was a rare plant, with both ornamental and medicinal uses. From these flowers, a fluid of the same color referred to as Dragon-Flower Blood could be extracted, and from this fluid a variety of medicines could be made.

Legend has it that a human maiden fell in love with a Dragon, their relationship transcending the boundaries of species. Through a series of unfortunate misunderstandings, however, a hero came along and slew the Dragon. Its blood, in turn, became these flowers as it seeped deep beneath the ground. To this day, Dragon Blood Blossoms are sometimes given as gifts to fair maidens in love.

Perhaps a strange idea of a gift, given the sad nature of the tale. But in the story, the hero was the maiden's brother. Although the Dragon could have defeated him without much effort, it instead chose to offer up its own life out of its love for the maiden. As a result, this flower came to represent one's unyielding determination in the face of all odds, hence its contemporary status as a romantic gift.

Its rarity meant it was near-impossible to obtain such flowers. They were hardly sold at the common florist, and they commanded a large sum of coin.

This request asked for the retrieval of these very same flowers. It was highly logical to assume the common adventurer wouldn't be motivated to take up such a task.

Although, Sheila did mention that quite a few adventurers considered taking the request. The reason was due to the name of the client in question.

Written clearly in block letters on the request were the following words:

“CLIENT: ORPHANS OF THE SECOND ORPHANAGE OF MAALT”

Despite its nature, it wasn’t written to invoke pity in any way. The details of the request were written neatly, clearly, and formally. And while the reward for this task was negligible at best, it was up to the adventurer to decide if this request was worth his or her time.

“What will you do...?” Sheila asked, with a slight smile on her face. Knowing Sheila, she already knew my answer.

“I shall... Accept. This request.”



The Second Orphanage of Maalt—

Although Maalt was a frontier town in most manners of speaking, it was blessed with the existence of two labyrinths in its vicinity, and as a result, it had a sizable population of its own. Maalt was by and large a somewhat well-established township. There were a fair number of public facilities available—at least a number proportionate to Maalt’s population. The orphanage I was heading toward was one such facility.

Depending on the area and kingdom, orphanages were run by a variety of organizations. This particular one in Maalt was run by a collective of monks and nuns belonging to the Church of the Eastern Sky. This church believes that an angel once descended from the skies over the eastern parts of Yaaran, with said angel apparently performing a variety of benevolent miracles. The Church, in turn, thinks of the angel as a materialization of God, thus being the target of their worship. As their activities suggested, they were a comparatively peaceful organization, not engaging in aggressive missionary work, nor demanding donations from the general public.

However, they were more impoverished than other organizations of a similar vein. Followers of the Eastern Sky were known for their frugality and noble intentions, and they were respected throughout the Kingdom of Yaaran. This

phenomenon only extended to Yaaran, though. Due to the fact the organization never did expand much, its name was apparently not heard often outside these lands.

In any case, I suppose that was how local religious organizations concentrated in certain parts of the land fared.

The presence of the Church in Maalt was represented by the Second Orphanage, although it didn't make for much of a pleasant image. The building itself was run-down and in dire need of repair, but I suppose that was just how things were. Cracks and holes in its walls were filled up with pieces of white gravel here and there. While the makeshift repairs seemed to do their job, the general lack of funding that plagued the Church of the Eastern Sky was painfully evident in these observations.

According to the books I had read and some of Lorraine's ramblings, a certain empire to the west of Yaaran was home to quite a few large religious organizations. The power they wielded was immense, holding as much power as the empire itself. Its priests and representatives were said to be dressed in such an overwhelming amount of gems and finery that one would often mistake them for jewelers. In Yaaran, however, not a single one of their followers could be seen.

Looking at the state of the orphanage, I felt the Church of the Eastern Sky would do better with a copper cooking cauldron as opposed to jewelry. But copper cauldrons were expensive, so that was neither here nor there.

I soon found myself standing in front of the orphanage, its door equipped with a sizable knocker. Raising a hand, I gripped the metal handle, intending to announce my presence. That was what I wanted to do, until the knocker itself ripped off the door, now an inert metal part sitting in my palm.

"...I saw... Nothing."

Fortunately, metal contacts existed on both the knocker and the door, so a simple repair job was in order. Withdrawing a vial full of Slime fluid from my tool belt, I poured some onto the knocker before holding it in place against the door for a few quiet seconds. Slowly releasing my hand, I was satisfied to see the knocker return to its original position.

Not wanting to demolish any more of the orphanage's infrastructure, I rapped on the rickety wooden door—softly, lest I take the door off its very hinges. Avoiding the area around the knocker, I continued my rapping, ensuring enough sound transmitted through the door's surface. A most technical maneuver, this was probably the most elaborate door-knocking I had ever performed in my career as an adventurer. But the act of doing so caused me to momentarily ponder what exactly was I doing with my life. Thankfully, the door soon began to open, jolting me out of my increasingly sidetracked thoughts.

A series of wild thuds emanated from the other side of the door—and to think I had just repaired the door's knocker! In the next moment, the wooden door finally opened, the person on the other side apparently not caring much about the state of the door, nor my suspicious, skull-masked presence. In fact, she smiled.

“Ah, a guest? I do apologize, but Lillian is not in today...”

A girl about 12 years old, at best. Her short, but tidily-cropped hair stood out. Despite her poverty, she was well-groomed, with an air of refinement about her; I suppose even the perils of poverty weren't enough to take that away from her.



But I had no idea who Lillian was, and no idea how to respond. So I decided instead to explain my reason for visiting.

“...I am an adventurer... From the guild. Who accepted your... Request. Or would you turn one... Such as myself, away?”

The girl's eyes widened at my words.

“Ah! Why didn't you say so? I assumed you were one of the debt collectors... Please, do come in. I hope it isn't too cramped for your liking.”

The girl opened the door wide, welcoming me into the orphanage.



“...Do the children... Need something, from me?” I asked as we made our journey inside the building.

Many pairs of curious eyes stared at me as we walked—orphans of all ages and sizes. Some were young girls holding infants in their arms, while others were near an age where they would soon be working in the outside world for their keep.

Orphans came in a variety of ages, sizes, and histories. Some were orphaned when they lost their parents to monsters or bandits, and others were simply abandoned at the steps of an orphanage after they were born. Although the latter was somewhat rare in Maalt, the former was an all too common occurrence. After all, anything could happen once one left the safe confines of a walled town. Even if a village was established in an area that was supposedly safe and not frequented by monsters, it could be just as easily demolished by a roving band, or monsters that were attracted to human presence. These unfortunate events occurred daily, and more often than not, were too numerous to count.

Such was the state of affairs in the world, as tragic as it may be. These orphans could be counted as lucky, if only because they still drew breath and had a roof over their heads.

The gazes of those girls would perhaps be understandable, given my appearance.

Having been led into a reception room of sorts, the short-haired girl left to get me some tea. In her absence, the room started filling with children; orphans filing into the room one girl after the other, eventually turning into quite the crowd. I suppose I looked interesting to them—I was a masked, robed adventurer—and was probably not the type of person they came across on a regular basis.

There were countless adventurers dressed in a similar fashion as myself, but to those outside the profession, I suppose mine was a different sort of look.

Occupational hazards common to the standard adventurer weren't exactly shared with normal townsfolk. For instance, a townsfolk wasn't exposed to encounters that could irreversibly burn or scar their face on a regular basis. The darkness of my robe only contributed to this image; although adventurers mainly wore robes for concealment from monsters when moving through labyrinths or forests, they commonly wore dark brown robes for this purpose. Mine was pitch black.

Considering all this, I could hardly blame the girls for gawking at me. To top it all off, I, an adventurer, personally paid a visit to their orphanage. Needless to say, the typical adventurer wasn't exactly known for visiting orphanages, if only because most orphanages couldn't afford their services.

This phenomenon was echoed throughout most other kingdoms and countries in the land. Being a nonprofit organization to begin with, few funds would be assigned to an orphanage like this. Discounting the Church of the Eastern Sky's frugality and financial troubles, one didn't have to look too far in Maalt to find that other religious groups' orphanages were plagued by a similar lack of funding.

In other words, the presence of an adventurer in any orphanage was a rarity in and of itself, hence the curious crowd before me.

This sight somewhat saddened me. While I was relatively harmless, adventurers were typically characters of questionable morality, and they were hardly the type of people children should be so readily approaching.

The orphans didn't seem to understand this.

As if to interrupt my internal monologue, the door to the room opened once

more, revealing the girl who had greeted me at the door. In her hands was a tray, along with a simple cup and saucer set. Tea for me, perhaps.

The girl stopped right in her tracks, the tea-tray still in her hands. The presence of such a crowd seemed to have surprised her, if her rapidly widening eyes were anything to go by.

“What are you lot doing?!” she shouted, visibly agitated.

This girl was clearly different. She knew of the dangers a typical adventurer posed, and she was warning the other orphans to steer clear of me.

I wouldn’t put it past a typical ill-tempered adventurer to cut down a child who carelessly approached them, or for them to beat up a room full of curious children who got a little too close for comfort.

“Why don’t you listen? I told you clearly not to approach our visitor under any circumstance! Do you lot understand?!”

With a mighty roar and a cacophony of numerous crying orphans, the girl chased her “siblings” out of the room, before turning to me with an apologetic expression.

“I... I mean... I am most sorry, I didn’t mean to suggest you were an unsavory character...” the girl said, somewhat stuttering. Her tone was immensely forced.

Is she scared of my response?

“...No. In fact, I am... Reassured. Those children approached me... Without a trace of suspicion. If anything, I was... Worried. I was beginning to wonder... If no one had told them... Anything. About adventurers.”

I accepted her apology without much fuss.

The girl’s words rang true. Although the way in which she shouted at the other children in my presence was slightly unbecoming, she had done so in the name of the other children’s safety; she had the right idea.

It just so happened the adventurer present at this establishment today was myself, and not some violent lout from a local tavern. This did little to change the fact that adventurers were inherently dangerous individuals, though.

With that said, an adventurer that took on an orphanage’s request for the

grand price of one bronze coin probably wasn't a violent individual either way, but it was always more prudent to err on the side of caution. It was common sense to the weak and downtrodden to be wary of the strange and eclectic—namely, adventurers and their ilk.

The girl, having inferred my intent from my words, lowered her head slightly. “I really do apologize... Those children, they never listen, even if I tell them not to stick their noses into danger. They're always so much trouble. They're usually well-behaved, but once you look away...”

Once their caretaker looked away, curiosity took over. I understood what the girl was trying to say. I supposed all children were like this, but there were some slightly older orphans in their midst. They, too, had no sense of danger or apprehension.

“A sense of curiosity... Is not necessarily a bad. Thing. Not with the young. However... They would do well... To be more careful. Although most of Maalt's adventurers... Are well behaved. Drifters often... Visit the town on their travels. If the appropriate caution... Is not taken during those... Moments. It could become... Quite the incident.”

Murders and the like always led to huge problems, but even if it didn't come to that, there always remained the potential for large, undesirable problems. Even if one was to look for the culprit, a drifter could easily move to the next town on their map—and that would be that.

“Yes. I understand. I will make sure to lecture them sternly afterward.”

Nodding at my words, the girl looked at me, her expression tinged with a mix of curiosity and disbelief. “Even so... You're a kind adventurer, right? Although it's known that most adventurers based in Maalt are reasonable... Few would care to this extent.”

While it would be inaccurate to say that adventurers who cared as much as I did didn't exist, many would choose to ignore the children and laugh vaguely when offered an apology. Few would care to give their client a lecture on the dangers of adventurers.

I wasn't exactly in the business of lecturing my clients either, but at the very least, I thought it reasonable to give this much of a warning. That way, I

wouldn't regret not having said enough should anything unfortunate occur somewhere down the line.

It was probably a blessing that we were having this conversation now, then, given that it only happened because I met with those children moments ago.

I suppose I have come to appreciate life a little more, given my own experiences with life, rebirth, and undeath; even so, I did overstep my boundaries slightly.

"Even if... It was another adventurer... Instead of me, they, too... Would have said something, given how... Innocent. Those children were. I suppose that... Is an indicator of just... How happy they are, living... Here."

An orphanage was by no means hellishly poor. They did receive funding to operate, but orphans were treated in various ways, depending on where they lived. This variation can be clearly seen in orphanages not run by the Eastern Sky; orphans in those places were often treated as a burden, and they weren't cared for kindly.

The orphans here were different. They'd been showered with love and treated adequately. This much was evident from the way they had behaved: curious, but not with fear or resentment.

The caretaker of this orphanage must be an individual of upstanding morals.

While I had accepted requests from the First Orphanage of Maalt twice, maybe thrice a year, I never took on a request posted by the Second. This was because someone else always accepted the requests before me. I, however, didn't remember much of this individual, and try as I might, my recollections were hazy. But their name was on the tip of my tongue.

The girl's response interrupted my monologue once more.

"Yes... Lady Lillian was really good... I mean, she took great care of us..."

While the girl had been exceedingly formal up until this point, she seemed to have forgotten about her forced tone of voice while referring to herself. She spoke well for a child, but her manner of speech was by no means perfect.

Even so, her effort was admirable, if not misguided, since addressing

someone like me in such a formal manner was strange, at best.

“You seem... To be tripping. Over your words. I do not... Mind. Do speak... Freely.”

“Eh? Really? But...”

“Do not... Worry about it. Perhaps you should... Be careful. When speaking with other... Adventurers. But I am not... Particular. About such things.”

Adventurers who were particular about such things did exist, but they were the exception and not the norm. Adventurers who had a formal and somewhat more refined way of speaking were often thought of as a bit snobbish. Adventurers often made fun of each other for various things, their manner of speech being a common topic. Such jibes were absent when a particularly refined adventurer spoke to a female guild staff member, however, and their so-called chivalry was praised. Adventurers were indeed a complicated and conflicted existence in many ways.

Most adventurers weren't beyond speaking to and sleeping with the common wench, but it is said they often seek women of class to make up for their own lack of social elegance. That's just not a notion I can understand or empathize with.

In any case, I didn't care much about a formal tone of voice—quite the segue I went on.

Basically, most adventurers didn't particularly care for being addressed formally.

Pausing momentarily, the girl stopped to think, before nodding at my words. “I understand. But don't get angry, okay? You said it yourself,” she said, speaking in a more natural manner.

I suppose this was a more natural manner of speech for a child, or so I presumed.

Due to the fact that she resided in this facility, she was probably an orphan, much like the other children here. She would have to make an effort to train herself in speaking formally and being socially alert, lest she become embroiled in some unpleasant incidents down the road. Should she not have these skills,

she would be unable to resist, and possibly lose her life, seeing as the social position of an orphan was not strong by any means.

From that perspective, maybe I'd done something unnecessary. The girl did seem more relaxed speaking as she was, though, and maybe that was for the best.

Even if I did her a disservice in some capacity, I would at the very least see to it that her request was fulfilled.

"Yes... Of course. I will not... Be angry. About the... request. But... Before that. We should really... Introduce ourselves. My name is... Rentt. Rentt... Vivie. A Bronze-class... Adventurer."

"Bronze...? I assumed you were an Iron-class adventurer... You know, since this is an orphanage's request and all that... Oh, I'm Alize. I have no surname."

Since orphans came from a variety of backgrounds, it wasn't uncommon for some orphans to have no surname, if only because the identities of their parents were not known. Orphans were often given a surname if they were ever adopted, or when they became independent.

Alize was probably in similar circumstances.

In fact, it was a well-known practice for orphans to adopt their caretaker's surname should the need arise. For this particular case, I didn't feel that it was necessary, as I was an adventurer, not an office or organization of some kind.

Essentially, I didn't need Alize to have a surname to sign the relevant documents.



"Now that... We know each other's... Names. I would like to... Inquire more. About this request."

With that, Alize readily nodded, quickly offering an explanation. "About that... It's nothing fancy. What I want is written on the request."

"You want a... Dragon Blood Blossom."

"Yes. Can I ask that of you?"

“Well... I have already. Accepted it once. There is no reason... For me to refuse. But... I am sure... You understand. This plant is not... Commonly found. In the areas around... Maalt. At the very least... I would like to know. Why you would ask... Such a thing of me.”

Alize turned her gaze downward, a difficult expression on her face.

“That’s...”

I suppose she had her own reasons. Despite this, she soon continued her explanation.

“Yes. I know. You aren’t convinced... Well... Could you wait for a while?”

“Sure...?”

I was under the impression that Alize would speak plainly of her reason to me, but she was soon out the door. I didn’t have to wait long for her to return, however.

“Please, come this way... I’ll show you why we asked for such a thing.”

Beckoning me with her hand, Alize turned, walking out of the reception room.



I followed behind Alize, but we didn’t have long to go, as we soon stopped outside a room. Approaching the door, Alize knocked on it twice.

“It’s Alize...” she said, as if looking past the door before her.

“Enter.”

It was a quivering, almost inaudible voice—the voice of a woman.

Alize nodded. “Pardon me...”

With that, Alize opened the door, stepping into the room. Glancing over at me, Alize tilted her head slightly, motioning for me to enter as well.

It was a simple room, furnished with a small shelf and table, along with an equally simple bed. In that bed lay a middle-aged woman, who struggled somewhat to sit up in her bed at the sight of Alize and me.

“Pleased to meet you. Thank you very much for accepting our request...of

cleaning the orphanage's basement storage rooms. We do not have very much to repay your kindness with, but know that we are truly grateful for your charity. I am the caretaker of this orphanage, Sister Lillian Jeunne, of the Church of the Eastern Sky. We are in your generous care."

The disparity between Alize's request and the sister's words made me turn my head slightly. Alize's gaze back convinced me to remain silent on the matter. I supposed I should introduce myself, either way.

"Ah... Yes. I am... Rentt Vivie. Of the adventurer's... Guild. Taking on requests... Like this. From time to time. Is not... Too bad."

Realistically speaking, I took on this request because I felt like I should; therefore, the acceptance or denial of requests was up to the adventurer. But as long as one accepted the request in question, one would work, and such was an adventurer's way. The client and adventurer were both considered to be equals, so there was no real reason for the client to defer to the adventurer in question.

"Your words bring strength to my heart... The basement storage space of the orphanage is small, but due to the presence of monsters, I could not have the children do it. If I were in better health, I would fight the monsters myself, but now..."

I wondered if it was possible for Sister Lillian, a slightly rotund woman in her forties, to be fighting monsters, but Alize's relative silence and respectful gaze were enough to convince me otherwise. Monks and priests were often trained to have some sort of combat capability, so they were the only profession other than adventurers to commonly have proficiency in combat techniques.

There were considerations of the use of divinity, as well, in which case the sister's physique hardly mattered. The cleansing flames brought about by one's divine aura were more than enough to set monsters alight in a small, confined space.

Compared to what Sister Lillian was theoretically capable of, my own divine powers were weak. I wasn't a devout believer in any religion, after all, so nothing much could be done about that disparity.

I did not mind too much, having learned a great deal about the possible

applications of divinity at Clope's. As long as I was creative about how I used my divinity, I could produce respectable results.

On that note, I did try a Fusion Art with divinity and mana, and that test ended in a failure. The reaction observed when mixing divinity and mana was far too violent, especially when compared to that of mana and spirit. Mixing divinity and spirit didn't yield more positive results, primarily due to the fact that the energies within the weapon dissipated the moment they were mixed. Maybe they were simply incompatible, or at least of a low compatibility. In any case, a successful application felt possible with enough practice, or maybe some sort of technique yet unknown to me.

Sister Lillian used to have combat ability, but she was now unable to fight like she used to. It was plain to see that the good sister was unwell.

"Are you ill... Sister Lillian...?"

"Yes, unfortunately... It would seem like my strength has left my body as of late. However... I never did have any problems with my health. I am sure I will recover with some rest. So... if you would be so kind as to assist us during this time..."

Unsure of how to respond, I turned to Alize, whose expression seemed to be one of pleading silence.

"...I will do. What I can. Do take care... Of yourself. Sister Lillian. I should... Get going soon. Alize."

"Yes... Well, then, Lady Lillian. We have to discuss the specifics of the request at hand..."

Lillian nodded at Alize's words. "Yes. You are a most helpful child, Alize. Mister Rentt... Do think of Alize as my second. If there is anything at all that you do not know...just ask Alize."

Nodding, we both made our way out of the room, Alize closing the door behind her.

"...I have many... Questions. Alize."

"Well... Let's return to the room we were in first."

Alize started walking down the hallway—I suppose it would all be for naught if Sister Lillian caught wind of our discussion.

I held my peace, following closely after Alize.



“...Well?”

It was only a single word, but Alize understood my question well enough.

I suppose that was a given, if only because Alize was the one who signaled me to remain silent during our conversation with the sister.

“Sorry for all the trouble... There is a reason...” Alize said, apologizing.

I couldn’t blame Alize for what she did, especially not with her finally willing to tell me the truth. I had no intent on grilling Alize or putting her on the spot, but I did want to know why we had to lie in front of the sister.

“Well... You saw how she was doing, right? Lady Lillian... She doesn’t realize it herself. But she’s very sick...” Alize finally started to explain.

“I see.”

With those words alone, I largely understood the nature of Alize’s request. However, I didn’t want to make any assumptions, so I allowed Alize to continue.

“We saw a healer for it... Sister Lillian’s illness, I mean. But it can’t be healed with magic... Only with the divine powers of those who have been blessed by healing spirits of some kind...”

“Perhaps it is... Rude of me... To be saying this. But you must have paid... The healer. A fair sum of money... For them to even see... Sister Lillian.”

Alize laughed at my words, pointing a finger at me. “There are more people like you than you realize! They said they wouldn’t take any money if it was for Lady Lillian. Well, that’s what they said, anyway.”

I suppose that was understandable since the sister was a member of the Church of the Eastern Sky, as well as a nun who took care of an orphanage. Surely there were many who have been saved by her benevolent hand, or even by her divine prowess against certain odds. She was quite capable of fighting

monsters while she was still in good health.

“Well... So, that’s why. Unless a priestess-saint or a great priest comes by, we would need medicine to cure Lady Lillian. In fact, a priestess-saint did come by a while ago, but Lady Lillian was still in good health then...”

If memory served, one such priestess-saint visited Maalt while I still drew breath. I suppose they would consider me a target for purification should we cross paths now...

Some say that simply looking at a priestess-saint made them feel better. If I were to carelessly approach such an individual, I might just disappear. I should definitely be more careful about this from now on.

“And for this... Medicine. You need a... Dragon Blood. Blossom?”

“Yes, exactly. The medicine will be made with the aid of that healer I mentioned... They said they’ll look for someone who can make it. And as for the fees... Well, I said I would pay, but they declined to receive anything from us.”

Surely, the healer in question intended to pay on Alize’s behalf. I suppose things like this happened from time to time, and in this case, Sister Lillian’s kindness had come full circle, with many individuals now wishing to aid her.

“I see. I understand... Your circumstances. Now. If I may ask... What is the name of... The sister’s illness?”

“It’s apparently called Accumulative Miasma Disease... It’s a type of illness that only afflicts practitioners of divinity. The stronger their divinity is...the more miasma their body absorbs every time they use their divinity, like a kind of recoil, I guess... And their health deteriorates over time. But...a Dragon Blood Blossom has the ability to dispel that miasma...”

Accumulative Miasma Disease...

Given that I am a practitioner of divinity myself, this could one day concern me. But I didn’t recall having such experiences in the past, probably because the amount of divinity I could muster was far too small to begin with, leaving no space for any miasma to enter. Purifying a cup of drinking water, or easing the infection in a wound was just about all I could do. Compared to my minor feats, Sister Lillian probably channeled quite a lot of divinity in her lifetime.

Come to think of it, even I utilized a fair amount hunting monsters... But that was a thought for another time.

“...What about that... Talk, about the basement... Storage?” I asked, recalling Lillian’s words.

“Just a...roundabout way of speech. After all, if I asked outright for an adventurer to gather Dragon Blood Blossoms, Lady Lillian would know what I was trying to do right away. After all, only Sister Lillian is capable of using any divinity here...”

“Is it a big... Problem. If this is publicly known...?”

“Of course it is! Lady Lillian would never ask for anything like that. Also...people don’t die from Accumulated Miasma right away, and that fact only makes asking for help more difficult. It’s a disease that slowly eats away at the person... From what the healer said, it would take a previously healthy person at least five to ten years to perish from it... Lady Lillian would just ask for her to be replaced by some other nun from the Eastern Sky if she got wind of this!”

Sister Lillian’s frugality was the genuine article.

One couldn’t hope to hire an adventurer to go Dragon Blood Blossom picking with a normal sum of coin, so I suppose this was the reason Sister Lillian held off making such a request.

One would think the good sister would ask for help, given that the orphanage wouldn’t run without her. Due to the nature of the illness, however, it would seem like she preferred to have another of her colleagues replace her instead of spending coin on a cure. While it made some degree of sense, it was a most troublesome thought process. I began to see why Alize had pleaded with me to keep silent on the true nature of this request.

While most of the nuns and monks who lived by the teachings of the Eastern Sky were indeed saintly in disposition, this same behavior had now become the root of this problem. Even when threatened with death, Sister Lillian thought of it as nothing more than her divine duty.

The disease could be easily cured as long as one had the appropriate amount of coin. Sister Lillian, on the other hand, would be loathe to spend such an

exorbitant amount on herself. This was probably why Alize had to resort to such a roundabout method, and it was indeed a good thing that I held my tongue.

But Alize appeared to have other worries.

“Well... That’s how it is. But...can you really obtain a Dragon Blood Blossom? What you said is true; if one were to obtain it near Maalt...it would only be in the ‘Swamp of Tarasque’...”

The swamp was, as its name suggested, a swampy area ruled over by a fearsome monster, appropriately named Tarasque. They were a type of monster somewhat related to Dragons, primarily inhabiting swampy areas. They were armed with a thick shell, six legs, and a potent poison—a truly terrifying beast. Low-ranked adventurers couldn’t hope to face such a monster in combat, let alone go searching for Dragon Blood Blossoms in the swamp.

It was inevitable for Alize to have doubts about a Bronze-class adventurer such as myself, and not about my commitment to the request, but if I would even make it back alive.

A valid consideration.

“I do not think... I could. Best a Tarasque. Though... I do have my ways. After all... They are not exactly... Goblins. There are not... That many. Of them.”

“Really...?”

“Yes. All you have to do... Is wait for me. I will definitely... Retrieve the requested flowers.”

“Thank you. We’re all counting on you... Well... Will you be leaving right away, then?”

“...Not quite. The Swamp of Tarasque... Is quite a distance. Away. Many of the... Monsters there. Are nocturnal. I will be headed there... Tomorrow.”

Alize probably wanted me to set off right away if it meant I could cure Sister Lillian just a little faster, but that wasn’t a wise course of action. If I just up and left without any due preparation, the chances of me never returning to Maalt again were considerably high. Taking some time to prepare in advance was the logical choice.

“Is that right? Hmm... I guess you’re an adventurer that knows his stuff, even for a Bronze-class. Since you know this much, I guess you really are a professional.”

Alize’s words piqued my interest.

“Are you, perhaps... Interested. In the ways... Of the adventurer?”

“Oh, have I been found out? Well, yes. It’s been my dream since I was a little girl. I do have some luck, I suppose. I have a little bit of mana in me. Given how things are at the orphanage, though...it seems like I won’t be able to do very much for a while. At the very least, I need to stay with Lady Lillian until she recovers...”

If the words of Sister Lillian were to be believed, Alize was her second in the orphanage, so it wasn’t too strange for Alize to feel like she had to shoulder all responsibility.

In fact, if Alize was indeed blessed with a reservoir of mana within her, she had potential to become a great adventurer, unlike the two-bit counterpart I was in life.

“When you want to... Become an adventurer. Tell me. I will... Aid you.”

“You’re really a nice person, aren’t you? Well... I have no idea when it’d be possible, but I’ll definitely come looking for you when the time comes,” Alize said, a small smile lighting up her face.



Although I wanted to return to Lorraine’s and make the appropriate preparations for the morrow, Alize had one more request for me. Apparently, her talk of monsters in the basement storage of the orphanage was, in fact, real, so I decided to offer her my aid.

The greater half of monsters that did infiltrate human settlements weren’t very threatening. While those that had the ability to disguise themselves as humans, attack from the skies, or infiltrate towns through some special means could be dangerous, the same could not be said for monsters that snuck around in the basements of buildings.

Following Alize's lead, I made my way to the basement storage, wondering about the kind of monster that decided to nest there.

The cool air of the basement was somewhat appealing to me. I suppose becoming an Undead had a major influence on my preferences. Specifically, I found myself more drawn to dark and damp places like this, more so than I was in life. Not necessarily a bad thing, but I digress.

"...Ah. There they are."

"Eh? Where? Where?" Alize asked, turning her head this way and that.

In her hands was a small knife, probably meant for self-defense. One could never be too cautious; we were dealing with monsters, no matter how weak.

I pointed at the dark corner of the room. "There... Do you see it? It is sitting right... There. That round... Thing."

"Ah... That? That, huh... It's a little big, isn't it?"

Sitting in the corner of the room was none other than a Puchi Suri, a small, mouse-like monster.

Recalling my past discussions with Lorraine, it was a monster that was frequently experimented upon by scholars. Under normal circumstances, they were only slightly bigger than a sewer rat. This one was at least five times bigger, hence Alize's observations. Perhaps the environment here was conducive to its growth.

Finally noticing us, the Puchi Suri turned around, hissing and baring its teeth. I had to give the mouse some credit: its teeth were considerably sharp, like knives shining in the dark.

Maybe I shouldn't have brought Alize with me—a lapse of judgment.

Still, I readied my knife. While I would usually draw my sword, the basement was by no means a large space, and swinging it around here would not bode well for anyone.

I suppose it was a stroke of luck that I had my dissection knife with me, even if it only allowed me to channel mana through its blade. Given that my opponent was a Puchi Suri, however, this wasn't much of a problem.

“Steel yourself.”

Saying so, I tightened my grip on my knife, before promptly putting my foot down on the cold bricks of the basement and propelling myself toward the monster.

Puchi Suri were simple organisms. They were faster than the average townspeople, which made catching them quite a task.

But this wasn't the case for an adventurer. Before one who strengthened their body with mana or spirit, a Puchi Suri had no hopes of victory.

Taking aim, I lightly slashed at the incoming Puchi Suri with my dissection knife. The monster was sent flying, and I had my mana and my undead strength to thank.

Hitting the basement wall with a thud and squeak, the monster slowly slid downward, eventually coming to rest on the cold, brick floor. It still drew breath, though there wasn't much left in the creature.

All I had to do was put it out of its misery. I slowly advanced toward the fallen monster, knife raised high. What I did not expect, however, was for it to spring back up at me in a final move of defiance.

I could dodge such an attack, given its pathetically slow speed. But the problem was that Alize was behind me. Instances like this made me reconsider my stance on solo adventuring. All the time I spent adventuring alone had seasoned me to only think about my own safety, as opposed to that of any others. A lapse in judgment indeed...

Given that Alize was behind me, there was no way I could dodge the monster's final blow. And even if I were to strike with my knife, the angle it was currently held at did not lend itself well to such an attack.

I had little choice—I instead struck out with my free hand, intercepting the airborne monster. Though, I had the misfortune of punching the Puchi Suri right in the teeth. I could feel a tingling sensation in my hand, but that was an afterthought.

Did I finally slay the beast?

What I saw confused me: I hit the monster with enough force to kill it instantly, yet it was convulsing on the ground, its breath in short, painful gasps.

“What is... This?”

Not wanting to take any more chances, I slowly put some distance between myself and the writhing mouse. I had no idea what was about to happen, or what could *possibly* happen.

The Puchi Suri, for its part, continued to trash for a few moments, before finally relaxing entirely, sprawled out on the cold, damp bricks. Its previously gray fur had now turned a deep, dark shade of black. At the same time, I felt a strange sensation well up from deep within my being.

Shaking its head, the Puchi Suri slowly stood up, quietly staring in my general direction. Our eyes met, and I finally understood.

The monster somehow developed a connection with me.

Lowering my knife, I approached slowly, quietly, cautiously. The Puchi Suri remained quietly unmoving, maintaining its gaze at me.

“Eh...? Wait... What? What is this?”

I could hear Alize’s panicked and confused voice from behind me. Even I didn’t fully understand what I was looking at. In any case, the Puchi Suri continued its silent vigil.

“Slowly. Turn three times... On the spot.”

As if obeying my words, the monster did as it was told, turning three times slowly where it stood. Alize’s confusion seemed to intensify upon witnessing such a sight.

“Eh? Ehhh? What’s going on?”

I finally understood what had happened.

Raising my punctured glove up to my eyes, a dark fluid could be seen oozing from the wound—blood, I suppose. My blood.

Although my Thrall body was dry and withered for the most part, there were parts of it that were more human than corpse. There wasn’t very much of it, but

some amount of blood flowed through my veins. Even so, I didn't bleed much when cut.

It just so happened that the Puchi Suri's teeth had come into contact with a living part of me. In doing so, it ingested some of my blood, with this being the result of that contact. It made some degree of sense, given that I was a Thrall. Thralls were Vampires, albeit not very powerful ones. Vampires created familiars by biting humans and injecting their own blood into the unfortunate victim. The victim would then transform into a monster, and sometimes they would transform into a Thrall. Going by that logic, it was safe to assume that Thralls, too, could create familiars of their own.

Under normal circumstances this shouldn't be possible. Thralls were said to be mindless, shambling zombies of some sort, so they were by no means capable of complicated thoughts. One would be hard-pressed to find a Thrall that actively sought out victims to create familiars with. Even if it somehow succeeded in creating a familiar, it would not have the required intelligence to direct and instruct it.

A Thrall did have a will of its own, no matter how simple and frail. This simple will allowed them to follow orders from higher-ranked Vampires, and enabled them to create, albeit not control, familiars. In that case, a Thrall would be able to create familiars by injecting its own blood into a victim. The victim of a Vampire attack would then have their bodies forcibly altered by the Vampire, eventually transforming into a familiar-Thrall.

And now...my blood somehow found its way into the Puchi Suri, hence the convulsions, as its body was forcibly altered by my blood.

The result of the process was the mental link I now had with this creature. If I had to put it into words, the Puchi Suri felt like a part of me, albeit a smaller, detached, mouse-like part.

The Puchi Suri had become my familiar; this was the only educated guess I could make.

Of course, telling that to Alize would not be a good idea. Only Vampires and some other kinds of monsters were capable of such a feat. I had to find some excuse to justify what she had just seen, somehow. To Alize, this entire

spectacle must have been incomprehensible and strange. Thankfully, I had the perfect explanation to gloss it over with.

“It would seem like... My will has passed into the monster.”

“Pass” was an ancient and specialist term used by monster tamers. It was used to describe the moment in which their specialized magic dominated a monster’s mind, turning it into an obedient servant. I was basically trying to convince Alize that what she had just seen was an act of monster taming, and not of me turning the monster into my familiar.

“Eh...? What does that mean?”

Apparently, Alize didn’t have much knowledge concerning monster tamers. If anything, she seemed even more confused by my words.

Nodding, I offered an explanation. “I have... Succeeded. In taming and dominating the mind... Of that monster.”

“So...you are a monster tamer...with the ability to control monsters?” Alize was beginning to get the picture.

I was by no means any sort of monster tamer, but with this, I could control what Alize knew safely. She could discover that I was no such thing with some simple research, and this was why I said:

“Not... Quite. I am a swordsman... But. I learned the methods... From a monster tamer... Acquaintance. Of mine. A long time ago... So I thought I... Would try it out.”

“Oh! Adventurers are really something else, huh? That’s amazing...”

Although the art of monster taming was exclusive and usually never taught to those outside their secretive order, Alize didn’t need to know that. Even if she did do some research on me after the fact, there was no way to deny that such a thing was possible. With this, there were no more problems.

“Then...” Alize continued, “is that monster safe now? It won’t attack us anymore?”

Now this was a question I could answer truthfully.

“Yes. In fact... It will now listen to whatever... I say. This is... Convenient. We

could have it... Guard the basement storage. You did say that... Monsters occasionally found their way... In. Yes?”

A cold, damp place that often attracted monsters... I felt somewhat sorry for Sister Lillian, who must have purified this basement numerous times.

In any case, we now had a newfound guardian for the basement. But Alize didn't seem too convinced.

“You're sure...? About it not suddenly turning around to bite us in the behind? Really sure?”

Despite Alize's suspicions and apparent distrust, she eventually relented after some waving and pokes, placing some degree of trust in the oversized, reanimated monster-mouse that had become my familiar.



Given that the Puchi Suri in the orphanage's basement storage had become my familiar, I suppose I could say he was no longer a threat. Either way, dealing with the monster in question was never part of my contract to begin with, so my intervening probably changed little in that regard.

A more detailed search after we dealt with the larger Puchi Suri revealed quite a few of his smaller counterparts. These small ones weren't much of a threat, and I figured it was safe to let Alize tackle one of them head-on. It goes without saying that Alize only fought a single one, as opposed to the entire flock. Even so, she managed to defeat the Puchi Suri successfully, a jubilant look on her face. It reminded me of the look novice adventurers had upon scoring their first monster kill.

I told Alize to keep the magic crystal as a bit of a supplement to her allowance, if nothing else. One had to register as an adventurer to sell one's spoils to the guild, but one could also easily trade the crystal away to some merchant in the surrounding area. Their prices were fair, as far as street merchant prices went.

While Alize was busy celebrating, I decided to test out the capabilities of my newfound familiar. Although he ran into some difficulty on his quest to subdue his speedy brethren, my familiar had a trick of his own up his proverbial sleeve.

A quick stare from him was enough to immobilize the lesser Puchi Suri, much like how a mouse froze in the gaze of a snake. So potent was his immobilizing stare that his victims wouldn't move a step, not even after I approached and poked them with my finger. The Puchi Suri just stood in place, as if afraid of some sort of punishment should it dare move a muscle.

“...Did you make it... Obey you?”

I felt a sense of affirmation through our shared mental link. It would seem my familiar had an ability to control weaker variants of its species, much like how Vampires could control the Thralls they created. It was a phenomenon observed in monsters from time to time in which a greater variant of the monster ruled over the lesser of their kind.

A good example would be that of Goblin Generals or Goblin Kings who, as their titles suggested, had many Goblins under their command. The vampiric ability to turn monsters outside of its species into its obedient slaves could be thought of as a higher-ranked version of this skill. A Vampire had to inject its own blood into the victim for the process to work, though, and Vampires probably prioritized quality over quantity, unlike the ever-present Goblins.

I couldn't be sure of my familiar's commanding abilities, however. Exact perimeters, such as the area in which its control would remain effective, were unknown to me. There was always the possibility that this larger Puchi Suri ruled over his smaller relatives in this basement from the very start, and their obedience had nothing to do with my familiar's skills.

More research was required on the topic, which would thrill Lorraine.

I thought to simply take my familiar-mouse home with me, despite having him originally tasked with guarding the basement in Sister Lillian's absence. But with his smaller relatives now heeding his every word...could I not have the smaller mice guard the place while we were gone?

Yet another question for my familiar, so I projected a thought at the oversized mouse.

“I wanted... You to guard this basement... At first. But could we leave it... To these smaller ones, instead?”

Fixating its red eyes unto me, the Puchi Suri stared straight ahead, before transmitting what felt like yet another affirmative thought to me.



I supposed the ability to communicate without words or a shared language was a unique boon between master and familiar. And quite convenient, as well.

I turned to Alize, explaining the situation.

“I don’t really get it...at all. So you’re telling me that...the monsters will guard this place from now on? Will the other children be fine down here? I tell them not to play in here, but sometimes they sneak in...”

I relayed the question to my familiar, and soon received a strong mental impulse in response. It was calming and reassuring in nature.

Turning to its smaller brethren all neatly lined up before him, my familiar stared, his intimidating gaze hanging heavy in the air. The smaller Puchi Suri straightened their backs as they squeaked in response.

“It says... That there will not be. Any problems.”

“Looks that way...” Alize said, nodding as she continued observing the Puchi Suri with surprise all over her face.

To me, it seemed more like some sort of obedience brought about by fear—the Puchi Suri were terrified of my familiar. I suppose traditional hierarchies no longer held water, given that one of them was a half-Vampire mouse.

Satisfied that the problems at hand were solved, I took my leave, intending to finally return to Lorraine’s to make the appropriate preparations.



“Welcome ba—?!”

As usual, Lorraine was lying down on her sofa, holding up and reading a book against the light. The sound of the door opening caught her attention as it always did. She slowly turned to face me, only to stop halfway through her greeting as she very audibly swallowed her breath.

Finally, with a deep breath, Lorraine began speaking, slowly and calmly.

“If I may ask, Rentt... What exactly is that rotund and oddly-sized black mouse doing perched on your shoulder? I don’t suppose it is some sort of hallucination.”

So shocked was Lorraine at the sight of the Puchi Suri that she assumed she was hallucinating.

Sniffing the air slowly, I caught wind of a foul odor—Lorraine had been mixing strange medicines with the windows closed, yet again. Striding toward the windows, I threw them open, then returned to my original spot.

“I found him... In the orphanage basement... Storage. He will be in our... Care. From this day on...”

“A bit too apt a summary, Rentt. You would at least have to start from the beginning for me to comment on the matter.”

“Yes... I suppose I would.” An explanation was in order.

After sitting through my description of recent events, Lorraine nodded, seemingly lost in thought. “I see... It is very like you to take on such a request. But to the Swamp of Tarasque of all places? Even I dread to set foot in there, Rentt. Will you be all right?”

“I have thought of... Many. Contingency plans... There will be. No issues.”

“I suppose there would be no problems if you put it that way, but I still worry. Yet, not much can be done about it now, either way. To think you are capable of even creating and controlling your own familiars... I have performed many experiments, yes. But none that involved feeding your blood to other living things.”

Lorraine’s conclusion was reasonable; being a lower-level Vampire, Thralls were thought to lack the ability and intelligence to create familiars of their own. It made sense that she wouldn’t feed my blood to any animal she got her hands on. Lorraine, for her part, mentioned that her experiments centered around ensuring I was healthy to begin with, along with any other major traits and abilities my Thrall body possessed. I suppose less prominent abilities like this would naturally escape her detection.

“Can we... Keep him?”

“Do as you like, Rentt. A little late to be concerned about that, no? An Undead lives in this house, said Undead being you. One more mouse or two hardly makes a difference. He will, however, have to earn his keep.”

“He has to... Pay. Rent?”

“Don’t be so daft. Samples! A blood sample from the mouse, and some hairs, will suffice. I can think of many experiments, yes... A great deal of tests. Of course, I would not drain him dry. A healthy amount is enough. Speaking of health, Rentt. What does he eat?” Lorraine extended her hand toward the Puchi Suri.

My familiar leaned out, sniffing Lorraine’s fingers and closing its jaws around one.

“Oof!”

It was a light bite, enough to puncture Lorraine’s skin, but not cause grievous harm.

Loosening its grip on her finger, the Puchi Suri licked Lorraine’s wound, small droplets of blood rising to her skin’s surface.

“I see. Blood? Like your maker? Hmph. Predictable,” Lorraine said, exasperated. “At least he is easy to understand. Even so...my blood is quite the commodity these days, no?”

I couldn’t quite make out if Lorraine intended her statement to be a joke, but she seemed to be in a good mood. I supposed that was enough for now. Lorraine was no doubt excited over all the new experiments she had in mind concerning our newfound furry friend. My familiar, on the other hand, wasn’t too keen.

“Spare me...” he seemed to be saying. Unfortunately, I couldn’t do much about Lorraine’s tendencies to engage in mad science, having endured the exact same processes and experiments in the past. All I could do was tell my familiar to bear with it. The Puchi Suri responded with a marked sense of apprehension and fear.



A new day dawned upon Maalt. The sun, slowly rising above the clouds, flooded the streets of Maalt, or what I could see of it from my window. In the sun’s rays, previously purple clouds turned red, and with that, a new day began.

It was a sight I saw on a regular basis. Not exactly a rare sight, but one I had to wake up for in life. Sleep wasn't so much something I needed now that I was a Thrall. This seemed to be a fact that held true ever since I became one. I caught some shut-eye every now and then, but it was no longer necessary for my body to function.

This was terribly boring. All I could do to pass the time was look outside the window, or light a lamp and read a book. This allowed me to operate around the clock while I was fulfilling a request, though an adventurer that didn't require rest would surely come across as suspicious to others. Adventuring wasn't exactly a job where one finished all of one's tasks immediately; no matter how seasoned the adventurer, a lack of rest could lead to serious complications. As such, I had no choice but to rest.

Thanks to my newfound nocturnal tendencies, however, I had become more of a scholar than before, and it had gone this way for the past month or so. My knowledge was nothing compared to Lorraine's, though all I had to do to get answers was ask. A convenient benefit, if nothing else.

The Puchi Suri I brought back with me from the orphanage required a fair amount of sleep on the other hand. He was currently snoozing on his back, sprawled out on the desk I was reading at.

I found myself somewhat resentful of my familiar. Here I was, its tragic master, fighting an ailing battle with solitude in the middle of the night, while the mouse was sleeping soundly.

Does a familiar not share all of my traits?

I assumed it to be as such, but reality was quite different.

What a carefree mouse...

Then, I felt the slightest bit of thought from my familiar, as well as some basal emotions I could understand. I suppose being asleep didn't completely sever our connection. Testing and proper experiments would most likely reveal more details, but I supposed the specifics could be left to Lorraine. After all, she would engage in such experiments unprompted.

I felt a little guilty for leaving everything to Lorraine, but I had my Existential

Evolution to worry about, so that was that. As things were, however, I found myself with an excessive amount of free time. One would possibly even call me a bit of a freeloader.

I would do well to set such thoughts aside. Outside, the citizens of Maalt stirred, some already leaving their homes. It was during these idle thoughts that a strange scent wafted past my nose.

Where was it from? Outside? Impossible. I made sure all the windows were shut and bolted after Lorraine had gone to bed.

Then...

My sense of curiosity piqued by this strange scent, I walked toward the source of the smell, which was apparently the kitchen of the abode.

For now, I decided to leave my familiar where it was, for if it should wake, its keen sense of smell would tell me what the scent was immediately.

I was greeted by a strange sight upon arriving in the kitchen.

"I would almost... Think. That it would snow... Today," I said, amused at the sight.

"Don't be silly, Rentt. Even I can cook if I put my mind to it."

That answer came from none other than Lorraine, who had decided to take a turn at cooking breakfast for one reason or other. Numerous magical and alchemical magic tools were present in the kitchen, and Lorraine manipulated each one with a trained hand.

Normally, Lorraine would be sound asleep at this hour, but as she said, it wasn't strange that she was reasonably capable at cooking. I could take credit for that, of course, being the individual who taught her how to cook in the first place.

Lorraine, for her part, would cook from time to time should she feel like it. If I had to guess, today was one of those times.

"Is there... Any. For me?"

While I could survive off nothing but blood, I did enjoy a good meal every now and then.

“Yes, yes.” Lorraine’s response was reassuring. “I am working on it, Rentt, as you can see. Sit down, it will be done soon.”

Although her methods were somewhat unorthodox, Lorraine knew what she was doing.

Nodding, I turned and headed for the dining table.



“Well, then. Eat up,” Lorraine said, gesturing to the dishes laid out on the table.

Black bread and milk, along with some steamed dishes... A classic Maalt breakfast.

Lorraine was probably steaming these very dishes when I walked in on her in the kitchen a few moments ago.

It was a simple steamed stew of the Orc flesh I had preserved some time back, along with some legumes and root vegetables. The rich aroma of stock permeated through the ingredients—quite a most mouth-watering dish.

Being a Thrall, my stomach didn’t bloat or hunger very much at all, but I still had a sense of taste. My memories of food and their taste were vague during my brief tenure as a Ghoul, becoming much sharper upon my evolution. I could now enjoy and taste all manners of food, much like I did in life.

If I had to pinpoint one change, it would be my newfound appreciation of blood. I found the taste of blood unbelievably enjoyable, though it wasn’t exactly something I would bring up at the dining table.

Clasping my hands together before Lorraine’s hand-prepared breakfast, I closed my eyes briefly, uttering a prayer before picking up my set of utensils. Needless to say, I hardly believed in the existence of gods of any kind, merely doing so out of habit.

“An Undead praying to the gods before a meal? A most jarring and strange sight, Rentt.”

I didn’t need Lorraine’s reminder to understand the irony of the situation.

While each major religion had its own separate views on the Undead, they

were mostly viewed unfavorably, as enemies of the gods, traitors of the heavens, or far worse. In any case, I could always be sure of the fact that most of these religions viewed the Undead as a crime against the creations of God.

“...What do you propose... I do. Walk into a church... And offer up a prayer there?”

“Ho, would that not be blasphemy? Or perhaps you could even call it a change of heart... To think that an Undead would consider offering a prayer to God...”

As expected of Lorraine, she had somehow managed to give serious consideration to what was clearly silly banter. I hadn't really thought about defying the gods in the first place, nor had I thought much of the gods at all. To call it a change of heart would be inaccurate, but I did wonder what would happen if I entered a holy place of sorts.

Come to think of it, that orphanage was run by the Church of the Eastern Sky, and if I had asked, I would have been granted access to their local altar or place of worship. A missed opportunity—most unfortunate.

However, given that I was so close to a holy place and felt nothing amiss... Maybe there really was nothing to worry about, then.

With that said, there was something strange about the food today. If I had to put it into words...it was, for some reason, most delicious.

I didn't mean to say Lorraine had somehow miraculously improved her cooking skills. Instead, it simply tasted...better. In fact, it tasted better than everything else Lorraine had ever prepared for me.

For a while I sat, an expression of amazement on my face. Lorraine, noticing this, beamed widely, a satisfied expression coloring her features.

“Oh, so you have noticed. It is good, is it not, Rentt?” Lorraine asked.

“What... Did you put. Into this?”

“It is quite simple, really. I mixed in a single drop of blood for your sake at the very last step of my preparations. While I would not exactly call it a spice, I thought it would be more suited to your palate. Am I wrong?”

I did appreciate Lorraine's efforts in preparing food that was to my taste, but I couldn't help but wonder...

"...But then, Lorraine. That would mean... There is blood. In your breakfast... Too."

Was our breakfast really stew with a drop of blood? And Lorraine would be fine with it?

"Well... Even if it is my own blood, I am not in the habit of having bloody stew for breakfast. Rest assured, Rentt, I simply removed a portion for you and left a droplet in that. Did you think I would simply give my finger a good nick and submerge it into the stew pot? That would really be a witch-like thing to do, no?"

I was relieved Lorraine had not ruined an entire pot's worth of breakfast for my sake. If I thought about it, I suppose mixing blood into food was somewhat witch-like, if the fairy tales were to be believed.

"I do not engage in such practices, mind you," Lorraine continued. "In older days, however...fortune-telling witches would often advise young girls to do strange things. I do pity the men, really."

A terrifying prospect. Thinking it just had to be a joke, I asked for more information, only to instantly regret it as I looked up and met Lorraine's focused eyes. She was apparently serious.

"When did they... Engage. In such a... Practice?"

"During that one festival... What did they call it again? That one where it was socially acceptable for women to propose to men... It was on some saint's birthday or the like. You remember the feasts, dances, and whatnot that went on during that time, yes? The deed was done then."

I recalled such an event. While I never attended it myself, nor had anyone propose to me, I often heard about it from friends and acquaintances—namely, former adventurers who had gotten married.

Lorraine continued once more. "I suppose you could say it was a folk curse of sorts that worked much like how Vampires create Thralls to be their obedient slaves. In this case, however, the women have bound men to their will. Almost

parallel examples, if you would.”

Lorraine, apparently satisfied at giving me a historically accurate explanation of the custom, sat down and continued eating her breakfast without another word.



“Do be careful on your journey, yes?” Lorraine said as I made to leave the abode.

Come to think of it, there was meaning in having this specific type of stew for breakfast. According to local customs, it was something akin to a blessing or prayer for a peaceful journey ahead. This was why Lorraine had woken up early to prepare it. The Swamp of Tarasque was a dangerous place, after all.

“...Don’t worry about... Me. Lorraine. If it ever gets... Too dangerous. I would escape... Without hesitation.”

“And you expect me to believe the words of one who was eaten whole by a Dragon in his previous life? Well... I suppose that was a stroke of bad luck, more than anything... Ah, yes. One more thing... This mouse over here. Will you not be giving him a name?” Lorraine asked, pointing at the familiar-mouse on my shoulder.

While I was surprised at myself for not having thought about it until now, I did agree with Lorraine: a name was needed for my familiar. I hadn’t thought it necessary due to my simply treating it as a pet monster of sorts, and didn’t expect much from it. I couldn’t imagine calling him a Puchi Suri forever, as that was a most inconvenient thing. Now would be a good time to fix that problem.

“Well... He is. Black in color. We could call him... Black.”

Lorraine’s brow furrowed at my terrible naming sense.

“A little more effort would not hurt, Rentt. ‘Black’? *Really?*”

“Even if you... Say that...”

I’ve been pursuing my goal of becoming a Mithril-class adventurer all my life. Therefore, I had no children, and naturally didn’t have much of an opportunity to give names to anything. Come to think of it, I didn’t raise any pets when I was

younger, either.

“You are hopeless, Rentt. I will give him a name, then. Hmm... Aha. How about Edel?”

Edel...

I didn't have strong feelings for the name, nor anything against it. But I was certainly curious about the origins of such a word.

“Where did... Such a name. Come from?”

“Well, from what you told me, that mouse of yours lords over smaller Puchi Suri, yes? Much like a king of sorts... Hence, ‘Edel.’ It means ‘noble one’ in an older, lost tongue.”

“Noble... One.”

Personally, I felt my familiar was more of a mob boss than a noble; an intimidating dictator than a pious king. Catching wind of my thoughts, my familiar gave my shoulder a thump with his foot, as if disagreeing with my analysis of his character.

Was I wrong?

I wasn't, but that was an argument best left for another time.

Lorraine continued: “I do have other suggestions, considering how large he is. The fat and rotund Moppel, or the gluttonous Fressa...and other ancient terms. What do you think?”

I stood, thinking about Lorraine's suggestion for a few moments. My familiar was quite the glutton, having finished the small portion of Lorraine's blood-stew I had offered him in mere moments. So fast was the mouse that we could hardly keep up with his actions, and I suppose that left quite an impression on Lorraine. I didn't think fondly of either of those names, and my familiar seemed to prefer Lorraine's first suggestion, strongly projecting that thought to me in response. Perhaps it was a quirk of this particular familiar, but I felt the mouse on my shoulder had too much a will of his own.

Maybe I should just call him Moppel and be done with it. That, however, would be the gesture of a petty man. Though, I was no longer a man at this

point; at least, not a living one.

“Let us go with... Edel. The others... He does not seem. Fond of.”

“Is that so?” Lorraine seemed a little disappointed at my words. “Both Moppel and Fressa are great names, are they not? Yes?”

It would seem like Lorraine had taken quite the liking to Moppel and Fressa. In any case...

“The man... Well. The mouse. Himself. Says that Edel... Is good. We should respect... His wishes.”

“Ah, yes. That mental link between you and the mouse. You mentioned that earlier... Well, if he prefers it, then Edel it is. It is a pity, but I will not insist. From this day on you are Edel, and I am the person who named you. Don’t you forget!” Lorraine exclaimed, patting Edel on the head.

With that, we said our goodbyes to Lorraine, turning and finally walking out of her home.



“Hey... We’re here,” the coachman said, before stopping the carriage and horses and allowing me to disembark. Edel, for his part, was calmly perched on my shoulder.

Alighting, I looked out into the distance, near the vicinity of the swamp in question.

“From here on out ’n’ down that path s’the Swamp of Tarasque... You’ll be all right? S’not a place for solo ’venturers!” the coachman warned, worry apparent in his voice.

He was right, of course. This wasn’t a place I would’ve thought of wandering around in while I still lived. Even if I was forced to enter such a dangerous area, I would simply enlist the help of others and form a last-minute party of sorts, forgoing my solo philosophy in the name of safety.

This time, though, I had no such options. There were several reasons for this, but now was not the time to be reminiscing.

“I have... No intentions. Of fighting the Tarasque. Just a little in and... Out.

Trip. So do not... Worry. About me.”

The coachman didn’t seem convinced. If anything, he seemed even more concerned.

With a shrug and an exasperated sigh, the man continued. “You ’venturers’re all like that. Well... You’re ’sponsible for your own life, but don’t do anythin’ reckless, y’hear? If the situation turns sour...y’should run back here immediately.”

Kind words, but rare ones as well. Individuals like him weren’t usually so overly concerned about their passengers.

Curious, I asked after the man.

“Y’know of recent goin’s on, yeah? What with new ’venturers goin’ missin’ in the labyrinths ’n’ all that. S’a lonely thing, y’know, the folks y’met yesterday, suddenly gone. So... Maybe I’m gettin’ a little emotional. Anyway... Do your best. I’ll return in the evenin’. I pray you’re here then since I can’t approach the swamp any closer’n I already have. Well’en... I’ll be goin’ now.”

The coachman raised his whip, spurring his horses forward. Soon, he was just a speck in the distance.

Adventurers that challenged the Swamp of Tarasque were few and far between. Horse carriages stopped at this pick-up point twice a day: once in the day and once in the evening. Should an adventurer miss the carriage, he or she would have to spend the night in the wilderness. I made a mental note to be aware of the time lest the same happened to me.

With that, I headed down the path, following the advice of the kind coachman.



The Swamp of Tarasque—

Northwest of Maalt, it took a few hours to reach by horse carriage. As its name suggested, it was a swampy, dreary area. To be precise, the swamp had some other official name assigned to it by geographers a long time ago. That name, however, had been forgotten, with society at large referring to it as the

Swamp of Tarasque instead. This was presumably done in honor of the strong monsters that lived there.

Tarasques were a subspecies of Dragon, or a distant relative. Armed with a turtle-like shell and three pairs of legs, it also sported a potent poison, making it a truly fearsome beast. While its armored shell, scales, and poison veins served as incredibly useful materials for weapons and armor, one had to be a Silver-class adventurer or above to even stand a chance against it. However, even an adventurer of such a rank would find themselves hard-pressed to hunt when surrounded by a few of the beasts.

In other words, it would be unwise for a Bronze-class adventurer such as myself to fight with, or even cross a Tarasque's path.

Of course, merely running into one wouldn't kill me. Though, it would still put me in quite a pickle. This was why I had a principle of exploring carefully: instead of desperately fending off a Tarasque, it would be best not to encounter one at all. To make things worse, a wide variety of monsters called the swamp their home as well, so it would be foolish to not take precautions against them, too. This, along with a few other unpleasant factors, made swamp exploration a most taxing affair.

To think I'm doing all this for just one bronze coin!

Even so, it was only right for an adventurer to be charitable from time to time. If I went about my hunt in a prudent manner, I might even be able to gather some rare materials from the monsters here, or at least some medicinal plants that could fetch a fair sum of coin.

It was obvious to see this wasn't a place an adventurer would willingly visit. This meant there was always a demand for rare materials that could only be found here. Even if I really did end up in a bad spot, all I had to do was escape—not necessarily a skill I could brag about, but escaping was a more attractive prospect than dying a second time.

In fact, I was now able to employ a mobile distraction. Edel bristled at the thought. My familiar apparently wasn't too keen on the dangerous jobs I had in mind for him.

Are you not my familiar, Edel? Should you not be risking your life for your

master? Or so I thought would be the case, but Edel didn't seem very loyal to me.

I suppose that's just the way it is.

I set foot into the Swamp of Tarasque, hoping not to cross paths with one of the menacing creatures in my travels.



If I had to describe the various dangers that filled the Swamp of Tarasque, I would definitely have to talk about the Tarasques themselves. Not to say there weren't a multitude of other dangers, though.

There were many lakes and ponds in the swamp that were extremely poisonous—as were the jets of air that occasionally erupted from them. Even walking around in the swamp in and of itself was a dangerous thing. To adequately conquer the swamp, one would first require a means of breathing in such a hostile environment, in addition to neutralizing the poison in the air. A poison-resistant magical tool would fulfill this purpose, as would the continued usage of divinity to purify the air around the adventurer. One would also need protective gear and attire to safely traverse the poisonous terrain.

To make things worse, such an intensely poisonous environment had profound impacts on its inhabitants, most notably the monsters that lived in the swamps. There, Slimes had evolved into Poison Slimes, Goblins held poison-coated weapons, and the Sea Snakes swimming in these murky waters were armed with deadly poisons in their bodies.

Taking all those factors into account, one realizes the treachery of the swamp: one does not simply walk into the Swamp of Tarasque.

And as I said, there was the issue of the Tarasques themselves. The swamp was a place that people avoided at all costs.

While there was a high demand for ingredients from the place, most adventurers held their life in higher regard than a pile of gold coins. Even I wouldn't have come here if I had a choice in life. It was the common perspective that most adventurers held.

But in my current state, the Swamp of Tarasque didn't pose very much of a

threat to me at all. I would've avoided the place upon the pain of death while I still drew breath, but as an Undead, I cared little about the poisonous terrain, air, or gas that permeated the swamp. Due to my newfound poison-resistant nature, as verified by Lorraine's experiments, I could safely disregard 80% of the swamp's dangers. Even poisons from monsters had no effect on me; to me, the inhabitants of the swamp were quite unchanged from their normal brethren.

Hypothetically, should a dangerous poison affect me, I would be able to easily cleanse it with my divinity. As such, I could safely write off poison from the list of environmental threats I had to deal with.

Even Edel, who was still resting upon my shoulder, had some degree of resistance to poison. While we didn't have much of a chance to experiment and verify this, I suppose it would only be natural that my familiar inherited some of my traits.

Since Edel lived in a basement to begin with, he should be used to dirty air to some degree. I did purify him with divinity before bringing him back to Lorraine's, however.

Even if I did fall into a pool of poison, my divine aura would cleanse us both, allowing us to board the carriage in a relatively clean state.

I put another foot forward, venturing deeper into the swamp.



The terrain of the Swamp of Tarasque was most unfavorable. More than half of the ground was soft and unstable; not exactly the best conditions for combat. There were also the issues of sinkholes and pitfall traps in which one would need to be relatively agile to escape such deathly maws.

In addition—

“Huh...?!”

I drew my blade swiftly, jumping backward and slicing an incoming arrow in half.

Am I flanked?

“Squeak!” Edel quickly informed me of the position the arrow came from via

our mental link.

Turning quickly, I spotted a bow-wielding Goblin staring in our general direction. The Goblin seemed to show no interest in approaching us. Instead, another arrow flew at us from a different direction. Slicing the arrow in two once more, I turned and, as expected, found another Goblin.

A quick scan of the surroundings confirmed my fears: we were surrounded by Goblins.

There were about ten of them in all. I couldn't help but wonder where they had appeared from. With my sword drawn, I did yet another quick visual sweep of the area. A distinct scraping sound filled the air—sounds from beneath my feet. Burrows, perhaps, or a series of warrens and caves present in the area.

I wondered how these Goblins could breathe in the swamp muck. My question was answered with a more detailed glance at the bow-wielding Goblin, holding a long, narrow, stick-like object in its teeth. A straw of some sort for breathing as they swam in the swamp?

The swampy terrain also worked in the Goblins' favor; even if I was alert, it was impossible to immediately notice something hidden in the surrounding bushes.

Cursing at myself for being distracted as I trekked through the swamp, I began formulating a battle plan—I could not be defeated here.

Their long-range attacks were annoying, and the Goblins still showed no signs or intents of approaching me. A strategically sound choice, given the fact that they were faced with one such as myself. I suppose the Goblins felt some degree of caution was necessary. If they carelessly approached me, I would swat them aside with ease.

I infused my legs with spirit, allowing myself to step on the swampy ground without sinking. In a motion that was all but too familiar, I readied my blade, rushing toward the Goblin Archers.

While I was moving at a pace that was significantly slower than what I was capable of on solid ground, I was still several times more agile than these muck-dwelling Goblins.

Panicking at my rapid advance, the Goblins lowered their weapons, turning and attempting to escape. Goblins were known for their cowardly nature, though I wasn't too different a short while ago.

A rapid escape was a sound choice if one couldn't win—this much was never in doubt.

Death was the great equalizer, the proverbial end for both humans and monsters. I suppose I was an exception...

In any case, I had no intention of letting the Goblins escape. Not all Goblins were necessarily evil or malicious. Some Goblins were known for being peaceful and cooperative, while in other parts of these lands, such Goblins were seen as a sort of beastmen, and were able to live without fear of persecution.

The Goblins here, however, sought to prey on adventurers exploring the swamp. I didn't feel like they were benevolent Goblins in any shape or form.

Of course, they did live in this swamp, and probably had varying views on humans in general. Even so, dying wasn't exactly in my interests, and should I let them go, they would definitely attack other adventurers.

Given that they had chosen to interact with humans in a hostile way, mutual bloodshed was unavoidable. This was why I brought my blade down upon them without hesitation as soon as I caught up with one of them.

They seemed notably stronger than the Goblins in the Labyrinth of the Moon's Reflection. I suppose this was a given due to their ability to live in these poisonous environs, and their ability to hide in the swamp's waters.

But that was really all there was to it.

While the Goblins were intelligent enough to use the terrain to their advantage and shoot arrows at unsuspecting adventurers, they didn't seem to have many close-combat capabilities.

With a single swing, a Goblin fell face down in the muck. The next soon followed, and the one after it. Before long, all ten Goblins were dead, sprawled out on the mud.

Confirming there were no more immediate threats in the vicinity, I made my

rounds, collecting magic crystals from the Goblin's corpses. The crystals were mediocre in quality at best, but at the very least, would be worth some amount of coin. Since there were no known uses for a Goblin's skin, I simply made a large incision with my dissection knife, prying out the magic crystals from next to the creatures' hearts. I would leave their corpses here as fertilizer for the swamp's flora.

Then...it occurred to me that Edel did little to no work at all in this encounter, other than telling me where the first arrow had been shot from.

Does this mouse even think of itself as my familiar?

I instructed Edel to earn his keep in our next battle. Edel just told me that he would work should there be a need to.

Does this mouse even think of me as its master...?

I couldn't help but wonder...



While the swamp wasn't a place most people would voluntarily enter, one couldn't deny there was a wide variety of flora and fauna there, all of which could be harvested and utilized as ingredients or materials. For this reason, certain elements of infrastructure to facilitate this process were in place.

For example, bridges and the like were often found over large bodies of water. This much was necessary for a normal human being to explore the swamp, since no human with my degree of poison resistance existed in these lands. And given that no sane person would try swimming across a large body of poisonous swamp-water, bridges were a necessity in these parts.

Even though I was immune to the poison's effects, I wasn't exactly interested in taking a dip if I had the choice. Basically, I would gladly cross a bridge should I come across one.

And yet, there was still one problem—

Creeeak... Creeeak...

A sound I did not wish to hear; not here, of all places.

The material of a bridge differed depending on where it was built, and this

specific bridge was made of wood. Ease of construction was the main factor when choosing materials for a bridge. However, one would be hard-pressed to find enough materials to build a metal bridge in a swamp. In fact, such a feat would only be possible if multiple adventurers were hired. These adventurers would also have to work on the project for a long period of time.

This was why a wooden bridge hung here instead.

Naturally, the wood used for this bridge came from a type of poison-tolerant tree that grew in the vicinity. Due to its properties, it was a lot hardier than normal wood.

Even so, a wooden bridge was a wooden bridge. For all intents and purposes, this bridge was a simple affair, and its simple construction led to it decaying at an accelerated pace. One day it would fall into and be devoured by the swamp once more.

—And today was the day this bridge decided to fall, with me on it.

Snap!!!

I had no choice but to steel myself; even so, I wasn't quite steeled enough, so I attempted to run off the bridge, putting considerable weight in my steps. If I had calmly thought about the situation at hand, I surely would have chosen a different course of action.

Unable to withstand my weight, a rotting plank gave way.

Now, Thralls had significantly more physical strength than the average human. Thus, my careless stomping had brought about an all too predictable outcome.

My foot, now firmly driven through the plank, caused the already weak bridge to deform, with me dropping dangerously close to the surface of the swamp. Edel, for his part, had already jumped off my shoulder, clambering up the strained bridge and onto the safety of the opposite shore.

You traitorous mouse, you!

Edel's actions had merit, for I didn't know exactly how resistant to poison he was. The possibility that such a fall would be fatal for Edel couldn't be

discounted, so I forgave my familiar for now.

The bridge, finally giving way, plunged into the depths of the swamp, taking me with it. I didn't feel any pain or shortness of breath; I suppose the Undead did not need to breathe very much, if at all. This was news to me, if only because I had water-stepping boots during my excursion to Todds Village.

If I could swim in the first place, I probably didn't need such an expensive magical tool. But I guess I would've appeared suspicious to Ryuntus and Amiris.

That was all in the past, however.

That said, I did breathe when on land—I would've appeared strange if I didn't. Humans did this unconsciously, though in comparison, my ability to not breathe while submerged in a poisonous swamp was indeed convenient. Although I looked unsavory and strange, I probably wouldn't mind having such a body for the rest of my life.

Needless to say, I would be single for my entire life, but I would still have my dream of becoming a Mithril-class adventurer to keep me company.

Well, I hadn't intended to get married to begin with, so that was neither here nor there. The fact that I occasionally had such thoughts, however, probably meant that I hadn't given up on the notion of doing so.

Bringing my mind back to the current situation, I realized that the poisonous waters of the swamp seemed impossible for most living things to live in. This was because most living things would instantly turn purple if submerged in the swamp, then die in the next five minutes or so.

But the sight that greeted me as I sank into the swamp's waters was quite different. I couldn't call it a beautiful or scenic sight, but there were living things in the depths. Fish-like monsters, each about the size of a man, headed toward me with their jaws wide open. There were more than just a few of these fish, as I could count about ten in my immediate vicinity.

I probably wouldn't die if nibbled on by these monsters, and I even wondered if I was edible to begin with. As long as I endured it, these monsters would probably leave me alone after some time. What little parts of me that did remain human, however, seemed revolted at the prospect of being eaten by

these monsters.

Drawing my sword from its sheath, I readied myself in a combative stance as I faced the approaching fish abominations. Fortunately, my feet were now on solid ground, and I was able to fight.

The plank that I had unfortunately stepped through was still stuck to one of my feet, but I planted it firmly upon the ground in response. I could swim freely if I simply cut the plank free, but I instead decided to remain in place, striking out at the attacking fish.

Immediately, a large fish rushed toward me, its jaws wide open. Holding my ground, I brought my blade down on its head, neatly severing it from its body. My sword was still sharp enough for my purposes, despite being significantly heavier under water than on land. While its current performance couldn't compare to what it was capable of on dry ground, the infusion of some spirit into the blade was more than enough to behead a giant fish.

Even so, I found it somewhat difficult to defend against four or five of the beasts at once. It was difficult for me to be aware of all directions if only because I remained standing in place. My movements in the water were also considerably sluggish.

The fish, on the other hand, had evolved to move through water quickly. I should have thought more about the predicament at hand.

The fish didn't care about my regrets or bad decisions. Approaching me from all angles, they instead clamped their jaws down onto my body. Swinging my sword in a broad horizontal arc, I managed to dispose of three of them approaching me from the front, only for two others to attack me from behind, sinking their teeth into my skin. In response, I thrashed about, swinging my sword wildly. My actions, however, had little effect.

I felt a renewed sense of peril; if I didn't act quickly, I would be in danger of losing my foot. I was in a situation where my life was in jeopardy, so I should feel threatened. It wasn't my skills that lulled me into a false sense of security, but this ridiculously sturdy undead body of mine. I probably wouldn't die even if my head was removed from my body, and as a result, I no longer had an accurate or reasonable sense of danger, unlike what I had in life.

This was most unbecoming. I had to do something about it; well, after I got myself out of this mess. So, I resolved to put up a real fight.

No longer maintaining my spirit aura, I instead infused my body with divinity. Divinity went a longer way to strengthening my body; although a mana-spirit Fusion Art would have been stronger in this situation, I didn't dare use it while under such strain. If I really had to use it, it would be when my life was truly in danger, as opposed to me facing the loss of a foot.

As the divine aura coursed through my body, I felt my movements quicken. As expected, it was now easier for me to move through the water.

With renewed strength, I pulled one of my feet away from the offending fish. The other fish still remained resolutely attached, refusing to let go.

Was this undead, bony flesh of mine really that delicious? I suppose food was in short supply in the swamp, and it was part of the fish's instincts to not let go once it caught its prey.

That was horribly unacceptable to me. I had greater plans in life than rotting away at the bottom of this swamp.

With one of my feet now free, I was able to change my orientation. Twisting my torso, I raised my sword high, intending to end this fishy menace once and for all.

The trajectory was clear: I would now slay this foot-chomping fish.

Just as that thought crossed my mind, however, understanding seemed to dawn upon the fish. Rapidly swimming upward, the fish dragged me along with it, before finally leaping out of the water's surface and hurling me onto dry land.

"Guh...!!!"

And with that, my crossing of the swamp was complete, albeit ending with me slamming onto the ground with a pathetic sound.

I was completely soaked, poisonous water dripping onto the ground. Surprisingly, my robe remained impossibly dry. A testament to its quality, I suppose. Maybe it was never wet to begin with... This robe was as mysterious as the woman who gave it to me.

Turning around this way and that, my eyes came upon a familiar sight: Edel, the very same familiar who abandoned me to my watery grave.

“...You. What... Are you doing?”

Edel’s face...snout, more likely, seemed oddly puffed out. Grabbing him roughly, I opened his mouth with my gloved hands, only to find an assortment of nuts stashed in his cheeks.

My familiar left me, its master, to die, deciding instead to gather food from the surroundings.

It would seem like Edel had less of a reliance on blood for sustenance when compared to me.

But there was also something else that disturbed me—namely, Edel’s lack of faith...and loyalty.

Are the familiars of Vampires all this way?

But of course, no one could answer my question. Who would I even ask...?



Perhaps expectations existed to be betrayed. A sudden and blunt observation, and maybe even a tad fatalistic; quite sad, really. But I wasn’t in a situation where I could just lie on the ground and ponder philosophy. Not to say I didn’t still feel an overwhelming sense of despair, however, probably because that despair was now standing a short distance away, staring at my drenched figure.

With a turtle-like armored shell and six powerful legs, it was covered in tough scales, sporting a relatively plain, but still impressive Dragon-like body. Its eyes indicated a creature that was more savage than intelligent—the eyes of a beast. Reflected in those eyes was my own image, a weaker organism that would be hunted and consumed.

—A Tarasque. The very creature from which this swamp’s name was derived from.

While I preferred not to have encountered one on my journey, I wasn’t surprised that I ended up crossing one’s path. Simply put, the Dragon Blood Blossoms that I was looking for only bloomed around trails and areas favored by

Tarasques. Completing my task without ever bumping into one would be difficult, if not impossible. If one had a keen eye for such matters, however, one could identify Tarasque tracks, as well as the territorial markings they left to warn other monsters of their presence. I tried to do the same—and then spectacularly failed at my task.

What a predicament...

Looking at the situation at hand, I had little choice but to fight.

If there was any silver lining to this situation, it would be that I was immune to Tarasque poison. So all I had to do was fight it like a normal monster, presumably leading me to victory.

While I wondered if I possessed the necessary skills, the Tarasque didn't seem keen on my ponderous thoughts.

“GRUAAAAH...!!!”

An ear-splitting, thunderous cry that was no doubt a declaration of hostility. This wasn't what I had planned for at all, but I had no choice but to fight.

Drawing my blade, I stood still, facing the Tarasque. As soon as I braced myself, the beast charged, hurtling toward me at full speed.

Given the Tarasque's size, any normal human hit by such an attack would surely be sent flying, or be trampled and crushed underfoot. Needless to say, both these options didn't particularly appeal to me.

I held my ground, waiting for an opportunity.

Since a Tarasque was encased in a hard shell and had a long, flexible neck, my strategies were limited. I really only had two options open to me: I could either break through its shell with an attack, or send its relatively softer neck flying.

To even think of breaking a Tarasque's shell, however, one would have to possess enough strength and skill, as well as a well-forged weapon. Its shell was commonly used as an armor material favored by Silver-or Gold-class adventurers, after all.

A Tarasque's shell could be turned into quite a respectable material, provided one found an equally respectable blacksmith. Tools and armor produced of this

material had immense defensive capabilities.

Logically speaking, it would be extremely difficult for me to crack such a shell. There was the option of fusing mana, spirit, and divinity into my blade all at once, though... While that could possibly breach the beast's shell, the consequences of the move backfiring caused me to indefinitely shelve the thought. If I were to carelessly lose my weapon in such a fashion, I would surely lose my life. It would be a last resort, and hopefully one that I didn't have to employ.

I decided to go after the beast's neck instead.

Jumping up and toward the charging Tarasque, I landed on its shell, steadying myself and swinging my weapon down upon its neck—that was my intent, anyway.

Clang!

With a sound similar to that of clashing steel, my blade bounced off the Tarasque's skin harmlessly. The beast, now alerted to my presence on its back, quickly threw itself upon the ground, rolling its large body over in an attempt to dislodge me.

Ka-thung!

With a low, rumbling sound, the Tarasque continued rolling, sweeping up the swamp around it as it went. Kicking up a cloud of poisonous gases and flying mud, the Tarasque retreated behind this smokescreen, as if to obscure my vision. An intimidating attack, one that would fell a normal person. Unfortunately for the beast, I cared little about poisons.

It was an attack that was both defensive and offensive at the same time; quite the treacherous beast. Poisonous mud was nothing more than mud to me, however. In addition, I possessed eyesight superior to that of a normal human's. While the beast's efforts did impede my vision slightly, I could still make out its shape beyond the settling mud and gas.

A curious and convenient ability, and one that I hadn't used so consciously before.

Deciding that I could trust my enhanced senses of perception, I leapt through

the rain of mud and swamp water, making a beeline for the Tarasque. The beast, on the other hand, still maintained a low profile, having slammed its shell into the soft, swampy ground to deter my advance. While the tremors were impressive, the Tarasque was now in a disadvantageous position, as its neck was now much closer to the ground. That was an opportunity I would greatly exploit. As long as I struck at the right moment, I would surely be able to behead this beast.

I suppose this would be as good a time as any other to enhance the sharpness of my sword. And I had just the technique in mind for this very purpose.

I began infusing two auras into my blade, the auras of mana and spirit. It was time to put my technique to the test: a mana-spirit Fusion Art.

If I couldn't cut through its shell, all I had to do was crush its organs from the inside, and that would be it.

Of course, true practitioners of the Fusion Arts would be able to focus both these auras into the edge of their weapon, increasing its sharpness by an almost astronomical degree. I, on the other hand, was currently incapable of such a feat. I would instead rely on my brute strength, and blow through the beast.

I steeled myself, expanding my spirit aura from my blade to my entire body. Propelled by an intense concentration of spirit, I found myself beside the Tarasque's neck before I knew it.

The beast continued to struggle, and I had no intention of waiting for it to right itself. With a swift motion, I swung my sword down on its neck.

A thunderous crack filled the air as steel met scale.

As the aftermath of my attack resounded through the air, it was accompanied by a small shower of broken scales, apparently having been freed by my blow.

Did I slay it, I thought, momentarily stopping. Unfortunately, a Tarasque wasn't a weak monster by any means—

Before I could react, a series of sharp claws flew toward me, intending to crush me right on the spot, robes and all.

Dodging the blow with a panicked step, I reoriented myself, intending to

strike at its wound once more. Instead, I discovered that the Tarasque had raised its neck up high.

Looks like the beast has finally righted itself...

All that trashing and rolling couldn't have been good for me had I still remained a human, but the beast's currently raised neck wasn't good news either. A human wouldn't be able to fight a Tarasque to begin with—but now wasn't the time for idle thought.

With its six legs, the beast bore down upon me once more, albeit at a slower speed than before. Already, the Tarasque was wary of being mounted by me again—truly a fearsome monster.

To think that it could learn and adapt in such a short time... It was a savage beast that largely lived and died by its instincts and senses, but one would almost think it was in possession of a somewhat logical mind. Personally speaking, I would much rather prefer a stupid, brutish Tarasque.

I supposed nothing could be done about the intelligence of my foe. I had to think of a new strategy.

While climbing onto its back and striking at its wounded neck was the best way to end this fight, my opponent seemed aware of this fact, and it was now visibly more cautious.

What should I...?

Edel—

Edel, the familiar-mouse on my shoulder, was missing.

Where did he go?

Looking around, it didn't take me long to spot Edel's silhouette, running at breakneck speed in the midst of the Tarasque's feet.

It was a dangerous approach—one wrong step, and my familiar would be crushed! But Edel weaved and danced through the monster's legs, avoiding its frenzied stomps and neatly landing on its back.

You're pretty good, little mouse.

For the first time since I had set foot in the swamp, I felt grateful for Edel's existence.

And yet, Edel was still nothing more than a Puchi Suri, a small, mouse-like monster, compared to the large and ferocious Tarasque.

Just as this thought entered my mind...

"...What?!"

Almost falling over, I caught myself; it was like all the strength in my body just left it all at once. Then, Edel's body started glowing.

What is happening...?

I could sense Edel's intents. He had a plan, and all I could do now was watch.

I stared at the scene unfolding before me, of Edel and the Tarasque.

Now shrouded in what appeared to be a veil of light, Edel ran up the Tarasque's neck, propelling and slamming his body into the exposed wound left by my previous swing.

Edel was large for his kind, but he was still a Puchi Suri. His valiant attack couldn't possibly leave much of a mark on the Tarasque.

Contrary to my expectations, however, the beast began trashing, evidently in great pain.

"Gruuuaaaaaarrggg...!"

It was a howl of fury—fury at having been injured in the same place twice, and possibly the indignation of having been dealt a blow by something so much smaller than itself. While only the Tarasque would know which of these was more frustrating, the force and resultant impact of Edel's attack couldn't be denied.

Twitching and struggling, the Tarasque suddenly rippled its neck like a scaled whip. It swept across its back in a wide horizontal arc, at a speed I didn't think possible for an injured monster. It would seem like Edel shared my thoughts as the sheer speed of the blow caught him unawares. My familiar was soon sent flying, the victim of a suitably violent impact.

Running in the trajectory of his flight, I leapt, catching him before he hit the ground.

“...Are you. All right?”

Edel, however, insisted he was fine, and I should do more than just running around catching flying mice.

You terribly cheeky thing... I suppose I should appreciate his vigor. I began healing his wounds with divinity, but he didn't seem to have any injuries. Come to think of it, I was drained of a significant amount of power just now—not mana or spirit, but divinity.

It would appear Edel utilized the divinity he drained from me for both offensive and healing purposes. I did not recall giving him permission, but here he went again, doing it anyway. I suppose that was just how familiars were...

Do all of them simply demand and claim power from their masters as and when they feel like it? Why does our relationship feel so inversed...?

My thoughts were quickly interrupted by a series of overwhelming roars—

“Gruaaaarrgg...! Gaaarrrg! Gaaarrgg!!!”

The Tarasque's pained cries jolted me back to reality. It would seem like the beast had been running in circles all this time, the weight of its large body working against it. It possessed fearsome speed when charging straight in one direction, though it didn't seem to handle turning very well. If there was a chance for escape, it would be now.

Despite being some distance apart, I couldn't guarantee that an escape would be useful or prudent. The battle could evolve into a stalling game, with both sides waiting to see if the opponent would run out of stamina first. Or perhaps I could stall for time and heal myself?

Though, Edel needed no such rest. In any case, Edel's attack on the Tarasque seemed to have left quite the mark. The beast could no longer move its neck as freely as before.

Slowly approaching it, my attention was drawn to a plume of smoke rising from the Tarasque's open wound.

Did Edel have the capability to launch fireballs? I didn't recall seeing such a thing. No, this phenomenon was unmistakably caused by his body slam.

Is it some special ability of his?

No...that didn't seem to be the case either.

Although he glowed, that glow was brought about by my divine aura, so the Tarasque was reacting in this fashion after it had been struck with a divine attack.

Quite the hint, little mouse...

I guess a Tarasque was more vulnerable to divinity, as opposed to spirit or mana. If only I used my divine aura from the very start... The hints had been in place long before I set foot in this swamp.

Due to the habitat of the Tarasque, they hated holy water, so most adventurers in these swamps carried some as a ward. It was said that dousing oneself in holy water could make even the most ferocious Tarasques wary.

To tell the truth, I wanted to do the same, and had purchased some Holy Water for myself, but this was the unfortunate result. This was no fault of the water itself, and all things considered, I probably ended up purchasing fake holy water by accident. I spent a fair amount of coin on the preparations for this trip, and ended up skimping on certain supplies. For instance, I had purchased this holy water from a somewhat suspicious roadside store—not exactly the wisest choice.

Holy water could only be obtained from churches, and it fetched a high price. I didn't really want to set foot inside a church, at least, not with my body being what it was. This was why I purchased this relatively cheaper bottle of holy water from a roadside merchant...

I suppose one gets what one pays for. A lesson well learned.

Although I wanted to make a supply of holy water for my own personal use, the methods involved in its creation were closely guarded by the church. My attempts at creating holy water were unsuccessful, as any aura injected into the water would only hold for a few seconds, before once again becoming normal drinking water. After several tries, I gave up. I suppose it was impossible to

create without some sort of special method.

Craaack!

A deafening crack snapped me back to attention. A nearby tree had been uprooted and tossed through the air.

The Tarasque's neck remained wounded, but its body still functioned normally, and the beast was once again hot on our trail. This time, it was spewing forth clouds of poison, not that this concerned me.

Edel, who was once again on my shoulder, didn't pay it much heed, either. To us, it was nothing more than a warm, purple cloud. In fact, its poison breathing opened itself up to attack.

I felt sorry for the environment around us, but I wasted no time diving into the cloud, quickly emerging on the other side. I was now close to the Tarasque—a bit too close for comfort, judging by its panicked attempts at retreat.

It wasn't too difficult for me to understand how it felt. I suppose I was the first poison-immune being it ever came across in its life. At the very least, a human being would require some sort of magical tool that completely nullified all sorts of poisons. But I had my Thrall constitution to thank.

Regardless, I should finish the job. Unlike my previous halfhearted blow, I would now go in for the killing blow.

I focused my divine aura, wrapping it around my sword. Reacting with the poisoned air around it, my weapon glowed a faint gold-blue, the purple haze surrounding me receding rapidly. With my surrounding visibility improved, I saw a clear path toward the Tarasque's neck.

I leaped—

With a single, decisive swing, I struck at the Tarasque's already wounded neck. In the light of my divine aura, the beast's scales melted and distorted. Unlike my attempts at slaying the beast with a mana-spirit Fusion Art, my divine-infused blade cut through the Tarasque's flesh without a sound. The resistance its soft flesh offered was much like that of lesser monsters I had encountered. This was an interesting observation...

The Tarasque put up quite a struggle. It intended to break free from the burning blade that was now in the process of removing its head from the rest of its body. But I didn't allow that to happen.

With a final burst of strength, I drove my blade into and through the beast's neck, scales, flesh, bone, and all. With a dull thud, the Tarasque's head fell to the ground.



Yet another peal of thunder echoed through the swamp as the beast's gigantic body fell to the ground. Struggling and thrashing for a few brief moments, the body of the headless Tarasque eventually fell silent. Its snake-like neck, coiled up in agony, was a disgusting sight to behold.

To think that something of this size could writhe and squirm in such a fashion; a sight I hoped to never see twice.

Probably a strange statement for me to be making, given that I had slain the Tarasque. I didn't really intend to do so in the first place, though; I blame the beast for chasing us down.

I won't apologize, monster.

Being the beast it was, the Tarasque held a magic crystal, much like all other monsters. While the position of the crystal varied between monster types, one could usually and safely assume it was near the beast's heart.

But for a Tarasque's crystal, it was buried deep within its shell, and I had no choice but to dig it out. But doing so would take a considerable amount of time, and the Swamp of Tarasque wasn't a place in which one could safely idle. It was almost warranted that another Tarasque would come trudging along while I set about my dissection work. That was something I had to avoid at all costs.

I suppose defeating one more Tarasque was possible, given that I now knew the weakness of their kind. But I had no way of knowing this until we actually fought. Though I also realized I didn't have much to fear from a Tarasque. Edel would be able to assist me as well.

The only problem in all this was the amount of strength I had left in me. Having used a large amount of divinity, I would be hard-pressed to cut off

another Tarasque's head. To make things worse, I had a considerably smaller reservoir of divinity, at least when compared to that of my mana and spirit. As a result, I often ended up using more of it, and it naturally took longer to recover.

I couldn't rely on employing the same techniques over and over again without rest. This was why I was trying to conserve my divinity, and, as a result, why I ended up using up most of it.

Quite the conundrum.

Then shall I give up on the corpse of the Tarasque, and the magic crystal within?

No. I could do no such thing.

I wouldn't do such a thing.

I was *incapable* of doing such a thing.

—I was greatly in debt. To make things worse, the orphanage's reward for me retrieving a Dragon Blood Blossom was the princely sum of one bronze coin. Despite my debt, however, I made sure to pay out of my own pocket for a very specific item before arriving at the swamp: none other than a magical pouch.

I already owned such a pouch myself, but that one was comparatively small, barely able to contain the body of an Orc. There was no way it could contain the body of a beast as large as a Tarasque.

I could just dissect the Tarasque and extract the valuable materials in it, but this wasn't a location conducive to such an effort. This was why a large-capacity pouch was needed, and why I obtained such an item before my foray into the Swamp of Tarasque.

My justification for obtaining such a pouch ahead of time, however, was much simpler: I had, as of late, taken into account my relatively terrible luck. Who, exactly, could say they were eaten by a legendary Dragon and turned into a Skeleton merely exploring a beginner's labyrinth?

If anything, I came to expect the worst from the world.

What, then, would happen if one such as myself ventured into the Swamp of Tarasque? Against all odds, I would run into a Tarasque. Yes, quite the fatalistic

vein of thinking, but it appeared that my assumptions—and gut feelings—were correct.

Maybe I obtained some sort of primal instinct after becoming a monster...

As it turned out, I had run into a Tarasque. I could even say my instinct was reasonably honed.

With that being said, this high-capacity magical pouch was just an item I had rented. A given, perhaps, considering such high-quality magical tools were worth their weight in gold. One would even be able to buy a house with the asking price of this bag.

Luckily, renting it was possible, as long as one had sufficient amounts of coin. One would think such a valuable item wouldn't be so easily rented out, but they would have to look no further than the guild, from where I rented mine. Should any adventurer be foolish enough to run off with it, the guild's trained retrieval specialists would be after them in an instant. Depending on the value of the tool in question, even Gold-or Platinum-class adventurers would be mobilized for the effort. That meant it would be difficult for any offender to live peacefully no matter the kingdom, which was why thefts of this nature were few and far between.

These thefts almost seemed to represent the infinitely dark nature of man, and possibly the world at large.

Either way, I was now armed with a means to transport the carcass of the slain Tarasque.

Its body was a goldmine of materials. Even if I excluded the proceeds from selling its magic crystal, the scales and shell of a Tarasque on their own were worth enough coins to fish me out of debt. The overall proceeds from this carcass alone would be enough for me to turn a profit, and that's taking into account the costs of this expedition.

To think I would be able to freely spend once more, and that I managed to do so with the spoils from a single battle! This was one of the many reasons as to why I couldn't stop adventuring.

This was my first time experiencing such a grand windfall over the span of the

last decade, most of which I had spent adventuring. Although I harvested a large magical crystal from the giant monster I had slain a while ago, the situation at the time meant I didn't profit from the event at all.

This time, it would be different. I opened the bag, kneeling down next to the Tarasque's carcass. I didn't mean to say I would have to somehow fit the bag over this impossibly large carcass, for that was unnecessary. One only had to allow the magical bag enough time to attach itself to the object, and before long it would be transported effortlessly into its bottomless depths.

Most convenient tools indeed.

Even the severed head of the Tarasque was valuable, so I dutifully allowed the bag to consume it as well. If memory served, its eyeballs, brain, and poison glands were of some value as well.

Having finished my task, I took a quick stroll around the premises, mainly to verify if there were any other monsters in the immediate vicinity. As expected, there were a few Goblins hiding in the bushes, hoping to scavenge for leftovers, I suppose.

To them, the body of a Tarasque contained many important crafting materials. One only had to observe a Swamp Goblin to discover they weren't picky about the materials they used. Anything was fair game, even shattered fragments of Tarasque scales and shells. This was then weaved together in a haphazard fashion.

A perfect opportunity to observe the swamp's ecosystem, and the everlasting cycle of life and death that permeated its reaches. I, however, picked up a series of stones from the ground, hurling them with all my might at the Goblins in question. While this may seem cruel, I was merely acting in self-defense, for the Goblins had already started drawing their bows, pointing them in my general direction.

The rocks, fanning out in a wide arc, caught one particularly unfortunate Goblin between the eyes. Witnessing the sudden collapse of their compatriot, the other Goblins promptly scattered. Not a single Goblin stopped to help their fallen friend, and the unfortunate Goblin remained shivering on the ground for some time before finally getting back up. Shaking its head rapidly, it limped

after its companions in a panicked fashion.

A heartwarming, or somewhat amusing, scene. I felt some stability return to my nerves, my psyche decidedly frayed after my encounter with the Tarasque.

Then, without warning, the fish-monster who had thrown me out of the poison lake arose from the depths once more, snatching up several of the escaping Goblins before disappearing again under the waves. The only surviving Goblin was the one stunned by the rock I had tossed.

Just the laws of the jungle...

Thinking about it, I realized this was more or less the status quo in these lands.

Apparently stunned by what just transpired before its eyes, the lone Goblin stood, seemingly at a loss. Staring at its silhouette, I couldn't help but wonder if it felt a sense of despair. Would it feel pity for the loss of its friends, given that they had abandoned him to his fate mere moments ago?

Such was the way of the world.

I suppose I should move on; I still had a Dragon Blood Blossom to find.

Affirming there was now a fair amount of distance between myself and the lone Goblin, who had at some point decided to retreat into the swamp, I returned to my search. Needless to say, I moved cautiously and slowly, not wanting to encounter another Tarasque.

Luckily, I didn't run into any more dangerous beasts, perhaps in part due to my cautious advance. Plus, the outcome of my battle affirmed that Tarasques did indeed dislike holy water. Along that vein of thought, I suppose I could assume they disliked divinity in general, and would avoid sources of it whenever possible.

I shrouded myself in a faint divine aura, slowly advancing through the swamp once more.



Having finally exited the Tarasques' territory, I found myself in a truly breathtaking place, and was momentarily lost for words.

Given that the Swamp of Tarasque was filled with poisonous gas, water, plants, and monsters, one would assume it was an unbridled hellscape. A reasonable assumption, to say the least. After all, the only individuals who set foot in the swamp were fearless adventurers, and those who weren't quite as right in the head. Townsfolk and other more mundane folk would hardly dream of approaching it in the first place.

One would also assume that the very depths and heart of the swamp played host to the most dangerous of monsters and the most potent of poisons. While it was logical to think this way, what I saw before me defied that logic.

Yes... This must be true beauty...

I never imagined such a sight was possible, and within the Swamp of Tarasque of all places. It was undoubtedly a paradise.

Before me was a beautiful pond, with waters so clear I could see the bedrock beneath. Crimson flowers ringed the waterside, with the occasional petal falling and floating on the water's surface. The flowers surrounded and bloomed around the pond, like an army of red, loyal soldiers protecting their queen from the swamp's other flora.

Among the flowers were insects, birds, and even the occasional beast, all milling about in relative harmony. This was the last thing I expected to see at the end of a poisonous swamp.

The reason for its existence was due to the flowers. These red flowers were the very same blossoms I had been looking for:

Dragon Blood Blossoms.

These blossoms had the ability to purify and cleanse their environment, and it was these very flowers beneath my feet that were responsible for the purified bubble that I now stood in.

Although the flora and fauna within this bubble seemed protected by the Dragon Blood Blossoms, reality was much more cruel. While they could live and breathe freely within the protective bubble of the Dragon Blood Blossoms, they would die within the hour if they had somehow been transported outside of it.

A paradise, yes, but at the same time, an eternal prison.

A variety of rare birds, insects, and beasts called this prison their home, and they were worth their weight in gold if transported out of the swamp. This process would be exceedingly difficult, given that one would have to transport the organism out from this bubble of clean air and into the poison of the swamp that surrounded it. Just transporting one creature was a tremendous undertaking, as one had to retain a relatively pure area of air around oneself at all times. Certain magical tools could achieve this, as well as some specific types of wind magic, when indefinitely maintained by a mage with high reserves of mana in their being.

While one could expect a certain degree of recognition for such a feat, the effort involved often dwarfed the rewards. This was why the ecosystem of this fragile bubble had been largely maintained.

If someone did manage to damage one of the few ecosystems in which Dragon Blood Blossoms could thrive, they would surely come under fire from a multitude of groups and organizations. As long as one was careful with the way they harvested the flowers, there wouldn't be any lasting damage. Dragon Blood Blossoms possessed a particular zeal for life, and they would often regenerate any damaged portions relatively quickly. A testament to this was that said blossoms grew here, of all places, along with the fact that they had the ability to absorb poisons in the environment, converting it all into life energy. This was most likely why it had taken root here, among the multitude of poisonous gases, beasts, and Tarasques.

The carcass of a Tarasque did give off tremendously poisonous gases while decomposing, and this was one of the many reasons why the swamp was so polluted. This also led to a strange gathering of organisms that fed off the poison, eventually culminating in this strange wonderland amidst the poisonous fog.

The Tarasques truly were the pillar of the swamp ecosystem; if they didn't exist, neither would these Dragon Blood Blossoms before me. Ironical, considering the legend behind these flowers, and the fact Tarasques were distant relatives of Dragons.

...Maybe I should return to the task at hand. Lorraine would be far more suited than I when it came to explaining such concepts.

Now, to fulfill the details of the request....

I put one foot forward, stepping into a crimson garden. I briskly walked through the flowers; brutish, but such damage was well within the regenerative means of these blossoms.

According to a tome I once chanced upon, a Dragon Blood Blossom would recover in a day even if violently crushed underfoot. This was a necessary measure, if only to rid my boots of the poisonous mud that clung to them.

The gathering of the blossoms was easy, as one only had to dig up the entire plant, roots and all. Even though one could cut and retrieve only the stem, such a method would result in the loss of some fluid. This would essentially defeat the purpose of my current excursion.

Given the troublesome nature of this entire affair, one would wonder if it was possible to just transplant some of these flowers in a safe location, periodically feeding them with concentrated Tarasque poison. It had been attempted before, but such flowers hardly turned red, and they couldn't be used to produce Dragon-Flower Blood.

Instead, beautiful white flowers would bloom, albeit without any healing or medicinal properties. Known as White Dragon Blossoms, these flowers were purely ornamental, and they didn't have any other known use... But I suppose that was just how things were.

Kneeling down, I dug out a fair amount of earth, pulling out a bunch of flowers with their roots and all. Wrapping the extracted dirt in some cloth, I opened the magic bag once more, gently placing the flowers within its depths.

I could have picked only the one flower, but several thousand of the plants bloomed here, and a few's absence would hardly be felt. This patch of earth would probably be overgrown with Dragon Blood Blossoms again in a little under a week.

Having come this far, I already had plans for the spare flowers, where some would make their way to the florist, and some others, to the apothecary.

In life, I once thought of the benefits of owning such a medicine, and this sentiment was shared by my fellow adventurers. I would, of course, sell these at

a suitably high price. Young couples who wished to propose to each other in particularly romantic ways could take a trip to the florist, while those who needed special medication could purchase some from Maalt's apothecary.

Even so, I wasn't too greedy, taking care to only harvest about ten stalks. This was more than enough, and once again I couldn't help but feel indebted to this high-capacity magical bag.

Come to think of it, this was the first time I had managed to gather Dragon Blood Blossoms with my own hands. Given that there was no way I could have possibly gathered these flowers in life, I felt a little happy at the accomplishment.

"...Ouch."

I felt a pinprick of pain run up my finger while digging through the ground, but if memory served correctly, Dragon Blood Blossoms didn't have thorns.

Curious, I examined a nearby flower closely, only to find that a numbing sensation ran through my finger when I touched a petal. Some sort of self-defense mechanism, I surmised. It was only natural, given how it survived in such an environment.

Having finished my harvest, I stood up, dusting myself off. All that was left now was to return to the pickup point, return to Maalt, and hand a flower to Alize. Her herbalist friend would visit, and then my job would be done.

I began making my way back to the entrance of the path, only to be greeted with a silhouette in the distance.

An enemy...? No, not quite. It didn't seem like a Goblin, and there were no other humanoid monsters in the Swamp of Tarasque.

An adventurer of sorts, I suppose.

Even so, I had to be cautious. Under certain circumstances, adventurers could very well draw their blades on each other. While adventurer cards were easily found in the confines of the Labyrinth, fighting in a place like the Swamp of Tarasque could very well result in the evidence of one's demise sinking into the poisonous depths.

More than enough of a reason to be cautious, so I drew my blade once more, steadying my stance as I waited, until I was able to see the whites of their eyes...

To be continued...



Afterword

Hello, everyone, it's been quite a while.

I'm Yu Okano.

At least, that's what I would have wanted to say. Book two is out sooner than I expected, but it hasn't actually been that long, has it?

Recently, I have fallen into quite the self-deprecating slump. With the publication of this book, and the readers' generous purchases (and subsequent reading of my work), I am encouraged to continue working hard.

I never thought I would become a novelist at all, but before I knew it, I had this book in my hands. I think this is a really fortunate thing—a blissful feeling, really. If possible, I wish these days would go on forever. It's not that simple, though. Hard work has to be built upon day after day, and one has to work earnestly until their dreams come true.

On another note, I have recently begun thinking about how novels are written. The methods vary from person to person, as some plan it out and all that, while for some others, the entire story just falls out of the sky and into their head one day. Personally, I definitely feel like I am more of the latter. If this happened every day, it would be great. Of course, things don't always go according to plan.

In the end, I guess writing a bit every day and then having some story bits just appear in one's mind is the best way to go about it—to always be prepared and not let a moment of inspiration escape.

And so, for as long as possible, I intend to work to the best of my ability, and to entertain my readers as I do so. This is Okano, signing off. I hope that you will continue enjoying my work from here on out.

Bonus Short Stories

End of the Road

“Not exactly something I’d like to find on a daily basis...”

This happened back when I still drew breath; back when Rentt Faina was still in the realm of the living.

Back then, I was more or less known as the thousand-year Bronze-class adventurer, and would head into the Labyrinth of the Moon’s Reflection on a daily basis. My routine was, more often than not, very similar to now: I would hunt a few monsters, collect their materials and magic crystals, trade my pitiful spoils over the guild counter, and go to bed with only a little pocket change to call my own.

Those were the days, when one day faded into another, each more or less similar to the one before it.

On this day, however, that sense of regularity was shattered by a certain object I had found...

“An adventurer’s card, huh. Let’s see... Bronze-class. Gott Rangul.”

It was a commonly known fact that one’s adventurer card would remain in the labyrinth, especially if one were to lose their life. Even if the labyrinth consumed them, this card alone remained, unscathed. Given enough time, even weapons and armor would vanish into these mysterious halls. An adventurer’s card, however, was eternal.

As such, an adventurer’s fate was somewhat black and white in nature. One day, someone somewhere would find a card much like this one, and understand that its owner had fallen in battle. It may take days, years, and in some extreme cases, centuries. In fact, cards from as long as tens of centuries ago were occasionally discovered, as far as the legends and rumors go, anyway.

It was due to this system that adventurers had come to a strange

understanding with death. The thought that one's demise may eventually be discovered and reported by a fellow adventurer after a certain amount of time was strangely reassuring. One no longer felt alone in death, which was a strange privilege in and of itself.

Ancient adventurer cards aside, most of us didn't wish to chance upon another adventurer's card, if only because it would mean that said adventurer had met their end. Usually, surviving relatives often believed their kin was still alive someplace, just lost, or unable to return. The discovery of an adventurer card, however, quashed all those notions. A card found in the labyrinth's halls symbolized an undeniable death; though there were rare cases in which the owner had simply misplaced or lost it, such occurrences were few and far between.

Most other adventurers chose to pick up such a card should they ever come across one, the reason being they would be rewarded for their efforts. Although it wasn't a large reward by any means, it was more than enough for one to have a fancy dinner with. A grim outlook, but finding a fallen adventurer's card was much like finding loose change on the ground.

While some may view it as nothing more than that, I felt adventurers had a duty to inform the next of kin. The reward in question was also directly proportionate to the adventurer's rank, so one would have to find an adventurer card above Bronze-class to be awarded any significant sum of coin. As such, most adventurers did it out of duty and compassion, and I, too, felt the same way.

This card in my hands was to be delivered to the guild, whereupon I would most likely be tasked with informing any surviving relatives this adventurer may have. This was an official guild request, and one was awarded appropriately for their efforts. But, it was almost always a difficult undertaking, and it was common for most adventurers to refuse the task outright. In some cases, the task was outsourced to another more willing adventurer instead.

But I felt it was important for me to relay what I had found in person, along with all the relevant details of where I found the card to begin with.

A heavy atmosphere surrounded me.

“I should still see it through, though...”

I made my way back to Maalt.



“Yes...? Who is it?”

The small house before me was located outside the walls of Maalt. It was a warm-looking home, with a tidy yard filled with flowers, decorative planters, and a polished, caramel-colored door.

The woman who greeted me had a homely feel about her, exuding the same kind of warmth as this charming little house did.

I felt my chest tighten up, in light of what I was about to tell her...

“I am Rentt Faina...here on an official request from the guild. I have come to deliver this to you on this day...”

I withdrew a small, wooden box from my bag. These wooden boxes were of a markedly high quality, and were specifically used to house the cards of fallen adventurers. This was common knowledge among adventurers that this woman, presumably Gott’s wife, probably knew as well.

Her eyes widened at the sight of the box, and before long, silent tears streamed down her face.

“I... I see. Thank you... For taking the time...to bring this to me. Please... do come inside.”

Despite her obvious shock and sorrow, the woman promptly composed herself, inviting me into her abode.

I refused.

To her, I must be nothing more than an emissary of Death itself. To think she would invite me inside!

The woman, however, would have it no other way, and I eventually found myself reluctantly relenting.



“A most lively child you have, I see.”

The interior of the abode was filled with cheerful children's drawings, along with some scattered toys and other childish creations.

The woman—Lily was her name—nodded.

“Yes. She turns five this year... This was why I told him to stop adventuring, and find a more sensible line of work... Ah, I do apologize, I didn't mean to offend...”

I knew more than anyone else she didn't mean to belittle adventuring as a career, so I shook my head slowly.

“Please, madam, pay no mind. It is as you say. I...empathize deeply with your loss.”

“I...”

For a while, we both sat, an uncomfortable silence between us. I couldn't stay long, and eventually began explaining the circumstances and details surrounding the discovery. Tears continued streaming down Lily's face as she listened to what I had to say.

Finally done with my report, I lowered my head as a sign of respect.

“Thank you, so much. If you didn't find him...Gott would've been all alone this whole time... With this, I can finally mourn in peace.”



As I exited the house, I could only think of returning to my rented room.

“Ah! Hey, Big Brother! Did you need to speak with Mom about something?”

It was a child's voice; Lily's only child, perhaps.

Turning around, I was greeted by a cheerful looking girl. I suppose she still knew nothing yet.

I knelt down, patting her on the head. “No...it's nothing,” I said, vaguely shaking my head back and forth.

The girl, still cheerfully smiling, began gesturing animatedly as she laid eyes upon my sheathed sword.

“Oh! Are you an adventurer, Big Brother? Mei's dad is one, too! He's really

strong, you know? He even beat a Slime the other day! And then...”

I could only patiently listen to the girl’s cheerful monologue, doing my best to respond convincingly at the appropriate intervals. At the end, Mei stopped, seemingly worn out. Before we parted ways, she asked me to promise to say hello if I ever met her father. I nodded.

As I lay on my bed that night, a mix of turbulent emotions rose up from deep within my heart.

Will I meet my end, much like Gott did? Even so...

Even so, I could not—would not—stop adventuring.

What were Gott’s last thoughts as he lay dying on the cold, hard ground of the labyrinth? I suppose no one would possibly ever know. I soon closed my eyes, drifting silently into the world of dreams.

A Promise with the Map Merchant

“Sigh... I suppose this is enough for today.”

I no longer knew how many hours had passed since I set foot inside the Labyrinth of the Moon’s Reflection. All I knew was that I had successfully slain a grand total of three Water Sprites. This was more than enough to cover my expenses as a Bronze-class adventurer.

Although I began adventuring quite some time ago, I found it somewhat pathetic that I was still hunting in a place like this. At the same time, however, the fact that I still had all my limbs and faculties after so many years of solo adventuring was worth acknowledging. Most other adventurers were forced to retire for some reason or other some years into their career.

While some may think my relatively healthy state was a result of cowardice, I didn’t feel it prudent to recklessly expose myself to danger. This, at the very least, was a responsibility I had toward myself.

On the other hand, I suppose this was why I didn’t grow very much as an adventurer at all... Well, maybe that would be remedied with time.



“Ah, I see you are quite done, Mister Rentt Faina!”

Upon leaving the depths of the labyrinth, I found myself confronted with a rather peculiar greeting.

Normally, the entrance would be relatively deserted, or only populated by a few adventurers at my level of strength. The man who greeted me didn't seem like much of an adventurer at all, however. Instead, he was draped from head to toe in a pitch black robe. What a strange little man.

“And you are...?”

“Oh, my apologies. I hadn't introduced myself, no? I am Jack. Jack the Map Merchant...”

A familiar name, and an even more familiar profession.

“Jack the Map Merchant...? That's you? I've heard you sell good maps; however...I've also heard no one ever runs into you under normal circumstances.”

The man before me was, without a doubt, the most well-known map merchant in all of Maalt. Despite this, Jack couldn't be easily found, and seemed to take on a variety of faces and forms.

Jack merely chuckled in response.

“Those individuals haven't merely searched hard enough! What I seek... Yes... What I seek are good adventurers...”

In other words, Jack wasn't only concerned with strength, but adventurers who displayed certain niche skills.

But...

“All right, then what does someone like you want with someone like me? I suppose you already know, but I'm just a two-bit adventurer who could never make it past Bronze-class.”

That was just how things were, but Jack just shook his hooded head.

“No, no! You are a good adventurer, yes yes. The proof is right there, in that map you made... It is even better than my own map of the Moon's Reflection! I

inquired hundreds of skilled adventurers... Yes, they prefer your mapping skills over mine... Even though I am a skilled Map Merchant, yours is still a step above.”

I felt a bit surprised; to think so many of my colleagues felt that strongly about my map.

I suppose there was some merit to it... If there was one thing I was confident about, it would be my personally annotated map of the Moon’s Reflection.

And yet, where exactly did Jack learn of my map? I didn’t recall giving it out for free.

As if anticipating my question, Jack continued his explanation. “You have, after all, helped mark the maps of many fledgling adventurers, yes? And in some of those markings, you highlighted traps and hidden passages even I did not know about!”

“I see... Well then, are you here to maybe purchase my map? Or something along those lines?”

If that were indeed the case, it would be quite a windfall, though I wouldn’t exactly be against it.

The Labyrinth of the Moon’s Reflection was well-explored, and most adventurers would have a map of it by now, though. Yet Jack still chose to approach me—I suppose he had some ideas in mind.

“Yes, well... That is part of it, yes. I do have a request... Could you come to my humble abode?”

Saying so, he left directions to a dwelling located deep within Maalt’s back alleys, and then vanished without a word.

Quite suspicious...

“Well... If he really will purchase my map, I may as well pay him a visit.”



“Is this...really the place...?”

Those were the words that escaped my lips as I stood before the marked

building. It was shabbier than I imagined it to be. This place didn't seem like very much of a shop at all.

Stepping through the doorway...

"This... This is amazing..."

"Yes, yes. Isn't it?" a voice rang out in response from behind me—it was none other than Jack.

"I suppose only you have this many maps to yourself! Well, in Maalt, at least."

I truly meant what I said, for the interior of the shop was stuffed full of maps: from the ground to the ceiling, and in every nook and cranny. The old and the new, small maps and large maps; some maps even displayed geography I didn't recognize, most likely maps of foreign lands.

"I can't imagine how someone such as yourself would need to purchase *my* map."

That was what I wanted to say, but Jack interrupted me before I even uttered a word.

"Come now. Nothing of the sort! I have said so before. I desire good adventurers."

"And just what do you mean, exactly...?" Jack's statement was strangely-worded.

"I do not want pity...so I shall speak simply. My father was an adventurer, a long, long time ago, yes. But now, he has gone missing. I wish for you to search... Yes, to search for his adventurer's card."

A request I had heard more than once. Maybe this was why Jack mentioned his request so casually. Although his carefree demeanor remained, I could see a sense of determination deep within his eyes.

"I do not mind." I nodded.

"You accept much too easily, no?"

"I don't want you of all people to tell me that... But, you do understand the limit of my abilities, right? I don't think it should be too hard..."

Jack nodded, explaining the details of his situation.

According to Jack, his father disappeared within a certain labyrinth while plumbing its depths. But Jack had no idea where that labyrinth was. While the specifics of the event weren't known, Jack's father had reported that the adventurers in his party perished within the labyrinth, shortly before passing away himself. Although the guild itself made inquiries into the circumstances, Jack's father had entered another labyrinth by his lonesome after reporting his comrade's demise, and then disappeared altogether without a trace.

"The circumstances are far too vague..."

"Yes, yes. This is why I became a Map Merchant. If I continued mapping labyrinths, I would eventually be able to follow after my father's footsteps... At least, I hope to be able to."

A strange motivation, but not exactly one that was flawed.

But by making arrangements with adventurers in this fashion, there was a higher possibility that someone would eventually find his father's card. Adventurer cards were designed to never be absorbed by a labyrinth. It would eventually be found, and if not by my hand, then someone else's.

"Quite the long story...but all right, I understand. I have no idea when or where I would come across it, but I accept the request."

"Oh, is that so? Well then...I leave it in your capable hands, yes. In exchange...I shall purchase your map for a good price, yes?"

"I appreciate that. Then...would I be able to purchase maps from you when I need them, as well?"

"Of course... When you do wish to purchase a map from me in the future, simply say... 'Sell me a map'. I will not respond if you say anything else... Remember this, yes?"

"A code phrase of some kind, huh? I understand. I'm counting on you, too, Jack."

Although I didn't know it at the time, my strange friendship with Jack would eventually come to greatly benefit me in the future...

He who Paints Death

“Is this spot all right?”

“Yes... Yes! This scenery... This is what I wanted to see!”

The young man pulled some art supplies out of his bag, before setting down the canvas that he painstakingly carried all the way here unto the ground.

Before long, he started painting. His concentration and aura were intimidating, enough to scare away even the most seasoned of adventurers.

He was a painter, and his name was Roy. Born and raised in Maalt, his works had become popular in the capital as of late. In the last few days, he returned to Maalt from the capital, with only about three months left to live.



“No one... No one accepted my request. But...you would?”

Laying on his bed, Roy turned to me, his face pale and tired. I, Rentt Faina, nodded in response.

“Yes. You wish to see the Swamp of Tarasque up close...or, as close as possible, right? I should tell you, though...we can’t enter. If we did, your three months would shorten into thirty seconds instantly... What exactly are you traveling there for? The only detail written in your request was the need for an escort.”

“Well...you see, I am a painter... Quite popular in the capital, despite how I look now. If I kept going...my name would be immortalized in the Royal Academy of Art...”

“That really is something else. I do find it curious, though...”

It wasn’t wrong for a skilled painter to be somewhat prideful, but I didn’t understand why Roy would go to such lengths a few months from his deathbed. There was no pressing need for him to prove himself, so I suppose his words were true.

The Royal Academy of Art only took the best artists in the land as its members. To be considered an academy member was one of the highest

honors any artist could achieve. To think Roy had come this far in his youth... He truly was a genius.

Even though he didn't have much time left, I felt he should make better use of what remained of his life, instead of wandering so dangerously close to a bog full of poisonous gas.

"I have always been...drawing the same subject matter, as an artist. I have been drawing and painting...the lives of people. Now that I, too, am at the end of my journey...I want to paint the opposite of that. Death... I wish to paint death, and there is no better place for this than the Swamp of Tarasque. The people of Maalt call it the 'Swamp of Death,' do they not?"

"The Swamp of Death,' huh. Yes, I suppose they do..."

Any normal animal or plant would perish in less than thirty seconds if it were somehow transported into the swamp. It was truly a terrible place. If anything, that was where the ichor of death itself pooled.

"Well...I suppose I could take you. You may think less of me for saying this, but...should you perish halfway into the excursion, I would like to be exempt of all responsibility."

"Yes, yes, of course. I have prepared my will here as well...and have arranged it so that my untimely death, should it does happen, would not get you into any trouble with the guild. Please, do not worry."

It would seem like Roy was genuinely determined. Since he had gone that far, there was no reason for me to reject his request.

And so it came to be that we headed off to the Swamp of Tarasque several days later, having prepared what we needed for the trip.



The shaking of the horse-carriage took quite a toll on Roy's already frail body. The painter would occasionally cough up blood, but never once did he ask me to turn back.

Holding onto a large canvas like it was his worldly treasure, Roy kept silent as the carriage slowly approached the Swamp of Tarasque. Nearing it as much as

possible, we eventually reached a point that satisfied Roy.

Against the stench of the swamp, a normal cloth mask was useless. Instead, Lorraine had prepared a special filter, created with a mixture of holy water, ashes, and spices. This was then attached to a cloth mask we fitted over our faces. Even so, the mere act of inhaling burnt my lungs. I promised Lorraine I wouldn't perish on this trip, but...

“Hey, are you all right?”

Roy, as if deaf to my queries, merely continued painting. His entire being was focused on his canvas, and the image of the swamp before him.

I, too, turned to the swamp. Death was indeed reflected in its surface, as the bodies of slain monsters littered the muck, slowly dissolving into the poisonous depths.

Rotten wood, bones, and remains that would one day disappear...

It was an almost calm, gentle depiction of the decay of death, and the natural order of things.

This was the sight that Roy had engraved onto the canvas. His hands continued moving, until he finally stopped, taking a step backward. Immediately, Roy collapsed, the last of his strength seemingly leaving him. I caught the ailing painter in my arms, who had indeed finished his painting. Carrying both Roy and his completed canvas, I made my way back to the carriage.

“Mister Rentt... I... I painted it...”

That was all Roy said as we returned to Maalt—and those were his very last words.



“And this is the painting from that time...?”

An art exhibition was being held in Maalt, featuring distinguished art pieces from the Royal Academy of Art. Much time had passed since Roy's death...

I, too, had experienced death, and was now an undead. This scenery, however, was still fresh and unchanged in my mind.

As per his will, I had returned the completed painting to the Royal Academy of Art, and Roy was posthumously declared an honored member. An honored member of the academy was treated in a way that saints were treated by members of the church. I suppose that was due to the overwhelming sense of wonder this painting instilled in the average person.

Standing next to me was Lorraine, a faint smile on her lips as she continued observing the painting. It would seem Lorraine understood Roy's intent.

"The 'Swamp of Tarasque'... Yes... This lingering sense of death... Very well portrayed indeed. Especially this small figure in the foreground... Gives the painting a somewhat mysterious charm. The painter who wanted—needed—to paint, even upon the pain of death... And the bony God of Death next to him, about to reap his life as he finished his last work..."

Just as Lorraine said, the painter was Roy. Death probably represented myself.

Was Roy possibly hallucinating at the time? Or did he see something else in those poisonous fumes, leading to this very painting?

No one would ever be able to answer this question.

Regardless, the painting seemed to communicate that death waits for no one; that death cares little about who it takes; that death was the great equalizer. This was what I felt as I gazed upon the aged canvas.

"Have you heard, Rentt? The Death God motif is really picking up in the capital. To think this painting was the start of it all!"

"...And I am the... Model. What a strange... Feeling."

"You see how I have an eye for these things, Rentt? Back then, you were steeped in death. Much like how you are...right now..." Lorraine said, smiling to herself quietly.

I couldn't deny her words. Here I was, an adventurer that foolishly rushed to his death. Dead, and now walking in undeath.

Perhaps my true nature was reflected in this very painting.

What would Roy paint now, upon seeing my current form...?

I could not help but wonder...

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The Unwanted Undead Adventurer: Volume 2

by Yu Okano

Translated by Shirley Yeung Edited by Kris Swanson

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