

thirteenth
13

Author
Yu Okano

Illustrator
Jaian



The cover features a dynamic illustration. In the upper left, a hooded figure with a skeletal mask and a white fur collar is shown. To their right, a blonde woman with a green and yellow braided necklace looks on. In the foreground, a man with long white hair and a blue cloak is depicted in a dynamic pose, holding a large sword that glows with a bright purple light. He has a small 'X' mark on his forehead and a shield-shaped pendant on a chain around his neck. The background is dark with golden architectural details, and the bottom of the cover is filled with bright, fiery orange and yellow light effects.

The Unwanted Undead Adventurer

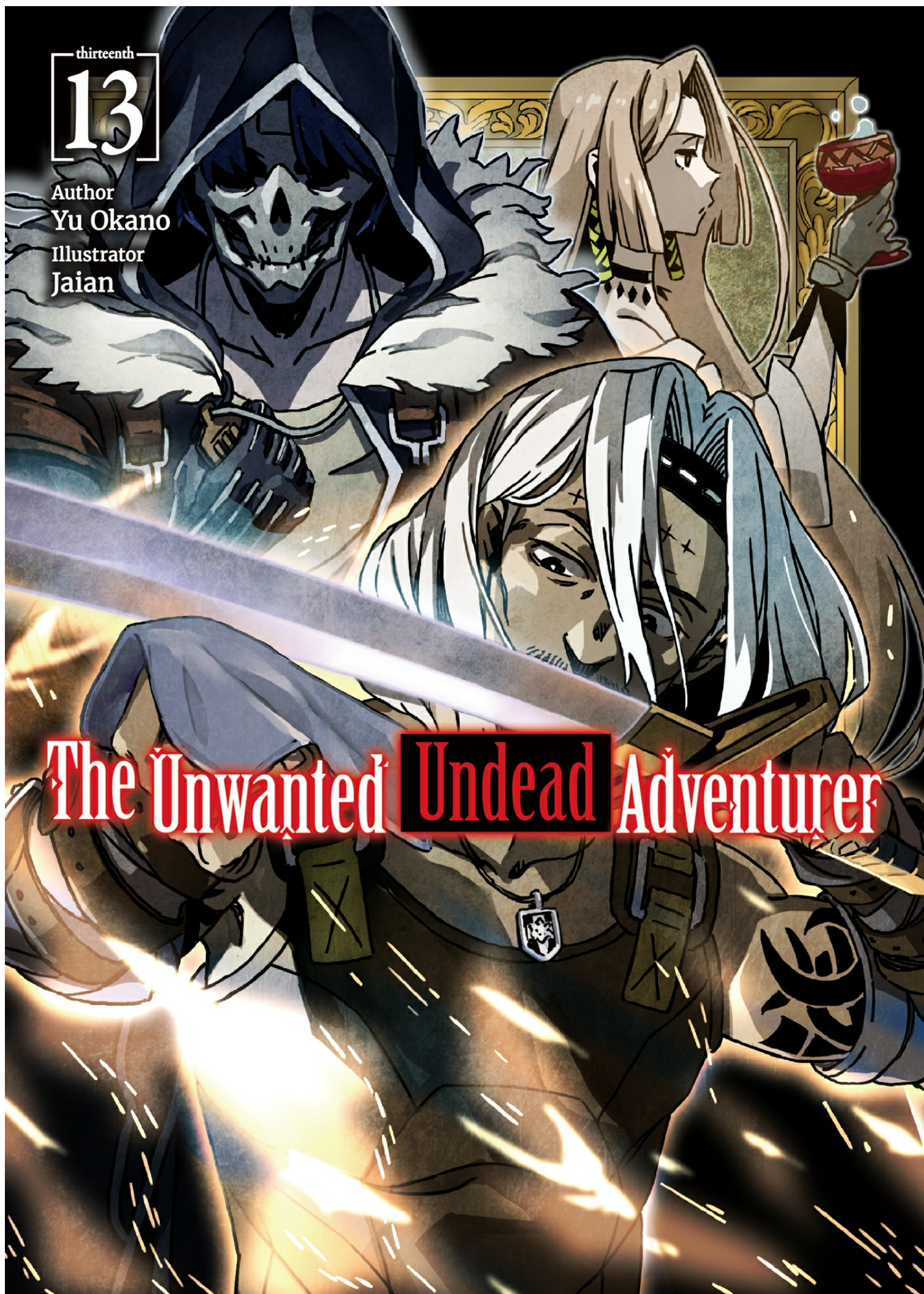
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VS. Skeleton Knight

Yeah, it didn't look like ordinary methods were going to cut it. Once again, the skeleton knight repelled my overhead swing. Supposedly they possessed no thoughts or emotions, but that didn't mean they couldn't learn—even a creature like that could grow stronger with experience. Just now, it had remembered my strike and come up with a countermeasure on the spot.

“All right,
Edel, take the
slimes to my
laboratory—
and be careful.”
“Sgreak!”



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The Unwanted Undead Adventurer

Author Yu Okano

Illustrator Jaian



Characters



Sheila Ibarss

A guild receptionist.
Privy to Rentt's secret.



Lorraine Vivie

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



Rentt Faina

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



Edel

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



Alize

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



Rina Rupaage

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



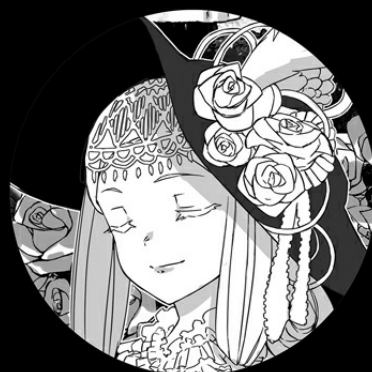
Wolf Hermann

The Maalt guildmaster.
Recruited Rentt to his guild.



Isaac Hart

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



Laura Latuule

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



Nive Maris

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



Gharb Faina

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



Capitan

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



Wilfried Rucker

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



Jinlin

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



Myullias Raiza

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

Summary

Rentt, the eternal Bronze-class adventurer, became undead after he was eaten by a dragon. Eventually, he used the unique monster trait called Existential Evolution to become a ghoul. After Rina, a new adventurer, helped him leave the dungeon, he ended up living with Lorraine in the city of Maalt under a false name, once again aiming to achieve his dream of becoming a Mithril-class adventurer. After completing a commission to exterminate the skeletons lurking in a small village, Rentt discovers a natural cave while searching for the source of the monsters. Just as he suspected, he runs into more skeletons inside. Rentt immediately sets about cleaning them up, but what will he find waiting for him at the cave's end...?

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Intermission: At a Certain Castle...

Chapter 2: A Report and a Request from a Blacksmith

Chapter 3: The Cup and the Monster Tamer

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Chapter 1: A Strange Monster and a New Find

“Things have gotten a lot more lively...”

After purging the village of skeletons, I spent a night keeping watch to ensure no more of them could enter. In the meantime, Rivul and the village headman Jiris were going around to all the other villages and towns to inform the evacuees that the skeletons had been taken care of.

Day broke and, come noon, they made their return. To my surprise, they weren't alone: the village's original occupants had tagged along with them, teary-eyed and weeping. It wasn't everyone from the village, of course—just the young, able men and their wives—but they planned for the children and elderly to trickle back in as the village recovered.

Jiris commented that some evacuees likely wouldn't return, choosing instead to settle in the towns or villages they'd escaped to. The majority *would* come back, though, which spoke to how much they loved their home.

Currently, I was helping them bring the village back to life. That being said, it was just simple work for the time being: repairing the fencing around the area, gathering the debris from damaged buildings, and sorting out what was still usable, that sort of thing. It looked like we'd be able to get enough done to at least ensure everyone who returned today would have a roof over their heads tonight.

“It's all thanks to you, Rentt,” Rivul said, carrying a plank into the village's center plaza. It had probably been part of some house's wall.

“Just doing my job,” I replied. “Besides, the real recovery effort is just beginning. It won't be easy...but seeing how many people came back today, I guess you'll be fine.”

Around twenty or so people had returned so far. That was a quarter of the village's original population of around eighty, and more would come tomorrow. Naturally, it wasn't realistic to expect everyone would return after only a day or

two—it was surprising enough that a full fourth of the population was already back. If someone told me the village would make a full recovery, I'd believe them.

"Luckily, most of the houses weren't majorly damaged, and the fields were left unharmed too," Rivul said. "We'll do just fine. Did we escape more serious destruction because it was only skeletons?"

"That'd be my guess," I agreed. "If it had been mainly wolf-species monsters, your fields would have gotten torn up, and goblins or slimes would've done a number on the houses."

The monsters I'd listed were the most common types that assailed human villages. Wolf-species monsters came in many shapes and sizes, but generally they were all motivated by finding food, and to accomplish that goal they would uproot fields or even devour the villagers themselves. Goblin-species monsters acted similarly, raiding food stores and dismantling houses to find materials for their own dwellings. If they managed a complete takeover, they'd usually strip the village down to its bones.

Slime-species monsters didn't raid in the same way, but since they could dissolve and eat anything and everything, they could consume a whole village—fields, houses, and all—and reduce it to a barren wasteland.

All of these monsters could be described as humanity's natural enemies. That was why there was a long history of people learning how to fight them.

One might think that dragons or chimeras were the more dangerous types of monster, but large creatures like those rarely left their own domains. Looking back through the ages, it was actually the small fry such as goblins that were always at odds with humanity, fighting over places to live.

That was how humanity had managed to survive to the present day. If dragons and chimeras had been attacking us every day, we would've gone extinct a long time ago.

Of course, in the modern age, humanity had ways to fight back. That hadn't been true of our ancestors, though. The only reason our species had managed to claw its way to survival despite its weak physical abilities was that we possessed slightly more intelligence than the other animals of the world.

Humans really were fundamentally weak creatures, huh...

“Yeah, that makes sense,” Rivul said. “I’ve heard what other monsters can do to a village. Sounds like we were pretty lucky, then.”

“In that sense, I guess you were...” I replied. “Though, from a timing perspective, you could call yourself *unlucky* too, given all the trouble you went through trying to hire an adventurer in Maalt.”

“Not at all! You ended up accepting, didn’t you? I count that as good luck, especially now that you’re going out of your way to help when you don’t need to.”

Rivul was talking about how I was assisting with repairing the village. He wasn’t wrong—none of that had been included in the details of the commission, so I would be perfectly within my rights to kick back and laze around the headman’s house right now. I couldn’t imagine myself actually doing that, though.

“No, I consider this part of the job too,” I said.

“Huh?”

“Sure, I cleared out all the skeletons, but I’m fairly certain this isn’t over. There’s a good chance more will come knocking. We need to shore up the village’s defenses in preparation.”

“I...guess you’re right. There *were* more skeletons when we arrived compared to when I left to submit the commission. They’ve gotta be coming in from the outside.”

“There you have it. That means there’s a source somewhere out there, and it needs to be shut down. But there’s only one of me, and I couldn’t bear it if the village were overrun again while I was out there looking, so I want to do what I can to prevent that.”

“You’d really do all that for us...?”

“Of course. Why else do you think I’m killing these monsters? It’s so you all can live here. There’s no point in doing all that work if they’re just going to come back tomorrow...so let’s do our best to ensure that doesn’t happen.”

“Yes, sir!”



“I’ve got all sorts of things—just tell me what you want,” I said. “Ah, though...you’ll have to pay, of course.”

Spread out in the village plaza was an arrangement of various foods and sundries. They were the contents of my magic bag, and all told, it amounted to several wagonloads’ worth of goods.

There were also a number of odds and ends that I always kept in the bag, the kind of items that always made Lorraine say, *“Why do you even keep this thing in there...? Not that I’m not going to use it, mind you. It’s just the thing for this situation.”*

I’d forgotten why I originally put some of this stuff into the bag, but being an adventurer meant that unexpected things could come in handy at unexpected times. Others might’ve called me a hoarder, but I didn’t see any problem with my little habit.

It was important to keep everything organized, naturally, but as it happens, I was quite the orderly person when it came to this. After all, I’d been in charge of cleaning Lorraine’s place for a long time. While she’d since matured into an individual capable of doing that herself, it just took one new research project that grabbed her attention a little *too* much for the mess to start piling up.

All of that actually made me wonder if the amount of concentration or self-control a person could use in one day was fixed, just like mana or spirit.

Whatever the case, I wasn’t laying out the contents of my magic bag in the village plaza for no good reason. Given that the village had been damaged in a hundred and one different ways, I thought that some of my collection might be able to contribute to the repair effort.

Of course, I had no intention of handing it all out for free. I needed to make a living too...or, that’s what I *would* say if a lot of what I’d laid out wasn’t random bric-a-brac that I never used. Mostly, I just knew the villagers would refuse to take any of it if I didn’t ask for any compensation. Strange purchases made on the cheap could seem suspicious and not worth the trouble. With items like

these, it was easier to just make a straightforward transaction.

That was the thing about random junk, I guess. It was almost worthless and I would be happy to give it away for free, but nobody actually *wanted* things like that. The only reason it wasn't completely worthless was because one man's junk was sometimes another man's treasure. For any given item, you could always find an eccentric out there who wanted it...like me, for example.

"I didn't know adventurers could fit so much in their magic bags..." Rivul was half taken aback, half amazed as he hunted through my odds and ends. "You've got even more quantity and variety than traveling merchants."

He was focused on the tableware: plates, cups, forks, and the like. Actually, most of the villagers were focused on that too, which made sense—those were the kinds of items the skeletons had broken the most of. As one might expect, the villagers hadn't possessed any actual glassware, but they'd had a lot of ceramics, and all of that had been the first thing to go once the monsters started rampaging about.

That said, the damage wasn't all-encompassing—the majority of their tableware was wooden, after all—but whether you were in a big town or a little village like this one, people always wanted fancier pieces that they could break out for celebrations. On such occasions, it was common to use colored ceramics.

Ironically, it was actually popular among the aristocracy and big merchant families in cities to use finely carved *wooden* tableware, and they treasured such pieces. The fact that supply and demand differed everywhere was the backbone of the traveling merchant's trade.

"Just between you and me, my magic bag's bigger than the ones you usually see," I explained. "Normal ones can only hold as much as three or four leather rucksacks, and those still sell for hundreds of gold."

That was exactly the sort of magic bag I'd used in my human days. My current one would probably be priced in platinum, not gold... If it hadn't been for Nive, I could've gone my entire life without being able to purchase one like it.

If you'd asked me back then, I would've wondered if I'd actually get my money's worth out of it. These days, though, I could definitively say the answer

was “yes.” Platinum coins were above the pay grade of a Bronze classer like me, but I had no regrets about my purchase. I saw this bag as an investment in my future. Besides, I saw no point in banking platinum coins anyway. My sights were set on becoming a Mithril-class adventurer, not getting rich. I’d spend every coin I had to accomplish that goal if that’s what it took.

“Hundreds of gold?!” Rivul exclaimed. “I’d heard that adventurers earned a lot, but to think you were so wealthy...”

“Hey, don’t get the wrong idea. It took me years to save up,” I said. “It’s true that adventurers make more than your average laborer, though. The thing is, we’re constantly risking our lives to do so.”

Rivul gulped. What I’d said was the blunt truth—adventurers were the kind of people who thought the risk was worthwhile.

That wasn’t a normal way of thinking, though. To the average person, all the coin in the world wasn’t worth one’s life. In their minds, those who chose to be adventurers all had a screw or two loose.

In fact, if you asked me how loose mine were, I’d take a while to get back to you with an answer. Unlike most adventurers, who often bragged in taverns about their exploits and how many times they’d brushed up against death, I actually *had* died once—more, depending on how you counted it. I wouldn’t have ended up like this if my screws weren’t at least a *little* out of alignment.

“I can’t tell you how much I admire adventurers,” Rivul said. “Especially ones like you, Rentt. You could be out there making that kind of coin, but you still chose to accept my commission.”

“The work comes and goes, though. It’s not as if I’m never troubled for coin.”

“I suppose not. Oh! But isn’t this...?”

Rivul had been browsing as we talked, and it looked like he’d found something that caught his interest. He wasn’t looking through the tableware, but the items I’d taken from monsters.

As for the specific item that had caught his eye, it was a spear that had been wielded by one of the skeleton soldiers.



“Is something the matter?” I asked, watching Rivul pick up the spear.

It wasn’t unusual to see him pick up a weapon in and of itself. The headman had called him a skilled hunter, so it only followed that he would have more of an interest in weapons than most.

The strange part was why he’d immediately gone for the spear. The lineup only consisted of a number of knives—some cheap, mass-produced ones and others meant for cooking—and the spoils from slaying the skeletons the previous day, including their bows. The bows weren’t bad either, quality-wise, and would probably sell for a decent amount. Given his own archery skills, Rivul would have been able to see that, so I would’ve guessed that his attention would be drawn there first. However, he’d picked up the spear, piquing my interest.

After scrutinizing the weapon, Rivul satisfied my curiosity. “I’ve...seen this spear before. No, saying that doesn’t do it justice. I *know* this spear. It...it was my father’s.”

Ah. That would explain it.

There were a number of different ways in which skeletons came to be, but the most skin-crawling one was when they, for one reason or another, emerged from a deceased person’s remains.

To be fair, it wasn’t just skeletons: that was a possible origin for undead in general. Circumstances changed when you got to undead of a higher order, like vampires and such, but it was quite common for bottom-feeders like skeletons and zombies to originate from dead bodies. That was why religious organizations strictly managed graveyards, and why small villages like this one reduced the risk by holding seasonal festivals during which they entreated the spirits of the dead to move on.

Well, thanks to the Kingdom of Yaaran’s scepter, things were a little different here. The risk of undead rising was low to begin with, which in turn was why religious organizations had less influence.

In any case, since that was a possible origin for undead, it wasn’t unusual for

some to wield the weapons they'd used in life. In short, a skeleton soldier wielding Rivul's father's weapon meant...

"That skeleton soldier was your..."

"It was probably my father, yes... I doubt he ever expected that he'd end up ravaging his own village after he died. I...can't thank you enough for what you did, Rentt. Truly."

I'd lost count of the number of times he'd thanked me at this point. "You really don't need to keep thanking me," I said. "That aside...can I ask when your father died?"

I wasn't asking because I was insensitive. Well, maybe I was, a little, but definitely not to the extent that I felt the need to reopen other people's old wounds. I had asked the question because it was necessary for me to know—it could lead to finding out more about the source of the skeletons.

"About three years ago," Rivul said. "He spotted a goblin wandering the area and gathered the villagers to slay it before it could call its brethren over. A single goblin is well within a group of villagers' capabilities to fight, you see. Not only that, but my father was a skilled hunter—far more so than myself. He knew how to use a sword and spear too, on account of being a city soldier in his younger days. It was he who taught me how to use a bow."

So Rivul's father had been a city guard during his teens and twenties, then married and returned to his hometown to support his parents. It was a common story, even among adventurers. In fact, that was pretty much how it went for the majority of them who'd moved to the city from the countryside, seeking fame and fortune.

Only a small fraction could succeed, after all. The rest learned their limits and place in the world, and headed back to where they could find a modest sort of happiness for themselves.

Rivul's father must've had a similar story. But returning to your hometown, teaching your son the skills you'd mastered, and watching him grow up into a fine man? That was by no means a bad life. When someone has a legacy, they can feel at ease. That was the kind of thing happiness came from.

“It sounds like your father was a great man.”

“Rentt... Yes. As far as I’m concerned, he was the best dad anyone could ask for. In the end, though, there were some things even he couldn’t do. Especially when it came to monsters...”

“By that, do you mean...”

“Yes. It was that goblin that killed him. Except it wasn’t just one—there were more than ten of them. According to the other villagers who barely escaped with their lives, he took up the rear guard by himself to ensure everyone got away. Thanks to him, they all made it back, albeit heavily injured. I can’t count the number of times they apologized to me. They still do, sometimes.”

It was no wonder—put bluntly, it wouldn’t be incorrect to say that they had left Rivul’s father to die. The guilt must have weighed on them quite heavily. That might’ve been the better outcome, though; given the circumstances, there was every possibility they could have criticized Rivul’s father instead and justified their own actions to themselves.

The reason that hadn’t happened probably came down to who Rivul and his father were as people, as well as the villagers’ inherent natures. After all, when I had fought the skeletons, they had sworn to back me up, going so far as to say they’d even use themselves as shields for my sake.

Perhaps the villagers who had been rescued by Rivul’s father were the very same ones who’d been keeping watch over the village from behind the hill.

“That’s all in the past, though,” Rivul said. “I don’t hold a grudge against them at all. If I’d been in their place, I doubt I could have done anything different. And as sad as I am about his passing, I’m also happy that my dad was a great man until the end.”

“You’re a fine man yourself. I think I’d have held a grudge, had it been me.”

“You wouldn’t, Rentt. I can tell.”

“You think too highly of me... Back on topic, though, the fact that your father’s weapon is here means that he became a skeleton soldier. And *that* means there’s a possibility that the skeletons are coming from the place where your father passed away. In regard to his burial...”

“We weren’t able to give him one. The goblins were handled by an adventurer we hired, but since it was a good distance away from the village, the risk of monsters was too high to make the trip. I couldn’t persuade the adventurer to help either...”

“Really? Maalt’s adventurers wouldn’t have minded helping out for something like that.”

“The adventurer we asked was just a wanderer. I don’t mean to speak ill of them, but they weren’t particularly concerned with anything other than slaying the monsters...”



“Well...I can’t confidently say they did a *bad* job,” I said. “I don’t know what their circumstances were, after all.”

“As far as we were concerned, we were just grateful that they’d slain the goblins,” Rivul agreed. “Still, when I think about how that might have been the origin of the skeleton attack... We should have asked them to do more.”

Rivul was talking about his father’s burial. If they’d buried him properly back then, the recent skeleton attack might not have happened.

In many cases, once a single skeleton appeared, the number would gradually increase—either others gravitated toward the location from elsewhere, or old bones buried in the ground would reanimate, drawn to their former comrades. If Rivul’s father had been the starting point, then a proper burial would have prevented all of this.

“Well, we don’t know if your father really was the reason. I wouldn’t worry about it so much.”

“Do you really think so?”

“Yeah. Regrets come as part and parcel of life. When they show up at your door, the most efficient way to go about things is to quickly forget them and move on to whatever’s next. This goes double for us adventurers—we’ve got more regrets than you can count.”

Regrets like: if I had done this or that differently, would that villager,

comrade, or friend still be alive? I doubted there were very many adventurers who hadn't had that thought at least once. Many of us, however, also instinctively knew that if you allowed those emotions to overwhelm you, they'd drag you down into the underworld yourself one day.

So, to forget, we drank wine like water, told stupid stories about our friends who had journeyed so far away, let the painful memories slip from our minds, and from time to time stopped by their graves to pour them a drink of their own.

The wounds didn't really heal, but in our day-to-day lives, we grew used to forgetting that they were there. That was the only way people knew how to move on.

"Returning to practical matters, Rivul, while we haven't pinned down the exact reason for the skeleton attack, we *have* figured out something we need to do."

"Um...you mean we have to go to the place where my father died, right? Because there's a high chance it could be the source?"

"That's right. The issue is, I don't know where it is. I guess I could ask you to mark it on a map...but one wrong step in a forest like this will send me off track. I'd rather have a guide come with me, if possible."

Though I hadn't specified, it was obvious who I was talking about. My gaze met Rivul's—it looked like he'd picked up on my implication.

"You mean me, don't you? Okay. I'll go. I haven't been to the place myself...but I've heard about it more times than I can count."

I did not doubt that Rivul had thought about going to search for his father's remains and mementos himself in the past. However, he had likely decided against it after taking his own abilities into consideration. As someone who'd be going with him, knowing he had that sort of composure was reassuring.

During the fight with the skeletons, he too had been the only one of the villagers to maintain his calm while the others had been nervous and hasty. Perhaps seeing the monsters had reminded them of when they'd left Rivul's father behind.

In the end, no matter how people's scars faded, they *were* still there...

"That settles it, then. Don't worry about your own safety—I'll protect you at the cost of my own life."

If nothing else, I could serve as a meat shield for him any number of times. I might have some trouble coming up with explanations for my resilience, but as long as the wounds weren't excessive I'd probably be able to explain them away as being less serious than they looked.

If they *were* excessive...well, that was what I had divinity for. I could brute force the issue with my divine blessing. It likely wouldn't hold up in the face of multiple observers, but if it was just Rivul, I could pull the wool over his eyes. At least, I was pretty sure I could...

Of course, the best outcome was neither of us running into trouble and both returning unharmed. Still, one had to be prepared for the worst.

"I'll do my best to not take any unnecessary risks," Rivul said.

That was a relief to hear. The other villagers being willing to risk their lives had actually done more harm than good. "Glad to be traveling with you," I said. "Shall we set out tomorrow, first thing in the morning?"

"Okay, I'll get everything I can ready. First things first—it'd be best if we told the headman about our plans before the end of the day, right?"

At the moment, I was primarily what stood between the village and any more skeletons that showed up to attack. I couldn't up and leave without any warning; I'd have to give a proper explanation.

"Yeah. After I wrap up here, let's go to the headman."

"Okay."

As for what I was wrapping up, it was Rentt's Impromptu Emporium. There were still people browsing, so it'd be remiss of me to suddenly declare that I was closing for business. We weren't departing until tomorrow, so we could leave persuading the headman until after I'd originally planned to be done hawking my odds and ends.

"By the way, Rivul, don't you want this bow?"

I held out the archer skeleton's weapon to Rivul. Its make was pretty decent—enough that it was several notches above the ones Rivul and the villagers had used during the battle. Since he was an archer too, I figured he'd be interested in it.

"I'm interested, of course, but...the spear's more important to me," Rivul said. "I don't have enough to buy both, so..."

He wanted his father's spear, huh? I'd been considering it his from the moment he'd explained its origins, but it appeared that he thought of it as something he'd have to buy from me.

Strictly speaking, he was correct. The spoils from slain monsters belonged to the adventurers who slew them, even if they had originally belonged to other monsters or people, adventurers or otherwise. Technically, the spear *did* belong to me.

However, that was just a general principle, not a hard rule. There was room for bargaining and negotiation—there pretty much always was when it came to the rules of adventuring. As long as everyone agreed to it, nobody really minded if the rules were bent—the exception, of course, being attempted murder and the like. Besides, that was the purview of a country's laws rather than adventuring rules.

All of which was to say that as far as I was concerned, the spear already belonged to Rivul, and I wouldn't be taking any payment for it.

"While this might have been something I won from a monster, it's a memento of your father. I can't take your money for that."

"But..."

"Just take it. That'll leave you with enough to buy the bow, right? I'll even give you a discount."

"Rentt... But then you won't earn—"

"I'm not that bothered about a small difference in coin here and there. I'm not even a merchant in the first place. We'll be risking our lives together tomorrow, so it's in my best interest that you're as well equipped as you can be. Come on, take them."

I pushed both the spear and bow into Rivul's arms. He looked troubled for a few moments, but it appeared that my last reason had been enough to persuade him.

He nodded and bowed his head. "I...understand. Then I gratefully accept."



Rivul and I left the village first thing in the morning. Our objective, naturally, was to discover the source of the skeletons that had attacked the village.

After consulting the headman, Jiris, we'd decided that the village's defenses would hold for the time being—the fences had been partially rebuilt, and the young men would be making rounds of the perimeter. It couldn't put up much resistance against anything more than a few skeletons, but at least with the patrols, the villagers would have early warning, allowing them to run.

Skeletons were monsters that could fight in the dark, but that didn't mean their range of vision was particularly good. If the young men acted as the rear guard and let the women and children escape first, withdrawing from the village wouldn't be impossible.

Jiris had wanted me to stay in the village at all times, but he also understood that would expose them to danger after I returned to Maalt. In the end, he agreed to the plan, recognizing that discovering the source of the skeletons and dealing with it would be safer in the long term. A little risk in the meantime was necessary to achieve that end.

"This way, Rentt."

I advanced deeper into the forest with Rivul. You could really tell he was the village's best hunter—he walked like he was right at home, taking silent footsteps and concealing his presence, all the while maintaining his bearings. I was confident in my own abilities when it came to traversing forests, but if this had been an ordinary hunting trip, I doubt I could have matched him.

As if to prove my suspicions, the few times we spotted deer or wild boars, none of them seemed to sense he was even there. If he'd wanted to, he could've taken them down in one shot.

I hunted on occasion too, when I was staying outdoors and needed to secure

food, but I wasn't as skillful as he was. At the end of the day, I was an adventurer, and my trade was fighting monsters.

After a while of walking, we finally reached our destination.

"That should be it, Rentt."

Rivul was hiding in the shadows of the undergrowth. I followed his line of sight and saw a cave, its entrance gaping like an open mouth. It was dark enough that I couldn't see farther in, so it was hard to tell how deep it went.

Makes sense, I thought.

Rivul had told me about times when goblins had appeared near the village in the past. Those monsters commonly used these kinds of natural caves as dens. Unlike skeletons, they increased their numbers via ordinary breeding, meaning they needed places like this. Although goblins multiplied at a terrifying rate and matured to adulthood in a single month, their offspring were still defenseless and tiny, making them easy prey for other monsters—or even regular animals. That made defensible dens a necessity.

The goblin tribes that traded with humans built small settlements for this purpose, albeit crudely, and the ones who couldn't mainly used natural caves like this one. If you asked me what the difference was between the goblins that built settlements and the ones that lived in natural caves and attacked humans, I wouldn't be able to give you a good answer. I supposed even goblins had their individual differences. It was like how some people were townsfolk and others bandits. That was why it was impossible to make the sweeping generalization that all goblins were evil.

There were a number of monster species like that, and they were often treated like demihumans as a result...but the distinction was hazy at best. Their relationship with humans depended on what part of the world you were in. Some places followed a doctrine of zero tolerance for monsters, while others were happy to engage in mutually beneficial trade.

Yaaran's policy was relatively loose, as these things went, and leaned more toward allowing trade—but perhaps it was more accurate to say the Kingdom was just not the strictest place in a lot of ways. The people's view of monsters wasn't particularly prejudiced either.

If attacked, however, they'd retaliate without mercy. That was only to be expected.

"Your father's in there?" I asked.

"From what the others told me back then, that's where they left him," Rivul confirmed. "Though...maybe that wasn't the nicest way to put it. It was how he was able to buy everyone time to get away, they think."

"That's probably right. It doesn't look like there's much room in there," I agreed. "They wouldn't have been able to surround him. If they'd managed to cut him off though, that would've been it. An ambush waiting outside for him would've led to a pincer attack."

Goblins were almost as intelligent as humans. They were dumb in their own ways, but when it came to hunting, they had a sort of cunning, or perhaps natural instinct, that was more than a match for a person's. Things like pincer attacks and traps were a common part of their repertoire...though, their lack of technical finesse meant the efforts were often crude in nature or construction. That didn't go for their whole species, however. The goblins who could build settlements were capable of pretty detailed craftsmanship. That was likely why they were said to be a monster well worth researching.

Whatever the case, it didn't seem like I'd be facing any goblins this time around, so I didn't have to worry about their tricks. There was a chance that their traps still remained from when they'd settled here, but even if that were the case, I doubted they'd be durable enough to have remained active after several years. It wasn't as though your common goblin could build anything on par with a magical item, after all.

"Skeletons won't suddenly come out of nowhere and surround us if we go in, will they?" Rivul asked uneasily.

"There don't seem to be any skeletons nearby," I replied. "Or any other monsters, for that matter, so there's no need to jump at shadows. Of course, that doesn't mean we can let our guard down."

Though I couldn't sense any monsters around us now, there was always the chance that they'd come crawling out of the woodwork later. It was dangerous to enter caves without keeping a close eye on your back. In any other

circumstance, I would've preferred to leave several other adventuring companions outside to keep watch, but it was just Rivul and me here.

I couldn't leave Rivul outside alone, and neither could I send him in by himself. I wasn't some heartless demon—just your everyday pseudo-vampire.

That being the case, I was left with only one option.

"We won't get much out of more surveillance," I said. "We're going in."

"Yes, sir!"

We set off into the cave.



"It really is as dark as it looked in here," I noted. "Let's make some light."

I didn't have a problem with it being dark, but the same wasn't true of Rivul. It'd be dangerous for him to keep going blind. I retrieved an enchanted torch from my magic bag and set a small magic crystal into it, creating a soft light that illuminated our surroundings for several meters.

"Oh, we can see a lot better now," Rivul said.

"Uh-huh..."

Actually, not much had changed for me. Light or no light, I could see inside the cave as if it were the middle of the day. I couldn't tell Rivul that though, so I just nodded along and moved on to establishing what we'd be doing with the magic torch.

"I'll hold on to this for now," I said. "If any monsters come at us from the front, they'll be drawn to me. Once I start fighting, though, I'll have to pass it to you. Is that okay?"

"Y-Yes, of course." Rivul sounded a little frightened to hear that holding the torch would draw the monsters' attention.

"No need to be scared. I'll be sure to keep any monsters from getting close to you. It'll actually be easier for me to fight if the torch is drawing them to us—it'll be just like the fight in the village. You were the only one who kept his cool back then, so you'll be fine now too, right?"

I couldn't say for sure exactly how "fine" he would be, but there was no point pressuring him about it. Still, it looked like remembering the village battle had steeled his nerves. His trembling stopped, and he nodded confidently.

"Right. I'll be okay."

"Good. Oh, and don't feel the need to do anything reckless. If it looks like they'll get me, just run. Don't bother trying to help."

I was worried Rivul would get worked up and try to save me, even if it was pointless. He kept his composure better than the other villagers, but his father's death no doubt lingered in the back of his mind. When push came to shove, I could see him standing his ground and refusing to abandon a comrade.

Of course, I had no intention of letting things get that bad. If it looked like I was about to bite it, I'd pick Rivul up under my arm and make a mad dash for the exit. Failing a commission was far preferable to death.

If there was a foe I couldn't beat here, I'd just have to call for backup from Maalt. Lorraine would come, even if no one else would, and with her around things would work out. My instruction to Rivul about recklessness applied to me too.

I couldn't tell if that had gotten through to Rivul, but he nodded in response. "Okay," he said. "I understand."

Figuring that was good enough for the time being, I led the way deeper into the cave...



"Ah, here we go. Looks like I was right about this place."

The sound of rattling bones reached us from up ahead.

I handed the magic torch to Rivul and readied my sword. Before long, two skeletons shambled into view. They carried no weapons and I couldn't sense any mana from them; they were as run-of-the-mill as skeletons got.

In other words, they weren't a problem.

After checking to make sure there wasn't an ambush waiting in the wings, I swiftly advanced and decapitated the skeletons before crushing their skulls to

retrieve the magic crystals from within them. Their bodies fell apart in short order, scattering bones across the ground.

Skillful work, if I do say so myself.

“Incredible...” Rivul murmured.

That made me a little bit happy—not that I’d get puffed up about it and lower my guard, of course. I was planning on ascending to Silver-class, for one. If I couldn’t take down two skeletons in a few seconds, I might as well give up before the exam.

As things stood, I was only achieving the bare minimum. I couldn’t let myself forget that.

Adventurers who forgot their humble origins grew arrogant or let their guard down, and then they’d end up losing everything in a single moment. They would only realize their mistake when it was too late, and they found themselves on the riverboat to the realm of the dead.

Stuffing the magic crystals into my bag, I took the torch back from Rivul.

“It was no big deal,” I said. “Let’s keep going.”

“Ah, right!”

Perhaps to distract himself from his fear, Rivul spoke up as we walked. “So...it’s pretty much confirmed now that the skeletons were coming from here, right?”

“Hmm... It’s looking very likely, but I can’t say for certain. There’s a chance they’re just searching this place and their actual origin is somewhere else.”

“Why would skeletons be investigating a place like this?”

“There used to be goblins here, right? If another group of goblins settled in this cave, well, the skeletons could be here to attack them when that happened. It’s not as if monsters always get along. Even in dungeons, you can see them fight and kill their fellow monsters... In fact, it might be inaccurate to call them ‘fellows’ in the first place.”

That was how monsters went through Existential Evolution, developing into monsters of a higher order. The number of individuals who’d actually witnessed

such a scene wasn't all that large, but it wasn't zero either. As for *why* it happened, well...nobody knew.

Was it a monster's natural instinct? A fundamental law of the world? Or something else entirely?

It was the sort of question that seemed impossible to answer, but humanity was all about solving those kinds of riddles. Perhaps we would, one day.

Maybe it would even be Lorraine who did it. With her intelligence and a rare specimen like me around, there was every chance she could get closer to the heart of the matter, even if she didn't make it all the way there.

The part I usually tried not to think about was that if she didn't, I might never be able to return to being human. Whenever that thought managed to surface, I couldn't help but feel uneasy.

Was it even *possible* for me to become human again? Was I just going to be a monster forever? For the sake of argument, I didn't think I'd mind too much if I was. What did scare me, however, was the prospect that my mind would become more monstrous too, one day turning me into a creature that viewed human beings as something to resent.

As long as that didn't happen, I could make my peace with staying a monster. Not *knowing* was the scary part.

Still, beings like Isaac and Laura were proof that even if I did become monstrous, it probably wouldn't be anytime soon. All I could do for now was make a steady effort to improve, one step at a time.



"Hmm?!"

Suddenly, something came flying toward us. It wasn't an arrow or a stone—I could sense from the presence of mana that it was a spell of some kind.

Channeling mana into my sword, I cut the projectile down just before it reached us, extinguishing it. Since magic spells imposed an effect on the world after they were cast, you could make contact with them using physical attacks. However, because their existence was sustained by mana, simply cutting or

hitting them wouldn't do a thing to actually disperse that mana.

That was why, if you wanted to forcibly extinguish an opponent's spell after they'd cast it, you needed to meet it with a weapon that was *also* channeling mana.

Naturally, there were people who could snuff out a spell without relying on such crude methods. One example was Fuana the Spellwise, a member of Jean Seebeck's organization in the royal capital. She was able to instantly spot the weakest point in a spell's construction and destroy it.

In essence, spells had a core, and if you struck that core in the right way, you could extinguish it. Even without Fuana's unique talent, there were people who understood the theory and practiced the technique.

Of course, it was no easy feat—even Fuana couldn't do it perfectly. Pinpointing the core of a spell flying at you at high speeds and striking it required an expert's touch, not to mention that failure could mean suffering a fatal wound. It was truly a risky move, so as options went, it was one to be avoided if possible.

If I had been alone I might have tried it, but I had Rivul with me. Therefore, I'd gone with the surer method.

"Rentt! Are you okay?!" Rivul yelled, after seeing me extinguish the fireball—a Fotiá Volídas—that had been launched at us.

I nodded. "I'm fine. You should get back—this'll be dangerous. We've got a mage on our hands."

It would've been nice if all we'd had to deal with were run-of-the-mill skeletons, but it looked like matters wouldn't be proceeding so smoothly. I could sense a strong mana signature from the presence that was approaching. It was no match for Lorraine's, of course—at a rough estimate, it had a bit more mana than a skeleton soldier.

Skeleton-type monsters with more mana than a skeleton soldier... There were only a few creatures that fit that description.

When it stepped into view, possibly to check whether its spell had landed, my suspicion was proved correct. Standing before us was indeed a skeleton-type

monster. Unlike the usual specimens of its kind, though, it was clad in a shabby—actually, make that *ragged*—cloak, and it held a wooden wand in its hand. Peeking out from beneath the hood of the cloak were dull lights in its eye sockets, glimmering with intelligence.

It was a monster known as a lesser skeleton mage—the weakest kind of skeleton monster that could still use magic. That didn't mean I could underestimate it, however.

Mages had high offensive ability, and were capable of killing a person with a single spell like it was nothing. You only needed to look at Lorraine to see that. I had personally known several adventurers who had taken such monsters lightly because they were just skeletons, and had lost their lives as a result.

Adventurers overall tended to be cautious about skeletons, but you got arrogant people wherever you went. Incidentally, the reason they were usually so careful with them was that being killed by a skeleton often led to your corpse joining their ranks not long after—and unlike an ordinary person, adventurers usually had large reserves of mana or spirit, meaning they turned into skeletons even faster.

Joining your killers and attacking the village or town you were initially supposed to protect was a fate anybody would want to avoid, hence why nobody wanted to be done in by a skeleton.

There was also what had happened to me, but of course that had been an exception among exceptions. In the first place, it hadn't even been a skeleton that killed me, and I'd become one anyway. What a scam.

Still, I was lucky that I'd gotten away with my life...but maybe I was *unlucky* from a broader perspective. It was hard to say.

At the very least, I was glad I hadn't become a monster that went around attacking human settlements. Now all I had to do was go back to being human...which really was a lot easier said than done.

I held my sword at the ready as I faced the lesser skeleton mage. It wasn't alone: a skeleton soldier accompanied it, standing in front as the vanguard. Looks like they'd thought this out.

I'd have to get past the soldier to get to the mage, but I couldn't let the latter cast spells at Rivul in the meantime. I'd have to draw its attention before that happened.

Pulling a dagger from my magic bag, I threw it at the mage. It flew with the force of my strength as a monster, reinforced by the physical enhancements I'd applied to myself with spirit, audibly whistling through the air.

For a moment I thought that one strike would be enough. It wasn't that easy, unfortunately: the skeleton soldier smacked the dagger down before it could reach the mage.

The mage began to chant a spell, pointing its wand toward me—though “chant” was probably the wrong word. My time as one had made me very aware of the fact that skeletons didn't have vocal cords.

Still, magic spells needed a chant of some kind, so the skeleton was using the time to silently recite something at me. According to Lorraine, spell chants didn't need to be vocal. As long as you could express the mana in the right way, just thought would suffice. Humans just placed a lot of value on the spoken word, leading to an unconscious bias that made nonverbal chants difficult for them.

This was proved by how some individuals were capable of chantless magic—which wasn't *wholly* chantless, strictly speaking. The chants had been shortened to their utmost limit.

The concept of running through an entire chant in your mind in the span of an instant was difficult for me to wrap my head around, but the point was: the lesser skeleton mage could actually chant spells. And perhaps because its chants happened at the speed of thought, it was only a few seconds after the skeleton soldier parried my dagger that the next spell was flying toward me.



The lesser skeleton mage's Vráchos Volídas—an earthen projectile—flew straight at my face. Was it getting revenge for me throwing my dagger at its head? Since the cast time had been relatively short, it lacked potency, but it still had enough power to blow a person's face off if it hit.

In my case, I'd be just fine with a torn-off face, but I couldn't show a gruesome scene like that to Rivul. Bending at the waist as far as I could go, I dodged the flying chunk of earth. From the angle my back was bent, some would probably be suspicious of how flexible my body was, but not so much that they'd accuse me of being inhuman. I was in the clear!

They probably *would* call me "creepy," though...

I straightened up and advanced toward the lesser skeleton mage. Dodging the soldier's sword slash from the side, I brought my blade down on the mage's head.

A thrust would have been the fastest move to end the fight, but because of the mage's cloak, I couldn't tell where the magic crystal that served as its core was located. It was most commonly in a skeleton's head, but that was by no means a guarantee, especially when it came to higher order specimens like skeleton soldiers or lesser mages. That was doubly true if their armor or cloaks hid the magic crystal, which was otherwise easy to spot in their bodies. It made them more difficult to slay—there was a big difference between having your weak point in plain sight versus having it completely hidden.

Still, a skeleton was a skeleton. If you smashed it apart, it wouldn't be able to move or act—which was why I'd aimed for the head.

Fortunately, the lesser skeleton mage was unable to dodge my blow, and my sword struck its target. I felt its skull give way with a *crack* as I followed through with my swing, and the majority of the skeleton's body collapsed to the ground.

A small fireball still managed to fly from its wand, but I simply sidestepped the spell and crushed the implement, along with the limb that held it. That would do for the mage.

Its bones were still twitching slightly, suggesting that its magic crystal was somewhere other than its head, but it wouldn't be able to do anything in its current state. Maybe it would pull itself together in a day or two, but I wasn't going to give it that long. After I slew the skeleton soldier, I was going to extract its magic crystal and bury the remains.

Speaking of the skeleton soldier, it was coming straight for me. Seeing me take down the mage hadn't...angered it, exactly, but it was giving off a slightly

more menacing aura than before. It had kept its distance before, preferring to fight defensively, but it looked like it was done with that—probably because it had been protecting the mage before, and now there was no need.

Although the mage was still alive—uh, for a given definition of alive, anyway—it had zero ability to contribute anything further to the fight. The skeleton soldier must have recognized that too.

Its strikes were swift. I parried them one after the other, then aimed for its head. Unlike the mage, the soldier's body was on full display. I couldn't see a magic crystal tucked within the bones anywhere, so it had to be inside the skull.

Evidently, however, it had seen through my intentions; it deflected my thrust. The combat skills of skeleton soldiers varied wildly, but it looked like I'd run into one that was a fair hand with a sword.

I focused even more mana than I was already channeling into my body and thrust forward again, feinting for its head before moving to strike at its torso. It seemed like my ruse had worked, because the skeleton soldier responded far too slowly.

My strike only managed to smash a few ribs, so I swept my blade to the side. It hooked the skeleton's spine, snapping it with a *crack*, and having lost its support, the upper half of its body crashed to the ground. The lower half lost its cohesion when it was separated, so it followed shortly afterward, crumbling to pieces.

Just because it had been reduced to an upper half didn't mean the skeleton had lost the will to fight, though. It kept a grip on its sword and swung it at me.

Skeleton soldiers didn't have emotions. They couldn't feel despair. As long as their bodies could move, they would continually attack humans with a relentlessness that only the undead possessed. Watching that phenomena occur before my very eyes evoked a kind of deep pathos within me—if I had taken one wrong step, this was how I could have ended up.

Nevertheless, that didn't mean I could just leave it be. Briskly, I stepped up to the skeleton soldier and crushed its skull. Its magic crystal rolled out, consigning it to an eternity of never moving again.

After picking up the crystal, I moved over to the still-moving lesser skeleton mage, pulled its cloak away, and extracted its magic crystal too. It went still and fell apart, leaving only bleached bones rolling around on the ground.

“Rivul. It’s over.”

Rivul lowered his bow—he’d been holding it ready at a distance—and ran over. “Rentt! I’m sorry I couldn’t shoot. I thought it would only get in the way, so...”

He was talking about how he hadn’t fired a single arrow during the fight. That was completely fine, though.

“I was trying to hold their attention as we fought,” I explained. “You made the correct decision. Firing would’ve made things worse.”

“I’m glad to hear that. I worried I was doing the wrong thing. When I saw the lesser skeleton mage fire off that spell at point-blank range...”

He was talking about the Vráchos Volídas. From Rivul’s point of view, that must’ve looked like a close call.

“I figured it would cast something at me the moment I approached,” I said, “so I was ready to dodge whatever came. It wasn’t as dangerous as it might have looked.”

“Really?! You were confident you could dodge something like that right from the start?! Y-You’re a real daredevil, Rentt!”

His momentary hesitation was probably because he thought calling someone a “daredevil” didn’t exactly make for high praise. Still...

“Speaking as an adventurer, I’m happy to hear you say that. Preserving your life is important, of course, but not acting when you see the opportunity is a critical flaw. It just so happens that I spotted an opportunity at that moment, so to me, it wasn’t dangerous. I guess you could say that’s results-based thinking, but...”

“To tell you the truth, working with you made me think for a moment that I could make it as an adventurer too—but now I know how wrong I was. I don’t think I could do anything that terrifying.”

“Oh? You thought about becoming an adventurer?”

“It wasn’t anything I gave serious thought to. More like an old dream of mine that reared its head again...though it was probably too farfetched to even be called a dream.”

“It sounds like you haven’t given up on it entirely yet.”

“No, really. I couldn’t do it.”

We advanced deeper into the cave, talking. We were almost at the end of our journey. I didn’t know what awaited us, but a lesser skeleton mage had popped up when I’d only been expecting ordinary skeletons.

I had to be ready for anything.



“Looks like this is as deep as the cavern goes.”

How long had it taken to get to this point? I wasn’t exactly sure, but it must have been a decent chunk of time. All the regular skeletons we’d encountered periodically along the way hadn’t helped us get here any faster either. Their presence, along with the lesser skeleton mage and skeleton soldier we’d run into earlier, was mounting evidence that this cave was the source of all these skeletons. And now that we had reached the deepest part, I was certain of it.

“Is...this where they’re all coming from?” Rivul asked. He was standing a short distance behind me, like I’d instructed him to. We didn’t know what was waiting for us in here, so it paid to be careful.

“There’s no doubt about it,” I said. “I don’t know if you can sense it, Rivul, but the air here’s laced with malice.”

The term “malice” had a number of meanings, but in this case, I was talking about stagnant mana. It was widely known that if mana continued to congeal and gather in a single location, it would become a source of monsters. We adventurers frequently encountered this phenomenon, so it was usually our first suspect in cases like this. It appeared that my suspicions had been proved correct.

“Malice...” Rivul said. “I knew this place felt unpleasant. I had just chalked it

up to how claustrophobic it is, though.”

“You need to be able to sense mana to tell,” I explained. “You’ve got a little bit of mana yourself, though, so you might be able to pick up the knack with some training.”

“I didn’t know I had any at all... I guess there might’ve been more to that unpleasant feeling I had after all.”

“Probably,” I agreed. “Whatever the case, though, once I disperse the malice, you shouldn’t get any more skele—”

Suddenly, a potent amount of mana began to converge in the center of the area.

“What’s happening?!” It appeared that even Rivul had sensed the change.

“Get back, Rivul!” I ordered. “A monster’s forming!”

Although the way monsters formed from malice resembled the way they were constructed by dungeons, they were distinct phenomena. After all, in the dungeon, a monster could truly pop into existence out of nowhere. Both were the kind of thing that only adventurers tended to see, though, so in a sense Rivul was getting tickets to a rare show—even if it was hard to say whether seeing a monster form was really something to be happy about.

Rivul nodded at my command and retreated far back. He’d probably be fine. The cave was mostly a single path, so the chance of any skeletons coming up from behind us was low. I’d also made sure Rivul knew to keep an eye on our rear, so he’d at least be able to buy some time if one did show up.

That aside, I wondered what monster was going to form. It’d be somewhat anticlimactic if it was just a regular skeleton—but since it would be easy to defeat, that was one case where I’d be grateful about being let down. Still...

“Looks like we won’t be so lucky...” I muttered when I saw what the congealed mana had created.

The monster that crawled out of the gathered malice with a *clatter* was no ordinary skeleton—it was clad in armor, and it wielded a sword and shield.

Before us stood a skeleton knight.



Clang!

My blade bounced off the skeleton knight's shield. I backstepped, dodging the sword that flashed out, and put distance between myself and my opponent.

Damn. Not good enough, huh?

Monsters were often the most vulnerable just after forming, so I'd attempted a preemptive attack. It hadn't worked, though. I wasn't particularly surprised; a skeleton knight was far superior to mere skeleton soldiers.

Perhaps I should have evolved into one of those instead. I wondered what kind of strength I would have had, and how different it would be from the strength I possessed now...

Just kidding—my goal was to go back to being a human. Jumping from one bag of bones to a stronger bag of bones wouldn't have gotten me anywhere. In the end, I'd still have been a skeleton who'd freak people out if I stepped into town.

But back to the matter at hand—how was I going to approach this? As monsters went, skeleton knights had a great balance of offense and defense, and the ones with shields were particularly troublesome.

Like skeleton soldiers, a skeleton knight's arms and armor varied. Their bodies—uh, I mean bones—usually came with whatever they'd wielded in life. Of course, they could also change their equipment by picking up anything they found lying around.

Since this skeleton knight had formed with its arms and armor, my guess was that it had originally been the corpse of someone who fell in this very cave.

As for why it was this cave specifically, there was no surprise there: many monsters had made a home of this place in the past, like the goblins Rivul had mentioned. Perhaps something stronger than them had resided here before that, and someone who'd come to defeat it had found themselves at the end of their rope.

That someone had then become a skeleton, with the strength they had

possessed in life making them a particularly powerful one who'd retained their skill with a shield. It went without saying that this monster would be a tough opponent.

With regular skeletons, the bones holding up their body were exposed and easy to aim for, but it was a different story when they were clad in armor and fending off attacks with a shield.

Still, that didn't change what I had to do. Since this was the end of the cave, I considered using up my divinity to solve the problem through brute force...

But, no—it was better to keep it in reserve. The job wouldn't be finished until we returned, and there was no telling what might take us by surprise on the way back to the village. We weren't in trouble yet, so I'd just fight normally for the time being.

I wasn't just being stingy, I swear.



Right now, I had three cards in my hand: mana, spirit, and mana-spirit fusion. You know, the usual.

I had an ace up my sleeve in the form of divinity, which I'd break out with no hesitation if necessary, but I wanted to defeat the skeleton knight without using it. I decided to save it for now and attack with my other three cards.

As that generalized plan formed in my head, I started by channeling mana into my sword—and enhancing my body, naturally. Then, I dashed forward.

I closed the distance faster than on my previous attempt. The skeleton knight, perhaps because it was more wary now, shifted its foot back to brace itself and brought its shield to bear, hiding as much of its body as it could.

Yeah, it didn't look like ordinary methods were going to cut it here.

Once again, my overhead swing was repelled by the skeleton knight. Then, it advanced, as though it had predicted that I was about to make some distance again.

Although my strike had been faster, it had still only been a rehash of my initial one. Though it was said that skeleton knights possessed no thoughts or

emotions, that didn't mean they couldn't learn—even a creature like that could grow stronger with experience. Just now, it had remembered my strike and came up with a countermeasure on the spot.

Of course, it wasn't the only one who could learn and grow.

I'd gotten a good idea of the skeleton knight's ability from my initial strike, and I hadn't been foolish enough to place all my bets on the second. So why had I just repeated the same attack again?

Because I wanted to limit the skeleton knight's movements.

More often than not, the same attack would elicit the same response. That wasn't only true of living things, but undead monsters like skeletons too. It was difficult to have perfect control over your own reflexes. Martial training allowed you to correct your own habits with endless drilling and eventually overcome those flaws, but skeletons weren't known for their daily training regimens.

Of course, gaining skeletal bodies allowed them to make movements that would otherwise be impossible for an ordinary human, so it was no easy feat to predict what their reactions would look like, even if you knew they were coming. For example, skeletons could fully rotate their neck and arms and bend so far back at the waist it looked like they'd snapped in half—in other words, all the stuff I did when nobody was looking.

However, I had fought enough skeletons to last me a lifetime—not to mention how long I'd spent as one myself. I knew their capabilities and movements like the back of my hand.

That was how I knew that after the skeleton knight blocked my strike with its shield, it would step in closer to me and attempt a thrust...and it would move faster than it had before.

Even if it was nothing but bones, the laws of physics still applied. In order to increase its speed, I knew the skeleton knight would have to slam its foot against the ground as it advanced to build momentum. Otherwise, it would never be able to catch me, even though I was just backstepping.

A skeleton knight was clad in armor, because it was far stronger than ordinary skeletons. That meant it would have to put an unusual amount of strength into

its step to propel it forward.

But there was a pitfall waiting for it.

I didn't mean a figurative pitfall either—I meant a *literal* pitfall.

At the exact moment the skeleton knight brought its foot down, I used my mana-charged sword to excavate the ground it was about to step on.

I still wasn't used to this technique, so I wasn't sure how much mana to channel, but I was familiar enough with it to create a localized hole as deep as the creature's shin. The floor of the cave was nothing but soil and sediment, which made it that much easier.

Sure enough, the skeleton knight stepped into the pitfall, losing its balance with a loud *clatter*. I had to give it credit though—it hadn't lost its balance *too* badly. As soon as it sensed how deep the hole was, it shifted its position and the strength it was putting into the foot, then immediately began to use its other leg as leverage to push itself out.

However, that single moment was all the chance I needed.

Although I'd stepped back, this was what I had been aiming for the entire time, so I was immediately ready to shift into an attack. Using mana, I hardened the dirt beneath my feet to make for a better kickoff point and charged straight at the skeleton knight.

Though it looked like the situation had taken it by surprise, the skeleton still managed to bring its shield up to intercept my attack. I knew it didn't have a good grip, though, so I channeled mana and spirit into my sword.

It was still difficult to charge my weapon using mana-spirit fusion, but maintaining it was far easier than it used to be. I made a sweeping slash with my blade aimed at the skeleton knight's shield—and the moment it made contact, an explosion blasted the shield away, taking the skeletal arm with it.

My sense that its grip wasn't secure had been correct, and now the skeleton knight had lost a layer of protection. It still had its armor though—and its sword.

Here, I had the choice of pressing the attack or retreating to a safe distance—

but I had already made my decision. If I backed off, it would only come up with some kind of new countermeasure. This skeleton knight definitely had the learning capability to do that.

Since that was the case, I redoubled my attack, stepping in even closer. I realized that my choice had been the correct one when I saw a chink in the skeleton knight's armor, large enough to thrust my sword into. Peeking through the gap was the magic crystal that formed the skeleton's core. A simple thrust wouldn't have been a fatal wound, but if I managed to hit that...

Without hesitation, I stabbed my sword into the opening, aiming straight for the magic crystal. I was still channeling mana and spirit, so the moment my blade made contact, there was an explosion from within the skeleton knight's armor.

All that armor trapped the energy inside it, so all it could do was ricochet around. A little bit did manage to leak out, but it was through the neck hole—a convenient turn of events for me.

The energy of the explosion ripped the skeleton knight to pieces within its armor. Outside, its skull and spine cracked and shattered in several different places. Finally, its magic crystal shot out like a cannonball, slamming against the wall of the cave and rolling to a stop on the floor.

I knew I had won, but the feeling didn't begin to set in until Rivul approached, cheering.

“Rentt! You did it!”





“There won’t be any more skeletons attacking our village now, right?”

Rivul looked a little uneasy. It was no surprise that that was the top priority as far as his village was concerned. His unease likely stemmed from his lack of knowledge about monster ecology and how they spawned—he didn’t know enough to tell if this was going to be the end of the skeletons or not.

There was no helping that; even most adventurers only knew the broad strokes when it came to this stuff. The world still had a great deal to learn about monsters, and what knowledge we did have was less fact and more a web of theories that changed on a regular basis.

Even with geniuses like Lorraine conducting serious research—wait, could I really call it serious when she had snacks and tea to one side and regularly paused for naps? No, yeah, I guess it still counted—our knowledge of monsters was still plagued by mysteries.

Many adventurers scorned any form of learning and would never bother remembering the specifics of all that stuff. The fact that Maalt’s adventurers were relatively well educated was a result of the value Wolf placed on knowledge. Even the younger ones weren’t slacking in that regard, since I’d taught them a lot of things too. Still, when it came to adventurers, they were the exception rather than the rule.

All that aside, I knew enough about this situation that I could explain it to Rivul.

“There’s still malice built up here. It’s not safe yet.”

“Does that mean...?”

“If we leave it alone, more skeletons will form.”

“But that’s...!” The look on Rivul’s face was full of despair.

I had no intention of leaving the situation alone, though. “Don’t panic, Rivul,” I reassured him. “I said ‘yet,’ didn’t I? I’ll take care of it.”

“O-Oh... Right. I’m sorry for panicking. But how are you going to...?”

An ordinary person would have no idea how to disperse malice, but it wasn't actually a terribly complex procedure. I dug around in my magic bag and pulled out a particular object.

"Is that...a flask? What's in it?" Rivul studied the finely crafted bottle closely.

"Holy water," I explained. "The religious organizations in Maalt give it to you in exchange for donations."

It was honestly more accurate to just say that you purchased it, but leave it up to the churches to call that sort of thing a "donation." Sure was a crooked racket they were running—not that they'd ever catch me calling it a "racket" out loud.

Still, I supposed the term "donation" wasn't *completely* inaccurate. Certain individuals who'd made enough contributions or done some kind of service for the churches might have their donation amounts lowered, so it wasn't a set thing. Of course, that also meant the churches could ask for ludicrous sums from the people they *didn't* like.

In my case, you'd think my status as a monster would bar me from getting any holy water no matter how charitable I was, but I had a pretty influential bit of leverage with the Church of Lobelia in the form of an acquaintance called Nive. Thanks to that connection, I could stock up from them on the cheap.

There wasn't a single thing I liked about the Church of Lobelia itself, but their holy water was excellent quality, so I often found myself begrudgingly buying it anyway.

Other than that, Lillian of the Church of the Eastern Sky had regained her strength as a saint, so the quality of the holy water from their branch in Maalt would probably improve before long. I'd been purchasing it occasionally for a while, but its efficacy had been on the weaker side, so I was looking forward to the change.

Once their holy water improved, it would be nice if I could get a friend's discount, but I wasn't going to force the issue.

Even with the Church of Lobelia, I was only getting a discount because they didn't want to offend me. I was really curious what kind of dirt Nive had on

them, but trying to find out would mean having to see her again, and that was the last thing I wanted to do. I'd be happy staying in the dark for the rest of eternity, honestly.

Rivul easily accepted my explanation about the flask. "Oh, holy water," he said. "Traveling merchants bring it to town sometimes. We sprinkle it around the village once a year, on the day of the harvest festival."

"To ward off monsters, right?"

"Yes. Though, it's my understanding that it's only a temporary measure..."

"It would be," I agreed. "It does the job just fine, but it's going to evaporate eventually. A particularly potent batch might work for a few months, but that'd eat into the budget pretty fast."

The income of a small village couldn't support the constant usage of holy water as monster repellent. Their once-a-year thing sounded like it came from some long-standing tradition that they still clung to as part of a ritual at harvest festivals and the like.

These days, there were a number of different things you could use as a monster repellent, but according to Lorraine, in the past, holy water had been the only option. In short, divinity was all the people of the time could rely on to protect them from monsters.

Mana and spirit existed back then too, of course, but it all came down to the inherent nature of divinity. Mana and spirit were latent resources that could be perceived and trained by people who possessed them to improve their ability in combat, but divinity was different. It was bestowed by gods or spirits as a blessing, and you could use it the moment you got it.

You could improve divinity with effort too, of course, but I had no doubt that in the distant past, the sheer ability to fight back against monsters without needing theory, logic, or effort was incomparably more important than it was today.

After all, that was why those who possessed divinity were venerated by religious organizations as saints.

"But, Rentt, how are you actually going to use that holy water?"

“Holy water is highly effective at dispersing malice. It’s true that it won’t last long—keeping the village safe the whole year round is probably too big of an ask—but it’s just the thing to handle a gathering of malice potent enough to spawn skeletons.”

Technically speaking, there was also the option of using my divinity instead of the holy water, but since the former was of more use in a fight, I wanted to save it. If holy water could do the job too, then that was just fine.

There was a hint of doubt in Rivul’s expression, though.

“Just watch,” I said. “Hmm. Where should I sprinkle it...? The skeleton knight spawned around...here, right?”

Rivul nodded. “Yes, it was around there, I think.”

“Then this’ll do.”

I began to scatter the holy water.



Not to spell out the obvious, but I had to be careful with how much holy water I used. It wasn’t cheap, after all—especially when it came from the Church of Lobelia.

That being said, it wasn’t the most expensive thing around either, and the Nive discount meant I got it cheaper than the market price. Still, being reckless with it would blow through the pay for this commission and leave me worse off than I was before I’d accepted it.

On the other hand, being too tightfisted with the holy water wouldn’t have the desired effect on the lingering malice, leading to the possibility of more skeletons spawning eventually. I had to be careful to use just the right amount...

To ensure that, I needed to ascertain where the malice was the thickest. Fortunately—or maybe it was more of a silver lining in something unfortunate?—I had been able to spot it when the skeleton knight had spawned.

That exact area would be where the malice was gathered, so if I focused my purification efforts there, it should have the greatest effect. If I hadn’t seen the skeleton knight spawn, I would’ve had to go through all the investigative work

of walking around and carefully examining every part of the cave.

Of course, someone with magical sight like Lorraine would be able to pinpoint the source of the malice immediately. People like that were rare though, and those who could use their magical eyes to their fullest potential were even rarer. That only made Lorraine's usefulness stand out even more.

Whatever the case, I couldn't worry about that kind of thing now, I had malice to purify. I uncorked the flask of holy water and began sprinkling it around in small amounts.

The unpleasant sensation I was feeling as a result of the gathered malice slowly began to dissipate. Even Rivul, who hardly had any mana, seemed to notice the change.

"Is it just me, or does the air feel more...cheerful, now?"

"It's because the malice is dissipating," I explained. "There, that should do it. Now, if I just do a brief exorcism..."

This time, instead of scattering the holy water in all directions, I drizzled some onto my sword and shook it as I walked around the cave. This would get rid of any lingering malice that might have stuck around. Even if there wasn't enough to spawn monsters, leaving any malice at all would allow it to build up over time again, so this step was necessary to ensure a clean job.

Continuing to just scatter the holy water around would've been an unnecessary waste, though, which was why I was using my sword.

After a while of doing that, the surrounding air had been thoroughly purified. It even felt like that clammy atmosphere unique to caves had gone with it—though that was definitely just my imagination.

And then, it was done.

"You shouldn't get any more skeletons bothering you," I said, then paused. "Probably."

Rivul's expression became one of relief. "Really?!"

"Really. Though, I suspect this cave might be a place where malice gathers easily, so I'd recommend hiring an adventurer once a year to scatter holy water

around. The cheap stuff will do.”

“I see... I’ll inform the headman when we return to the village,” Rivul said, before suddenly stumbling forward with a cry. “Ah!”

“Whoa, hey. What are you doing? Don’t tell me that was you jumping for joy.”

“No, um...I tripped over something.”

“You did? Let me see...”

Upon closer inspection, I saw that Rivul was right: there was some sort of object sticking out of the ground near his feet. His foot must have caught on it.

Curious, I dug it out. “It’s...a cup?”

“Looks like it,” Rivul agreed. “What’s that doing in a place like this?”

The cup was small, and it had a dull sheen to it. It didn’t look particularly high quality.

“I guess it could’ve belonged to an adventurer or warrior who came here before—maybe even that skeleton knight I just fought. It’s certainly in the right place for it.”

“Oh, I see. That would make sense. It doesn’t look particularly valuable, though.”



“You never know—it might take on a nice shine if you polished it. Whatever the case, I’ll bring it to Maalt to have it appraised. I can sell it for some coin if it turns out to be worth something.”

“You saying that makes me remember that you really *are* an adventurer, Rentt. It’s kind of refreshing, actually. You didn’t seem all that concerned about money.”

“Hey, come on. I like money as much as the next person. I love finding treasures like this one.”

“I wouldn’t exactly call it treasure, given what it looks like...”

Rivul was looking at the cup as though it were nothing more than a dirty piece of tableware—which was probably exactly what it was, so I couldn’t blame him, really.

“Well, in any case, our business here is finished,” I said. “Let’s head back to the village.”

“Yes, let’s. I want to tell everyone the good news as soon as I can. I’m sure they’ll have something delicious ready for us when we get back too. We’re not done rebuilding yet, but the hunting was going just fine.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

We headed for the cave’s exit, chatting. Then, a sudden thought occurred to me.

“That skeleton knight was unusually strong...”

Skeleton knights varied greatly in terms of their strength. Even the weakest was far above a regular skeleton, of course, but the one I’d just fought had been no small fry.

Still, I’d kept my guard up and managed to defeat it, so I supposed everything had turned out all right in the end.

“Is something the matter, Rentt?” Rivul asked, curious as to why I had suddenly stopped walking.

I hurriedly began moving again. “No, it’s nothing. I was just thinking about

how glad I am that I managed to beat that skeleton knight.”

Thus, Rivul and I headed back to the village.



After Rentt and Rivul had made their departure, two figures appeared at the back of the cave.

“All that work, and *this* is how it ends?” One of them said, voice dripping with sarcasm. “With nothing to show for it?”

The other’s voice was laced with hatred. “I didn’t expect an adventurer to come along *now* of all times. To begin with, didn’t I tell you to keep contact with the outside to a minimum, and not to bother the villagers?”

“And I did exactly that, thank you very much. Imitating a traveling merchant was a huge pain, but I completed all the work you asked of me. None of this was *my* fault, so could you lay off?”

A pause. “You’re right. Sorry.”

“There you go. Knowing when to apologize is one of your good points. Look, you were just unlucky. You saw how that fight went. It’s rare that adventurers of such skill show up here in the middle of nowhere. And if you had to be foiled anywhere, this is as good a place as any. It was only a spare, after all.”

“Yes, but I was also getting the best results here... I managed to make the evolution get as far as a skeleton knight. But now I’ve lost the cup.”

“That was ‘Existential Evolution’? It looked like a regular spawning.”

“What are you talking about? You saw how the base product transformed into malice and gathered to give form to the skeleton knight, didn’t you? It might have looked like a regular spawning, since the cup was artificially encouraging the process along, but—”

“Ugh, enough with the complicated stuff. I can take that to mean you did what you needed to do, right?”

“More or less. It’s a shame it wasn’t able to reach the final stage, but the results I have now will suffice. The cup is a sore loss too, but they won’t get anything out of appraising it. We’re done here. Let’s go.”

“Yeah, yeah. Where to, next? Welfia?”

“There’s raw materials ripe for the picking there. It’s sure to advance my research.”

“It’s nothing but research this, research that with you. Whatever. I’ve got orders to follow you, so I guess I will.”

“Then stop complaining.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

The two figures vanished, leaving nothing behind.

Intermission: At a Certain Castle...

The boy sitting atop the throne spoke with staccato emphasis, wearing a mild-mannered smile. “So. Do you. Have. Any. Excuses?”

The throne, jet black in color with no ornamentation, had no visible seams, as though it had been carved from a singular piece of stone. It seemed too plain for a king—a description that was also true of the expansive room. Dreary blacks and deep reds dominated the space, and not a single extravagant decoration was present.

The only exception was the boy’s hair, which was a beautiful gossamer white, its radiance akin to the sun.

However, in the boy’s eyes resided a profound darkness. The object of his observation—a single man—knelt far below the dais which held the throne, trembling. He was clad in the smart attire of a gentleman, though his cane and top hat had been laid next to his right hand, which was pressed against the ground.

If Rentt had seen this man, he would have declared him to be the one who had attacked him in the royal capital. Rentt would’ve added that he’d been unable to even put up a fight against him.

Yet nonetheless, the man now knelt before a boy who looked many years his junior, trembling. Though he had been directly addressed, his throat refused to work, producing only quiet, choked groans instead of fully formed words.

Needless to say, this situation was unusual.

The boy atop the throne examined the state of the man before sighing lightly and softening his smile. “I’m not angry, you know. I’m just asking why you were there. Do you understand?”

And then, all of a sudden the boy was behind the man, placing his right hand on his shoulder. The man twitched in shock—he hadn’t even noticed the boy

move—and his trembling intensified. Yet he did nothing else—he *could* do nothing else.

The boy put his left hand on the man's other shoulder and brought his mouth close to his ear. "I've said it many times, haven't I?" he whispered. "'Don't set foot into the Kingdom of Yaaran unless under my orders.' I know you're only a 'grandchild,' but surely even you can grasp that."

Realizing that he could no longer get away with remaining silent, the man answered. "Y-Yes. My 'parent' Yanshuf gave me instructions of that na—"

Before he could finish, the man realized that his head was flying through the air. He felt no pain—higher class undead could regulate their own physical senses. Pain in particular could be shut off completely, and since one never knew when one might be attacked, the man tended to keep his sense of pain blocked at all times.

Nevertheless, the force of the impact could still be felt even without pain. A strike potent enough to decapitate should have been detectable even *before* it made contact.

Yet the man had not noticed a thing until his head was already flying. His surroundings spun wildly for a moment before his severed head was caught—and it need not be said by whom. There were only two people present in the room, after all.

"So why can't you follow the instructions you are given? And then there's the matter of how easily I decapitated you. Did Yanshuf instruct you to shut off your sense of pain too? Pain is important for recognizing danger, you know." The boy's tone was light but regretful. Gradually though, his words took on a more dangerous edge. "You simply cannot obey your betters—and *that* is why you will die here today. Do you understand?"

Fear lanced through the man's heart. He was going to die? *Here?*

How many years had he existed as an undead? In the beginning, he'd retained his fear of death, but it had faded to nearly nothing over time. Because he'd become stronger. Because the undead couldn't die. Because nothing was a danger to him anymore.

For those reasons, the man thought he'd conquered his fear of death already.

Yet now, he was realizing that he had not done so. It was simply that he encountered fewer opportunities for death to seize him, and so he was forced to think about it far less often.

But the boy currently gripping his decapitated head *could* kill him—easily and carelessly, with no effort required. The man understood this, and so he was indescribably afraid.

No! I don't want to die...

Amid the mayhem of his emotions, the man found it in himself to speak. "Y-You have my sincerest apologies, my liege. I went to Yaaran because the influence of the Demon Lords has been growing in recent years. I was convinced that we needed to do something to keep them in check, and since Yaaran remained almost untouched by other powers, I thought perhaps there was something I could do there..."

The man's field of view flipped back the right way up as his head was spun and plopped onto the ground. Had his desperate words gotten through?

The boy was crouching in front of him, his expression still showing a gentle smile. Yet...the man sensed a greater menace emanating from it now. When the boy spoke his next words, he understood why.

"The Demon Lords, hmm? Those puny whipped dogs aren't worth the attention. Still, I suppose I can recognize that you had our interests in mind. If you'd been acting for personal gain, that would be a different story."

Evidently, the boy did not think highly of the Demon Lords. It appeared that bringing their name up had been a mistake.

"I think I shall reduce your punishment from execution to becoming an art piece for this castle," the boy continued. "Lucky you. Your decapitated head shall be the concierge at the door from now on. Ah, I suppose that means you won't be needing your body. Why don't you say goodbye to it while you have the chance? Watch with me. This is a moment to be commemorated."

The boy carefully shifted the man's head around so he could watch as he raised a hand toward his body, clearly about to cast some manner of spell—one

of destruction, if the boy's words were anything to go by.

In any other circumstance, the man's body would be able to regenerate—but it wouldn't be out of the question for this boy to possess a method of *true* destruction. And from his demeanor, he was utterly serious.

"S-Sto—"

"No, I don't think I will. Here I go... Bye-bye."

Light burst from the boy's hand, and all the man could do was watch. It was over for him. He had been consigned to an eternity of watching the scenery outside the castle from a position by the door.

When the light faded, however, the man's body was still there—as well as someone else standing in front of it. Someone whose shoulders were heaving from the effort of casting a frighteningly potent shield spell.

However, the spell soon crumbled to pieces, and the caster—a young man with beautiful features—sank to his knees. There was a sheen of sweat on his brow, but it did nothing to mar his attractiveness.

"Well, if it isn't Yanshuf. Come to sacrifice yourself for your precious 'child,' have you?"

Indeed, the young man was Yanshuf Fahalah, "parent" of the man and "child" of the boy.

"With all deference and respect, my liege, I beseech you to reconsider Tavas's punishment," Yanshuf said. "He is a loyal servant."

"How strange. Wouldn't a 'loyal' servant have obeyed my instructions?"

"That...was due to my lack of supervision. Please..."

"Will you die in his place, then?" The boy raised his hand in Yanshuf's direction.

Yanshuf bowed his head. "By your will," he responded. "This body of mine is yours to do with as you see fit, down to its last drop of blood." There wasn't a single note of reluctance in his voice.

The boy smiled and turned to Tavas's severed head. "See? *That* is loyalty."

“I-I...I under—”

“Do you? Well, out of consideration for Yanshuf, I suppose I’ll let you off the hook—this time. You won’t get another chance.” Then, an idea appeared to occur to the boy. “Ah, I know. Since you’re apparently itching to act, shall I give you a task? One in Yaaran, as you so dearly wanted.”

“What would you have Tavas do, my liege?” Yanshuf asked. “As you well know, he is still inexperienced.”

“Oh, nothing too difficult. It just so happens that the mining city of Welfia will be holding two events of interest soon: a Silver-class Ascension Exam and a blacksmithing contest. The former is of no importance to us this time, but the latter most certainly is. The number of blacksmiths able to forge San Arms has been decreasing, after all.” The boy turned to Tavas. “You will head to the contest and find blacksmiths with promise to bring into the fold. I assume that is within your capabilities?”

“I-If that’s all...” Tavas choked out.

“Our liege does not assign easy tasks,” Yanshuf warned. “If you let your guard down, you will die.”

After all that had been done to him, Tavas could do nothing but obediently accept. “I understand. I shall take the utmost precautions.”

At some unknown point during the conversation, the boy had returned to his throne. He looked satisfied. “Very well—it appears you’ve learned your lesson. That will be all. I’m expecting great things from you.”

Tavas directed his body to pick up his head and stick it back on before kneeling. “I hear and obey, Lord Arc.”

And with that, Yanshuf and Tavas vanished from the throne room.



After returning to the village and giving them the full story, explaining that no more skeletons would be appearing, things went exactly as Rivul predicted. The headman declared that a party would be held that night, and everyone had pulled together to begin preparations for it.

Part of me wondered whether it was okay for them to be doing this. Emergency repairs on the most vital areas had been finished, but the village was still a long way away from a full recovery.

Still, maybe this made for a nice stopping point. After being attacked by skeletons and suffering damage to property and loss of life, the villagers had been forced to completely abandon their home at one point. Yet they hadn't given up—instead they did everything they could, and so they had been able to return.

And now, they had no more monster attacks to worry about. From today on, their future was bright—so in order to really drive that belief home, they needed a party.

I understood how that felt, which was why I gratefully accepted their offer to participate. The food was surprisingly delicious, given that the place hadn't recovered enough for people to return to their daily lives yet.

Rivul must have noticed my surprise. “We live out in the middle of nowhere, so we're used to inconvenience,” he explained. “And while the menu might just be hunter's food and nothing too complex...well, we had good ingredients to work with.”

“Oh, so this is game that was caught today. No wonder it's so good,” I said. “Is it all right to be using so much, though? Shouldn't you stockpile some?”

“Maybe, but if there's any day we can be forgiven for cutting loose, it's today. We're celebrating how we took back the village with our own hands. Not so long ago, we thought we'd never be able to return at all. Compared to that, tomorrow's concerns...well, we'll sort them out when we get there. And it's all your doing, Rentt. I honestly don't know how to thank you.”

“I keep saying you've thanked me more than enough already.”

I'd already been on the receiving end of every single villager's gratitude—multiple times. I hardly knew what to do with it all, let alone any more if I got it. Besides, I'd only been carrying out the particulars of the job I'd taken.

I supposed I *had* thrown in a few freebies, though.

“By the way, Rentt—will you be leaving tomorrow?”

I nodded. “That’s the plan. This job took longer than I’d expected, but now you’re all safe for the foreseeable future. There’s nothing more I can do here.”

“Really? You’ve got so many talents, though. Your carpentry, for example, was decent work.”

At times like these, all the skills I’d picked up in the process of becoming an adventurer came in handy. But while I could have assisted in the village’s efforts, I didn’t have that much time.

“If I’m ever in the area again and you need an extra pair of hands, I wouldn’t mind. But I’ll be busy for a while from here on out, so I want to get back to Maalt as soon as I can.”

“Yeah? Have you got another job?”

“No, I’ll be taking the Silver-class Ascension Exam. It’s not for a while still, but I need to set some time aside to go over my fundamentals. The skeleton knight I fought was stronger than I’d pegged it to be—guess I need more training than I thought.”

“It looked to me like you won without any trouble, though...”

“Far from it. I can’t say it was a close call or anything, but that skeleton knight had real skill. I don’t know for sure since I don’t run into them much, but if that’s what they’re all like on average, then passing the Silver-class Ascension Exam might be a lot to ask as I am now. Skeleton knights are supposedly beatable if you’re somewhere in the upper end of Bronze-class to the middle ranges of Silver-class, so the fact that my fight was a little touch and go has me worried.”

The one I’d fought this time had *seemed* to be on the higher end of how strong skeleton knights could be, putting it around the middle of Silver-class. Of course, there was also a chance it had been an irregular specimen that was even stronger.

However, having been a Bronze-classer all my life, I lacked experience fighting skeleton knights, so I couldn’t say for sure. If the one I’d fought had actually been around the upper end of Bronze-class to the lower end of Silver-class, then I was probably going to fail the exam.

I didn't know what the Silver-class Ascension Exam was like, since I'd never taken it before, but a certain degree of fighting ability would definitely be a requirement. After all, that was the number one thing an adventurer needed to have.

Once you accounted for the possibility of a written test or shady tricks like I'd encountered in the Bronze-class exam, then someone who had trouble fighting a skeleton knight didn't have a chance.

That was why I needed to do an extensive review of myself before the exam, including a close look at my fundamentals. As things stood, I was lucky that I had a wealth of experience fighting against many kinds of enemies, but that also meant that I hadn't had the time to drill my basics as thoroughly as I would have liked. The powers I had gained were all rather unique, and I had focused more on finding ways to use them rather than mastering them. That wasn't a bad thing, but now that I had a rough idea of everything I could do, the next step I needed to take was practicing so that I could utilize all my capabilities to their fullest extent.

Take, for example, the sword Clope had made for me. I'd learned what it could do through my practice trials with it, but what I *needed* was to get a complete grasp on things like the right time and place to use its abilities and how much energy it consumed.

Once that was done, I also needed to go through some exhaustive trial and error testing to see how I could incorporate its abilities into the swordsmanship style I'd learned. There was a lot that went into the process, but it would all be necessary if I wanted to wield it smoothly when push came to shove.

That was how I planned to spend my time until the Silver-class Ascension Exam, and if I wanted to get started, I needed to get back to Maalt as soon as I could.

I explained as much to Rivul, who nodded in response. "I'll be sad to see you go, but it's not like you can stay here forever," he said. "We'll do our best to rebuild the village too, so give everything you've got for the Silver-class Ascension Exam, Rentt! We're cheering you on!"

"Hey, that's *my* line. I'll come back one day once I'm Silver-class—so treat me

to something when I do, okay?”

“Gladly!”

And with that, my job there came to an end.

Chapter 2: A Report and a Request from a Blacksmith

“I’d like to report a completed job,” I said. “Is now a good time?”

Having returned to Maalt, I found myself across from Sheila at the Guild’s reception.

“Of course,” she said. “Let’s see, the job you took was... Ah, the one from Crask Village. Since you’re back, I assume that there weren’t any issues?”

“Well...that’s the thing...”

The job was definitely finished—that much was certain. However, a lot of things had happened that were pretty out of the ordinary. It would probably be best if I explained.

“Did something happen?” Sheila asked. Her time working for the Guild had apparently made her perceptive enough to pick up on my tone. She didn’t seem unduly worried either.

“Well, the Crask Village job was to slay five or so skeletons that had shown up in the village. That part went smoothly enough.”

“There was more to it?”

“Yeah. There were five skeletons wandering around, sure, but then I found more. After looking into it, I figured out that they weren’t random stray monsters, but there was actually a source producing skeletons near Crask.”

“Many adventurers would have asked for the job to be called off there—but I take it you didn’t, did you, Rentt?”

Sheila had said “many,” but my estimate was that it would be a little more than half—mostly the Bronze-class parties for whom anything more than five skeletons could be a real threat.

With an active spawning point, someone strong enough to have a shot at

stopping it—even a group of Bronze-classers in the upper ranks would do—generally wouldn't cancel the job. And not because they were being reckless or overestimated themselves, but because monster spawners were dangerous phenomena that needed to be cleaned up as quickly as possible. If left for several months, in a worst-case scenario we'd suddenly have several hundred skeletons on our hands. That rarely happened, of course, but it wasn't impossible.

That meant about half of all adventurers *would* continue with the job—though renegotiating the pay and conditions was possible, naturally.

“Yeah, I kept going with it,” I explained. “And just as I figured, I found a skeleton spawner. I purified it with holy water, though, so it shouldn't be a problem anymore.”

“I see. And in regard to the increased commission fee...?”

“I spoke about it with the headman. Since the village was torn up pretty badly, I turned the offer down. I *did* get my food and board for free, though, as well as a number of rare ingredients and plants from the villagers, so...not a bad deal, all in all.”

“Is that so? Well, given what happened, the Guild might have had to take measures if you had received no additional pay or compensation at all—but if you're satisfied, Rentt, then I'm sure there'll be no issues. Incidentally, what rare plants did you receive?”

I'd been surprised when Rivul had brought it up while we were eating, but apparently lutedd herbs grew in the vicinity of the village. Lutedd herbs were extremely rare and could be sold for a lot in the royal capital because they were vital to the powering mechanisms of small machinery.

Honestly, if I went through the proper channels to sell them, I'd make much more than the commission fee for the Crask Village job. Since they had supplied me with a decent amount of the herbs, I was comfortably in the black—and that's also why I was being vague with Sheila about them.

Her eyes sent a clear message, though: *I know that by “rare,” you actually mean “extremely rare,” so fess up.* We'd known each other for a long time, and Sheila was familiar with the type of person I was...

Well, it wasn't like it was a huge secret or anything. I had told Rivul and the others about the prices lutedd herbs could fetch. If they managed it well, those herbs would become a profitable venture for their village. I had tried to be vague about it in my report, figuring that it would be better to keep it hidden until the villagers had a better handle on their production...but now that we were at this point, it was probably better to ask for cooperation rather than trying to hide it.

"There are several areas near the village where lutedd herbs grow," I explained. "They gave me a few bundles, so there's no issue with compensation."

"Lutedd herbs?! It's never anything minor with you, is it, Rentt? Lutedd herbs are terribly difficult to cultivate and generally can't be cultivated in mass quantities outside of their natural habitats. It was *you* who taught me that, actually."

"I was surprised too. That's why being out here on the frontier is so much fun—making discoveries like that at the drop of a hat. I explained how much they were worth to the villagers, as well as the ways I knew how to cultivate them, so they'll probably circulate into Maalt before long. I know a traveling merchant stops by Crask regularly, so..."

According to Rivul, they regularly got a traveling merchant who stocked up on Crask's specialties to sell in Maalt, so the lutedd herbs would probably take the same route. I had given the headman a thorough explanation of their worth so they wouldn't get shorted. Their village had a profitable future in store for them.

Sheila cocked her head. "A traveling merchant who goes to Crask? That's strange. There are records of one who regularly made the trip, but that was over a decade ago. As far as I'm aware, Crask only gets merchants who happen to be passing through the area, not any regulars. I'll check with the Merchant's Guild, but..."

"Hmm? But they said that they did... They also said that the merchant was generally fair with prices, though they never seemed to want anything specific."

"Is that so? Then maybe it's just an oversight in the records. Still, I'll look into

it. Now, about the skeleton spawner...”



“Right, about that,” I said. “It spawned a skeleton knight.”

“What?! Were you okay?!” Sheila’s eyes flew open in surprise, but as she thought about it, she gradually appeared to calm down, muttering to herself. “Well, of course you were, since you’re here to speak about it, but...” She looked at me, practically begging for more of an explanation.

“Yeah, I am, as you can see. If I had fought it in the past without any help, I’d have been dead in a snap, but it looks like I’ve come a long way. I beat it.”

“Really?” Sheila’s incredulity was only natural; she was well aware of how strong the old me had been.

I retrieved my spoils of war from my magic bag. “Look, here’s the skeleton knight’s magic crystal. Though, I think it’s a little bigger than an ordinary one...”

I set the magic crystal on the receptionist’s counter. It was large, red, and clearly of a higher quality than the magic crystals of bottom-feeder monsters.

“You’re right—it’s slightly on the larger side. I know magic crystals can vary depending on the individual monster, but I haven’t seen one this large before. Perhaps that’s just a testament to my lack of experience, though.”

“You think so too? I *knew* it. I’ve seen a lot of average ones, and this seemed a bit different. In that case, I guess it really was a stronger specimen.”

At the very least, I could discard the possibility that it had been a weak example of a skeleton knight. If it *had* been weak and I’d had all that trouble against it, then that was a sign that the Silver-class Ascension Exam would be dangerous for me, and I should probably skip it this time around.

“Mmm. It’s definitely larger than average, so the skeleton knight must have been a match for a lower ranked Silver-classer, at the very least,” Sheila said. “Of course, appraisal isn’t my area of expertise, so I can’t say for sure.”

“No, just knowing that is enough. I was on the verge of losing confidence in myself.”

“Again? Why?”

“The skeleton knight was pretty strong. I won’t say I went at it with everything I’ve got, but I definitely couldn’t have won without taking it seriously. I had a villager with me as a guide, so I was able to stay on my toes and come out of the fight unscathed, but things might’ve gotten bad if I’d gone in with my usual easygoing attitude.”

“Was it really that strong? Undead in Yaaran tend to be weaker than in other countries—though I don’t know why—so specimens like that are rare here. I wonder if there was some anomaly or other reason for it... I’ll have to look into this thoroughly. There’s the matter of the lutedd herbs too, so perhaps it would be good to gather a team of experts and dispatch a survey team. Thank you for the information, Rentt.”

“No problem. It’d be great if you could do that—it’d mean less to worry about for me down the line.”

Even though I’d purified the source of the skeletons, there had been aspects of the job that had felt off, though I couldn’t clearly say what they were. I’d finished and returned to Maalt, but I wasn’t confident that something else wouldn’t happen, so it would be nice if someone looked into it.

Sheila must have followed my line of thought, because she shot me a knowing look. “Is that why you were so willing to tell me about the lutedd herbs? A girl really can’t let her guard down around you, Rentt.”

“It’s not that big a deal, is it? Nobody’s losing out.”

“Well, you’re not wrong. But I do feel like you played me like a fiddle.”

“Come on. I’m not capable of something like that.”

“I’m not sure I believe you...but like you said, nobody’s losing out, so I suppose it’s fine. Is that the end of your report?”

“Yeah. I’ve already got the pay and everything too, so I’ll be heading out. See you, Sheila.”

“You too, Rentt. Until next—Oh, I almost forgot. Rentt!”

Just before I could leave, Sheila hurriedly called after me. I turned around. “Was there something else?”

“Not from the Guild. Clope left me a message to pass on to you, though.”

“Clope? The blacksmith?”

“Yes, he came right after you left on the Crask Village job, so you must’ve just missed him.”

“I guess that’s my bad. What did he want?”

“He wanted you to drop by his shop when you got back. Apparently, he’s got a job for you that he’s going to put through the Guild.”

“Oh, so that’s why he left the message with you. I wonder what he wants, though. He could’ve just let me know directly.”

Although most adventurers took commissions through the Guild’s system, there was no law against hiring them directly.



There wasn't anything wrong with it from an ethical standpoint either. It happened all the time, and whenever Clope wanted materials, it was common for him to just hire me directly.

The advantage of a direct commission was that it was both cheaper for the client and more profitable for the adventurer. Clope had frequently made requests of me out of sympathy, since back then I hadn't made much in the way of earnings. These days, though, it wasn't really necessary.

Another point worth considering, however, was that commissions that didn't go through the Guild didn't count toward earning the points necessary for rising in rank. However, back then, Clope's commissions were better for me because stacking tiny commissions at the Guild never made for many points anyway, and I probably wouldn't have been able to earn enough to reach Silver-class in the first place.

Now, though, I had earned the right to take the Silver-class Ascension Exam—and in terms of earnings, I was making enough to get by even with the Guild's middleman fee. It was better for me to take Guild commissions these days, to earn points that would count even after I became Silver-class. That was probably why Clope wanted to hire me through the Guild.

Still, I felt like something was unusual here. I couldn't put my finger on it, but I didn't take my own instincts lightly. I guess I'd find out.

"Got it," I said. "I'll drop by his place later, then. If there's nothing else, then see you, Sheila."

"See you, Rentt."

Thus, I departed the Guild.



"I'm ba— Oh."

"Hmm? Oh, there you are, Rentt."

I hadn't actually expected anyone to answer as I stepped through the doorway of Lorraine's house, but evidently she just happened to be passing by.

"Perfect timing," I said. "Here, I brought you a souvenir."

“Did you now? It’s not some strange countryside delicacy again, is it? I suppose I *have* been feeling more adventurous about that kind of thing recently...”

“No, check it out.” I took the cup I’d picked up at the skeleton spawner near Crask Village out of my magic bag and handed it to her.

Lorraine examined it inquisitively. “A...cup? It’s in pretty bad shape for a gift.”

My shoulders slumped. “Hey, I have eyes too. I wouldn’t have brought it to you if it was *just* a dirty old cup.”

“I know, I know.” Lorraine smiled. “I was just joking. Why *did* you bring it to me, though?”

“I’m getting to that part. Let’s sit down—this’ll take a while.”

“Yeah? Set your things down, then. I’ll brew some tea.”



“Oh ho. Sounds like you had a rough time of it.” Lorraine sipped at her black tea. “And to think the original commission was only to deal with a handful of skeletons.”

I’d just given her the abridged version of how the job had gone, as well as how I’d gotten my hands on the cup.

“I wasn’t expecting it either. The possibility of a skeleton spawner, sure, but the skeleton knight blindsided me.”

“They’re certainly a rarity. You were more likely to find that the skeletons numbered several dozen or more, but from what you told me that wasn’t the case...”

Lorraine was referring to the tendency seen in groups of monsters where, as their numbers increased, so did the likelihood that stronger individual specimens would spawn. In large packs of goblins, for example, a goblin general or goblin king often appeared to lead them. To a greater or lesser extent, this tendency applied to all monsters.

The Demon Lords were said to be the apex example of this. They were considered capable of wiping out entire countries not just because of their

individual strength, but because they commanded vast and mighty legions of subordinates too.

However, nobody had ever borne witness to a Demon Lord's birth—or at least, anyone who had never made it into the history books.

Whatever the case, this tendency meant that the presence of a strong individual monster inevitably meant that there was a group of weaker ones nearby. What made the Crask Village incident unusual was that it *hadn't* met those conditions. Still, that was all it was: unusual. It wasn't outright impossible.

"The spawning location was way at the back of a cave, after all," I said. "Malice built up easily there, so maybe that's our explanation. I remember it feeling pretty thick in the air..."

"You're right—it could've just been the right place for that sort of thing from a geographical standpoint. They say that's one of the reasons powerful monsters manifest in the deepest levels of a dungeon." It wasn't the only reason, naturally. Another major contributing factor was the Existential Evolution that arose from monsters fighting each other and becoming stronger.

Monsters were beings shrouded in mystery, and the study of them was a volatile field where today's accepted knowledge could be tomorrow's disproven nonsense. Of course, that was why it had such a strong pull on people like Lorraine, who found such research exhilarating.

"At any rate, I dispersed the malice, so it shouldn't be a problem for a while," I continued. "Plus, the Guild's putting together a survey team. They might be able to dig up more information."

"Oh? I should request that they keep me in the loop, then. But about this cup—you said it was buried near the spawner... Wait, did you bring it to me because you think it has something to do with what happened?" Lorraine looked at me with eyes full of expectation.

I shook my head. "Sorry to disappoint you, but not really. It's just that there were so many things that felt off about the whole situation that I felt it best to do a close inspection of whatever I could get my hands on. I didn't sense anything suspicious about it beyond that. Given where I found it, though, it could be a treasure of some kind. It'd be nice if I could sell it for a bit of coin."

“You just want a regular appraisal job, then? And here I was getting my hopes up. You’re right, though—there’s nothing suspicious about its appearance. Doesn’t seem to be a cursed item either.”

“So it’s just some old cup after all?”

“I can’t say for sure yet...but I *can* tell you it’s more than *just* a simple cup. Bare minimum, you can at least channel mana through it. Its structure doesn’t seem too unorthodox...but there are a few strange parts that I want to examine more closely. I don’t think I’ve seen anything of similar make before.”

“Why did you say it wasn’t suspicious, then?”

“I’m sure you’re aware that people find magical items with unique compositions in dungeons all the time. Most of it turns out to be meaningless junk, and there’s a good chance that’s exactly what this cup is too. Still, it’s worth examining. Understanding how pointless junk is made can come in handy when crafting other magical items.”

In short, the cup was promising enough that it would satisfy Lorraine’s hobby interest.

“So, it’s a good enough souvenir?”

“Plenty. I’ll be able to kill a decent amount of time looking over it.”

“That’s good. Sounds like it was worth carrying all this way.”

“I’d be happy to take these kinds of souvenirs any time you find one.” Lorraine placed the cup on the table. “By the way, have you wrapped up your work for today?”

“No, I need to stop by Clope’s place.”

“Hmm? Didn’t you just go the other day to pick up that sword? You didn’t break it, did you?”

“If I’d broken it already, Clope would probably bawl his eyes out. No, he called for me. I don’t know the details, but apparently he’s got a job lined up.”

“Oh? You just got back from one job and you’re already getting personal requests for more. Business is thriving, I see.”

“I wouldn’t be so quick to say that. What if he just wants me to gather some goblin loincloths?”

“I really doubt that’s the case...”

Lorraine was frowning, but I knew it wasn’t impossible. Despite appearances, Clope could be just as prone to eccentricity as she was.

“He’s asked me for similar things before, so I wouldn’t say it’s *not* in the cards. Whatever the case, I’ll be stopping by to find out.”

“All right. I should be able to finish my examination of the cup while you’re out.”

“That fast?”

Lorraine paused for a moment. “Well...if I’m not done by then, I’m counting on you to make dinner, Rentt.”

“So *that’s* what you’re after. Sure—I’ll do some grocery shopping on my way back.”



True to form, the Three-Pronged Harpoon smithy and store was sweltering inside. After being welcomed by Luka, I called out in the direction of the forge in the back.

“Clope. Clope! You there?!”

“Yeah! Hold on a sec!”

Clope’s reply was so loud that it would’ve sounded angry to anyone unfamiliar with him. It wasn’t that he was in a bad mood or anything; it was just necessary to be heard over the sound of hammering.

Still, it was pretty rare for him to respond. Usually, once he started working, it was impossible to get his attention.

I discovered the reason for this after Clope reached a stopping point and came out.

“Oh, Rentt,” he said. “That was fast. Sorry for calling you out as soon as you got back from a job.”

“It’s fine—I don’t mind. Is that the sword you were working on just now?”

There was a sword in Clope’s hand. Not just a freshly hammered blade either, but one that had been cooled and sharpened. No wonder he’d kept me waiting for a while. That alone told me that his passion for blacksmithing hadn’t wavered a bit, but still, his expression was clouded.

“Yeah,” Clope said. “It’s... Well, take a look.”

I took the sword from him and examined it. “A mass-produced blade? And no offense, but this work isn’t quite up to your usual standards, Clope.”

It was plain to see that he’d purposefully made the sword from average materials, aiming for an everyday level of strength and durability—but even so, the make was poor. It was still much better than what other blacksmiths could accomplish, but even Clope’s mass-produced blades were usually two grades above this. Strange.

“Can’t get anything past your eyes, can I?” Clope said. “You’re right, that blade’s a write-off. Can’t sell something like that.”

The sword was good enough that it’d still attract some buyers, but Clope’s pride probably wouldn’t let him put it up for sale in the shop. That aside, it seemed there was a reason his work wasn’t up to scratch.

“You heard me when I called out to you in the middle of smithing. I’m guessing you weren’t really into it.”

“Yeah. Just can’t get in the right mindset. After you’ve lived enough years, all sorts of bothersome thoughts start getting into your head while smithing. It’s distracting.”

“I take it something happened?”

“Mmm. Come into the back and I’ll tell you about the job I have for you. It’s a bit of a long story.”



After following Clope into the back, we sat at a table. His wife Luka brought us tea, but hurried out to the store instead of joining us.

“This is going to be complicated, isn’t it?” I asked. I could tell from how Luka

had given us space.

Clope smiled wryly. “I feel bad, making her feel like she needs to treat me like I’m so fragile... Objectively speaking, this isn’t a big deal. Bit of a tricky issue for me personally, though. Hear me out?”

“Sure.”

“I’ll start with the job. I’ve gotta go to Welfia, the mining city, so I’d like to hire you on as a bodyguard. You’re taking the Silver-class Ascension Exam there, right? I figured it’d line up well.”

“Really? You’re going to Welfia? Actually, I guess you *are* a blacksmith, so it’s not that unusual. Regarding the job, if the schedule works out so that I can still make it in time for the exam, I’d be happy to accept. Otherwise, I’m afraid I can’t.”

As you’d expect from a place known as “the mining city,” Welfia had ties to blacksmiths that went way back. Since it was a production center for many varieties of ore used to make weapons and armor, it had a high population of blacksmiths. Row after row of smithies lined the streets, and it was said that if you wanted the best quality arms and armor in all of Yaaran, Welfia was the place to go.

That being the case, there was actually nothing unusual about Clope making the trip. Any number of reasons quickly sprang to mind, like procuring materials or meeting a professional acquaintance. It was also possible that he was heading there to acquire some kind of new skill.

“Schedule-wise, arriving in Welfia anytime before the Silver-class Ascension Exam is fine,” Clope said. “That’s the same for you, right? Should be no problem.”

“In that case, sure...but why are you going?”

“There’s going to be a blacksmithing contest in Welfia, and I have to compete.”

“Ah. Come to think of it, it’s the right time of year for that. Wouldn’t have expected it of you, though. You’d definitely make a good showing with your skills, but you’ve always said that if you had the time for such things, you’d

rather be honing your craft instead.”

I doubted that Clope had *never* participated in a contest, but at the very least, he’d never done so in the time I’d known him—not to my knowledge, anyway. Clope’s skill would all but guarantee a high placing, which would drum up more business as commissions for arms and armor rolled in. Placing well in a blacksmithing contest basically functioned as one big advertisement.

You’d think that would be a good enough reason to participate, but Clope was an old-fashioned craftsman: he wanted to attract customers with the quality of his creations rather than publicity.

Given that, I was surprised he was even talking about competing.

“I never thought I’d be participating in one either—not after all this time. The truth is...I’ve competed once before, a long time ago.”

“In Welfia’s blacksmithing contest?”

“Yeah, when I was young. By the time I met Luka—though technically it was our second meeting—I’d already left Welfia to become a traveling blacksmith. But it was in one of the city’s workshops that I learned the basics of the trade, so I’m familiar with the contest. I watched it every year as an apprentice, when I still wasn’t good enough to take part myself.”

I hadn’t known that Clope had lived in Welfia—he didn’t talk much about his past. It made a lot of sense, though. In Yaaran, many blacksmiths hailed from Welfia. It was the capital of their trade, so perhaps it was only obvious.

Still, Clope had a different air about him than your usual Welfia blacksmith, so I was a little surprised. Maybe that was just a result of the time he’d spent wandering after he left the city.

“But you’re practicing your trade in Maalt now,” I noted. “You didn’t want to stay in Welfia?”

If a blacksmith wanted the best possible environment for honing their craft, there was nowhere better in Yaaran than Welfia—hence my question.

Clope shook his head. “I *couldn’t* stay. I ran. That’s how I became a wandering blacksmith in the first place.”



“You ran...?” I asked, puzzled.

“When I was a little brat in Welfia, I told myself I’d become a blacksmith,” Clope said. “Do you know why?”

That wasn’t an easy question to answer. Everyone had different reasons for the dreams they’d decided to chase. I was no exception. If I told people I was aiming to be a Mithril-class adventurer, most would ask why.

It was natural for adventurers to want to improve, so everyone was capable of understanding the sentiment. Mithril-class, though, was usually considered an impossible objective. The majority of adventurers who talked about aiming for it weren’t being serious. That was why it stood out to people when they discovered I’d set that as a firm goal—normally, nobody would *seriously* be chasing after something like that.

If not for what I’d gone through as a kid, I might’ve walked a different path in life. Maybe Clope had something like that in his past too.

I didn’t know, though, so I shook my head. “No. I’ve never asked you, have I? From the first day we met, it always felt natural to assume you just loved blacksmithing and wanted to dedicate yourself wholly to it—like it was a given thing, and you needed no other reason. I guess that’s why I never asked.”

Clope’s mouth twisted into a slight smile. “Me being a blacksmith is just natural, huh? You sure know how to cheer a guy up. You’re not wrong—now, at any rate. It was a different story in the past.”

“Did you not like smithing back then?”

“That’s not it, although... Well, I began my training seeing the whole thing as just a job. Once a person’s old enough to work, they’ve gotta pick a trade and earn their keep, don’t they? It just so happened that for me, it was blacksmithing.”

“That’s a surprise. I kind of always thought you’d come out of the womb with a hammer and anvil.” I was joking, of course.

Clope laughed. “I don’t think that’s possible, even for someone like me. This

isn't some storybook tale."

He'd said that, but the world was a big enough place that it wouldn't have been *truly* impossible. There were babies out there that genuinely were born holding something, like a ring or an orb. Nobody really knew why such things happened, but those babies always grew up to achieve great things. Clope had mentioned storybook tales, but the reason those tales existed in the first place was because of individuals like that.

"I suppose not... Still, even if that *was* why you began, blacksmithing's your passion now, right? To the point you take it too far sometimes. Even Maalt has its share of blacksmiths who only treat it as a job, but you're not like them."

I didn't think ordinary blacksmiths like that were a bad thing. If anything, they were the normal ones. Not everybody could pour all their passion into every piece of work they made. Imagine if a housewife purchased a pot from them to make hodgepodge stews, and it turned out to be a masterpiece with no equal in the world. Maybe a royal chef would need something like that, but most people wouldn't even be able to bring themselves to use it. The world needed craftsmen who cut just the right corners and churned out mass-produced goods.

Clope wasn't capable of that, though. Each of his creations was like his very own child—that was how he could pour everything he had into making them the best they could be. It was why there wasn't a single piece he'd cut corners on, even among the smallest knives on display in his store. Their prices still varied, though, depending on the materials used, time spent, and the differences in quality that naturally arose from being handcrafted.

"While I might have started blacksmithing just to put food on the table, I soon found out how fascinating it was. Before long, I had completely fallen in love. It was probably as perfect a fit for me as you could find."

"You can say that again."

"Yeah? You think so too, huh? Still..."

"Still?"

"There was a time when I thought I wasn't cut out for this job."

I supposed no matter what job you worked, there were times when those kinds of thoughts popped into your head. They had for me, with adventuring—not just once or twice. But each time, I managed to cheer myself up and shake those thoughts off. Had Clope been able to as well? Curious, I asked him.

“How’d you overcome it, Clope?”

My question had been lighthearted, but the answer I received was heavy.

“I didn’t. That’s why I left Welfia.”

A few moments of silence passed. “But you’re still a blacksmith to this day, aren’t you?”

“Yeah. In the end, it was a good thing that I left.”

I cocked my head. “What do you...?”

“In this world of ours, every field has its geniuses, right?” Clope said.

For a moment, I wasn’t sure why he had suddenly changed the topic, but then a vague idea of why occurred to me. I nodded along. “Yeah. Every field, adventurers included. Actually, adventuring work’s filled with them. I can’t count the number of times someone has picked up their Iron-class license, and then I blink and they’ve already caught up and surpassed me.”

That happened in every field to people like me who weren’t blessed with talent. One day you’re teaching somebody, then the next they’re leaving you behind, running far ahead. That repeating cycle had filled up the last ten years of my life.

“Yeah, that’s exactly what I’m talking about. I... Well, I was a little cocky, once. Thought I was one of those talented people. I learned and got better faster than those who’d started at the same time as me. I pulled ahead, going further and further. There was a time I thought I’d be able to go somewhere nobody else would be able to follow.”



“You outdid the others, but still ended up thinking you weren’t cut out to be a blacksmith?” I asked.

Clope nodded. “Strictly speaking, though, there was another who outdid

everyone else right along with me: Hazara Feyvro, an apprentice who joined the workshop at the same time as me. We honed our skills against each other's."

"Yeah? So you and this Hazara person were rivals?"

You needed people like that, no matter what you pursued—having them close by would hasten your improvement by leaps and bounds. The drive to beat them served as the fuel for continued effort.

"We were. Rivals...and best friends. We competed over who'd learn new techniques faster, point out each other's shortcomings, test out interesting new creations... I had so much fun back then. Every day, I was making progress."

No matter what pursuit it was, the period where you saw all the possibilities spreading out before you was exhilarating. It had been the same for me when I'd started learning swordsmanship and magic—a feeling close to omnipotence. Of course, it hadn't lasted long in my case, since my talent had plateaued rather quickly. Clope must have held on to that feeling for a long time, though. But if he had, then why had he...?

"With someone like that close by, what reason could you have had to leave Welfia?"

"I didn't have one—at least, not at the time. But then, one day, the head smith summoned Hazara and me. We were almost skilled enough to strike out on our own then, so we were excited. We thought he was finally recognizing us as fully-fledged blacksmiths."

There was a spark in Clope's eyes, like he was recalling the exact moment and it was making his heart race in excitement. However, the spark quickly faded, replaced by something murky. I could guess why.

"But he wasn't, was he?" I said.

"Not quite, no. Instead, he told Hazara and me that the Welfia blacksmithing contest would be held soon, and that we were to compete. He said that the winner would inherit the workshop one day."

"That's..."

"I was blindsided. The head smith wasn't old enough to be retiring yet, you

see. He knew that, of course, which was why he talked about it like it was a long way off—but even so, he wanted to see which one of us was better, which of us was more suited to take his place. We turned him down because we thought we were unworthy—he had so many other apprentices around. But he told us they’d all already given him the okay. That we were head and shoulders above the rest—even above himself. After hearing that, how could we say no? Besides...”

“Yeah?”

“More than the prospect of becoming the head smith, Hazara and I were thrilled at the chance to compete in the blacksmithing contest.”

“I couldn’t recite the rules to you, but it’s not *that* hard to gain entry, is it?”

Blacksmithing contests were outside my field of expertise, so I didn’t know for sure, but how they generally worked was common knowledge. Broadly speaking, blacksmiths with less than ten years of experience competed separately from those who had more, and then they were split into more categories depending on what they were asked to make.

“No, you’re right—it’s not that hard,” Clope explained. “It’s divided up by experience, but as long as you’re a blacksmith, basically all you need to do is apply. However, apprentices at a workshop like Hazara and I needed the permission of the head smith, and he’d never given it—not once. A handful of our peers had gotten it, but...”

“Hmm... Maybe he didn’t want to spoil his talented apprentices by letting them compete? He probably knew you’d place pretty well, so he didn’t want you developing a big ego that would get in the way of your growth.”

“That’s my guess too. Most of the others he gave permission to were diligent, serious types. Skill aside, they were the kind of people who’d be able to accept the result—win or lose—with a firm nod and keep on putting in the steady effort they always had. Me, though... Well, the head smith’s judgment was on the mark.”

“Did something happen?”

“Yeah. It wasn’t anything complicated. We competed in the contest. Hazara

won, I lost. That's all."

"That must have been..."

It must have been frustrating, to say the least. Your rival, who was exactly as talented and hardworking as you were, had taken a step beyond your reach. I'd never had a rival like that, but I could imagine how it felt. Clope's reply, however, took me by surprise.

"I wasn't frustrated. In fact, Hazara's victory was so decisive that it only made me realize I'd never be as good a blacksmith."

"Why...? You weren't that far apart in skill, were you?"

"That's what I thought too, but that moment made me realize we were fundamentally different. Before the contest, we both worked hard in our own ways. We avoided each other's work areas and didn't tell each other about what we would make or how, because we were rivals. We wanted to settle it on the day of the contest."

I could understand how Clope had felt. It must have been a terrifying time, but also a fun one.

"And...?"

"Like I said, it was settled. I lost, clear as day, with no room for doubt. Hazara made a magic sword. A brat not even a decade into blacksmithing made a *magic sword*. That was the victory, then and there. I got second place, sure, but all I'd made was an ordinary blade. I poured every scrap of knowledge and skill I had at the time into it, of course, but a *magic sword*? That's when I realized Hazara was a genius. For the longest time, I thought we'd been growing together, but I began to wonder if I was just holding my rival back. Slowing down Hazara's growth. I thought maybe that was why, as soon as we started training on our own, such a huge gap opened between us."



"Sometimes, people's talents awaken out of nowhere," I said. "Maybe that was the case for Hazara. But that doesn't mean you couldn't have caught up, Clope."

At the very least, they seemed to have been equally capable up until the blacksmithing contest. Even if Hazara had made some kind of breakthrough and pulled ahead, that didn't mean the same couldn't happen to Clope.

"I know that now," Clope said. "Even if I die before the chance comes, believing that it will and working hard is what gives birth to the possibility. Give up, and it's all over. Deciding that blacksmithing is my life's calling means I have to keep forging ahead, even if I experience nothing but defeat."

"Then..."

"But that's *now*. Back then, that was beyond me. The loss made me depressed and desperate. After the contest, I couldn't focus on my smithing, which made my master, the other apprentices—even Hazara—worry. In the end, I ran away from Welfia. I didn't think I could be a blacksmith in that city anymore."

"So that's how you became a wandering one instead?"

"Yeah. Though, in the beginning, I couldn't bear to practice my trade, so I hopped between odd jobs. Turns out I'm a blacksmith down to my core, though. I began to yearn for it, and before I knew it, I was diving back in again. I borrowed open forges and helped repair pots and kitchen knives, moving to the next town once I'd saved some money. I did that for a while, but couldn't stay anywhere. Settling down just made me sink into my thoughts again—only traveling helped me to forget."

So even though he'd left Welfia, the wounds hadn't been so easily healed.

"But you've settled into Maalt as a blacksmith, haven't you?"

"Mmm. I owe that to Luka."

"Your childhood friend, right?"

"Yeah, though she doesn't remember."

"She doesn't remember?"

"I've told you before about how we got married, right? When we met while I was still a wandering blacksmith?"

"Yeah, I vaguely recall the story."

“Well, it was true. She comes from a wealthy merchant family. I was contracted by their business’s blacksmith to help with the cookware they sold, and that was how we got acquainted. After that...a lot happened, and she practically strong-armed me into marriage. In the end, she overwhelmed me, and here we are.”

“I feel like you’re skipping over a lot there... I believe it, though. It seems like you’d need at least that much effort to convince a guy like you to get married.”

“Hey—you saying I’m stubborn?”

“That’s not it—it’s just that I wouldn’t be surprised to hear you say you had no interest in women at all, and that blacksmithing was your only love.”

“You’re not...totally wrong. There were bigger problems getting in our way at the time, though.”

“Like?”

“I was nothing but a wandering blacksmith, and her family were wealthy merchants. They couldn’t let their daughter marry a guy like me, and I didn’t have the means to take on that much responsibility and provide for her properly either.”

Now that he’d mentioned it, that was a good point. Clope didn’t seem like the type who would consider that kind of thing, but evidently even he had the common sense to think that through carefully.

“But you got married in the end, didn’t you?”

“Sure. I just...couldn’t find it in me to turn her down.”

“You really are a pushover, huh?”

“Like hell I am! It’s just, when it comes to Luka...I’ve never been able to say no. Maybe it’s because I still remember when we were small. Regardless of what I look like now, I was a pretty frail kid.”

“That’s surprising.” Clope was sturdily built and looked tough enough to do smithing work in any environment.

“It was when I was really young. Because of my constitution, I spent about half a year up in the highlands, where the air was cleaner.”

“Were you born to a rich family or something?”

“Now wouldn’t *that* have been nice. No, it wasn’t a mansion or anything like that. I went to a clinic that also happened to be a church—like a sanatorium that took in frail kids. It was expensive, sure, but not so much that a commoner family couldn’t afford it.”

I’d heard about those kinds of places. They were usually institutions that acted as schools, orphanages, and clinics all at once. Typically located in remote places far from cities, the clean air, stable ambient mana, and infrequent monster sightings. Monasteries or churches were often built side by side with such places, lowering the cost of staying there—though in exchange, boarders were strongly encouraged to live a religious lifestyle. In essence, it was missionary work.

“Anyway, it was while I was staying there that I met Luka,” Clope continued. “She wasn’t sick or anything, though—just staying in a holiday house to escape the summer heat back home.”

“So she really *was* born into a rich family...”

“Pretty much. Places like that don’t usually have kids running around outside of the sanatorium itself, though. That was probably why she came by so often. At first, she was just tagging along when her old man and other members of her household came to the church side of the building a lot to pray or make donations, but then she started coming by herself more and more. She even started sticking her nose into my business all the time, and, well...”

“That must’ve been a lot for a frail kid to handle.”

“Eh. It wasn’t like I had a serious disease or anything—I was just on the weaker side. Living in the city saw me cooped up in bed a lot, but I was full of energy at the sanatorium. I guess Luka realized it, and that was why she targeted me. She probably figured that even though it was too risky to drag the others around too much, I’d be fine.”

“I guess she had a good nose for sniffing things out...”

“She’s still got those uncanny animal instincts, you know. In any case, she quickly had me wrapped around her little finger... Good times.”

“But she doesn’t remember it?”

“Yeah. I recognized who she was when we met again, but I kept quiet—I didn’t want to stir up the hornet’s nest, you know? As you can see, though, she still caught me in the end...”



“As far as I’m concerned, I’m grateful for her,” I said.

Clope cocked his head. “Why’s that?”

“If she hadn’t done what she did, you never would’ve set up in Maalt as a blacksmith, right? I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

Back when I’d been human, I could’ve just patronized other blacksmiths and been fine. My skills weren’t anything worth bragging about, so as far as weapons went, I just needed your standard fare.

Now, though? I needed a weapon that fit my unique circumstances, built through trial and error. And would I even have been able to find a blacksmith willing to accept me and make weapons for me in the first place, given what I was?

In that sense, I had to thank Luka. Clope too, of course.

I hadn’t said it aloud, but Clope seemed to figure it out anyway, because he nodded. “I guess so. But from that perspective, I should thank Luka too. If I hadn’t settled in Maalt, I never would’ve met a guy as interesting as you.”

“Sounds like we’re in the same boat, then.”

“I guess we are.”

We shared a laugh.

“Anyway, a lot’s happened, but that’s how I came to be a blacksmith in this town,” Clope continued. “Oh, actually—I haven’t told you the reason we picked Maalt, have I?”

“You haven’t, now that you mention it. Why did you? Surely a bigger city would’ve been the better choice.” It definitely would’ve been more convenient in a lot of ways.

“That’s true...” Clope admitted. “But when I was thinking of where we should settle down after we got married, I definitely didn’t want to be near Welfia, and I figured if I set up in any of the larger towns or cities I’d run into somebody I knew. I ended up picking Maalt because it was a frontier town, and that came with a lot of benefits. It helped that the constant stream of monsters meant a consistent demand for weapons, so I knew I’d probably do good business.”

That was a pretty practical reason—but I guess you had to think like that when putting down roots and building a home. When you were single and even your death wouldn’t inconvenience anybody, you could do whatever you pleased, but once you were married, you had to think about the future.

It was why I admired couples like Clope and Luka, but also found it difficult to believe the day would ever come when I’d have what they had. If I ever married...*somebody*, I’d be wracked with guilt worrying that I’d suddenly die and leave them behind one day.

That was when it occurred to me—as I was now, it was pretty hard for me to die. Even if I was hit with a blow lethal enough to instantly kill most people, I could still recover to a certain extent. Given that, maybe building a home would actually be possible...?

Nah, probably not. For starters, my body was undead. Who’d want a husband whose body wasn’t even human?

Like I thought, the first thing I had to do was regain my humanity. Existential Evolution was probably the key to that, but things hadn’t been going well in that regard recently. I was working hard to get stronger, but it was going to take a lot more than that. I needed to slay monsters and absorb their strength, and then on top of that I needed some kind of “impetus.” I hadn’t needed that much of one to go from skeleton to ghoul, but I got the feeling the requirements were going to get more demanding. Human flesh, vampire’s blood...what would I need next? I had no idea.

On the other hand, perhaps those things were only necessary for such large jumps in progress, and otherwise I could do it without them—it would just be slower.

It was uncommon for monsters to go through Existential Evolution, and even

more rare for monsters of higher orders to do it—and yet I’d made several leaps in a short time frame. The obvious conclusion was that I’d fulfilled some conditions that had made it much easier for me to go through Existential Evolution than ordinary monsters, and it was possible that one of those conditions was that I’d ingested human flesh and vampire blood.

Whatever the case, all I could do was keep fumbling forward. I hadn’t plateaued yet. I’d seek out Existential Evolution, and one day...I *would* regain my humanity.

Now, back to my conversation with Clope...

“So after a number of twists and turns, you settled down in Maalt,” I said. “Why do you have to participate in the blacksmithing contest now, after all this time?”

“I...got a letter. Here.”

Clope handed me a letter written on coarse paper, and I began to read.



It’s been a while, Clope. Do you still remember me?

What am I saying? You couldn’t possibly have forgotten the master who drilled the fundamentals of blacksmithing into you. I’m hoping you didn’t, anyway, which is why I’m writing this letter.

Now that I think back, how many years has it been since you left my workshop? I can still clearly recall the day you first showed up, a snot-nosed kid with a twinkle in your eye...as well as what you looked like as you grew into your own and became a fully-fledged blacksmith. That’s why, when you left...

Ah, but look at me, getting sentimental in my old age. I didn’t write this letter to reminisce on the old days. I’ll get straight to the point, then.

Will you come to Welfia and participate in the next blacksmithing contest? It’s the same one you competed in all those years ago.

I know you’re still a blacksmith—and a damn good one too. I want to see your skills. I mentioned earlier, but I’m getting old. Retirement’s on the horizon for me, but before I hang up my hammer, I want to see your smithing again one

more time. Will you grant an old man his wish?

Ah, I should mention that Hazara will be participating too. Hazara's the deputy head smith of the workshop these days, though I've been the inferior blacksmith for a long time now. This contest will also serve as my final test to see whether I can entrust the workshop to your old rival.

I'm sorry to dredge up old memories, but you're both grown adults now. Am I wrong to think that you can come together and wash away my regrets?

Please.

But, well...if you don't feel like it, then that's that, I guess.

I've got high hopes for you.

Yours,

Barzel Staro



"So..."

*"The way I see it, he's telling me to come to terms with my past. It's his way of showing he cares. I can't *not* go, right?"*



Chapter 3: The Cup and the Monster Tamer

“I see,” Lorraine said, as she stuffed bites of food from the dishes on the table into her mouth. “So Clope’s had quite a colorful life up until now.”

After hearing Clope out to the end of his tale and accepting his request, I went grocery shopping on my way back to Lorraine’s. As it turned out, she’d been busy studying the cup, and was still at it.

It was quite deep into the night now—well past an ordinary dinnertime—but when I’d asked Lorraine if she was still hungry after she reached a stopping point and came out of her room, she’d said yes, so I’d whipped up something quick for us.

Lorraine was actually quite the voracious eater: rare were the times she had no appetite at all, and she would eat just about anything. It amazed me how much she could fit into her stomach, especially given how slender her hips were. Where did it all go?

As for me, I’d never been that big of an eater, but these days it took more than a regular-sized meal to fill me up. I suspected that if I felt like it, I could eat as much food as I wanted. I could be satisfied with blood alone, but that was a pretty dull diet, so I put in the effort to enjoy regular meals too, when I could.

“Well, I don’t mean this in a bad way, but it’s not every day that you get such a talented blacksmith settling down in a place like Maalt,” I said. “I’d be more surprised to hear he *didn’t* have extenuating circumstances.”

“That’s true,” Lorraine agreed. “It’d be one thing if he’d been born around here, but this isn’t the sort of place a skilled blacksmith would choose to build a successful career. Though, perhaps I’m not one to speak in that regard.”

Come to think of it, Lorraine had done something similar. She was a capable enough researcher that she could have obtained a decent amount of fame and status working in the city, yet she’d chosen a frontier town out in the sticks like Maalt.

Perhaps this place just had some strange allure to it that attracted eccentrics. If it did, then Laura Latuule would surely be at the center of it—her sheer peculiarity made the idea seem likely, in fact.

I wondered why her vampire household had chosen to base themselves here. Likely they wanted to avoid notice, since that would be a vampire's top priority, but...why Maalt specifically?

Ah, well. Puzzling over it probably wouldn't get me anywhere.

"Maalt's supposed to be the kind of town where country bumpkins like me come to make a name for themselves," I mused aloud.

Lorraine gave me a look. "Actually, I think you fall pretty comfortably into the 'eccentric' category..."

Well, can't argue with that.

"Oh, right—Lorraine."

"Yes?"

"Since it seems like you've reached a stopping point in your research, did you figure out anything about the cup?"

"Oh, that. The short answer is...yes and no."

"Meaning?"

"I'll start with its basic functions. As I expected, it's not just an ordinary cup. It has the ability to collect a specific type of static mana."

"You mean..."

There were various kinds of static mana. Mana with different elemental attributes, temporary localized influxes of chaotic mana created by potent spells, and clashing whirlpools of warping mana created by large numbers of monsters gathering in one place.

However, since Lorraine had called it "specific," she likely wasn't talking about those generalized forms, but static mana with a particular property of some kind.

"It's the type we're the most familiar with," Lorraine explained. "The static

mana that manifests when you kill a monster. The cup has the ability to gather that mana into a single location—at least, I’m fairly sure it does.”

“Huh. Sounds interesting. But what’s the point of doing that?”

“That’s still unclear. Well, to be more accurate...I have a good idea, but I just can’t say for sure since I haven’t been able to experiment with it yet.”

“And that idea is?”

“I happen to know of something quite similar to this cup. That’s how I struck upon the idea that it might be a magical item capable of doing the same thing, albeit artificially and with a high degree of efficiency.”

“Come on, don’t hold out on me here.”

“You haven’t figured it out already?” Lorraine gave me a meaningful look. “The static mana that manifests when a monster is killed becomes unstable, unbound from any owner. Can you think of anyone who can gather that mana for themselves?”

Ah. “You mean me?”

“There you go—though the more precise answer is ‘monsters in general.’ As a matter of fact, even humans can absorb strength and mana from the monsters they slay, albeit at a drastically less efficient rate. In other words, that capability—which all living beings technically possess—has been applied to this cup.”

“Hmm...I get it. But what would you use something like this for? Does it improve your mana absorption rate if you carry it around while you kill monsters?”

“That would be fascinating, but I won’t know until I test it. Edel’s bringing me a number of small slimes from the sewers tomorrow, so I’m thinking of experimenting on them.”

“Wait, you’re not going to give those slimes the cup, are you?”

“I am. I’ll be making them fight, observing whether the victor absorbs the loser’s mana, and if so, measuring the absorption efficiency and various other factors.”

“Hey, just a thought...but if it really does increase the rate of mana absorption

for monsters, doesn't that mean it makes Existential Evolution easier?"

"Oh, well done for realizing that! Yes, if the cup can do that, then there's a high chance it would help."

"Is it dangerous?"

"Of course it is. But experimentation and danger go hand in hand. Humanity can never make progress if it's too busy cowering under the sheets."

I'd almost forgotten—Lorraine truly was a mad alchemist at heart. There'd be no dissuading her. Besides, I trusted that she'd at least implement the bare minimum of safety measures—and if things got really bad, she probably wouldn't hesitate to dispose of the whole experiment, cup and all.

So there was no problem...right?

I looked at Lorraine. Her eyes had taken on a faraway look, perhaps because she was thinking about tomorrow's experiment.

I began to get very worried.



"Good mor— Whoa. What's this?"

As I left my room and stepped into the living room to greet Lorraine, I was suddenly confronted with the sight of a small puchi suri swarm. The little pickpockets had been divided into several groups, with one in each group carrying a small container on its back that emanated mana.

Edel, my familiar, stood before them as if he were a military captain. Lorraine was at his side, looking terribly pleased with herself.

"Oh, Rentt, you're up," she said, when she noticed me. "Good morning."

"Mmm. So...what's going on here? You caught me by surprise—I couldn't detect their mana."

Edel and his other puchi suri minions, being monsters, naturally discharged mana. However, the amount they were giving off was much less than usual. Were they doing it on purpose?

"Those containers they're carrying hold my order from the yesterday. I didn't

want too much external contamination, since they gobble up whatever mana's around them, so I requested Edel and his henchmen to suppress theirs. They're a talented bunch—they managed to do exactly as I asked."

"What you ordered yesterday...? Oh, the slimes from the sewers. Makes sense."

Slimes were primitive monsters that grew by absorbing whatever they could latch on to in their environment. That included animal and monster corpses, of course, but their tendency to take in mana was stronger than other monsters' too.

That said, it didn't mean they were more efficient at it—just that they were exceedingly susceptible to outside influence. Slimes that inhabited mana-dense areas were lively and took the initiative in attacking other living things, but where mana was thin, they moved about sluggishly, only able to consume the remains of already dead animals.

Slimes could be affected in other ways as well, but given how much of an impact mana had on their disposition, Lorraine must have wanted to limit any experimental bias and use specimens that were as ordinary as possible. Of course, if you left them alone for a while, they'd eventually lose any changes they'd undergone due to environmental influences or the mana of other monsters, but I suspected that Lorraine wanted to begin the experiment as soon as she could.

She was like a child faced with a new toy. Maybe all researchers were like that, more or less.

"All right, Edel, take the slimes to my laboratory—and be careful."

"*Scream!*" Edel replied. He gestured to his henchmen, and they all headed up the stairs in perfect marching order.

I was momentarily distracted by the strange sight—a swarm of puchi suri moving like well-trained soldiers—but soon regained my senses. "You're starting the cup experiment soon, right?" I asked. "Mind if I watch?"

"Not at all," Lorraine said. "You might find it boring, though—it could be that nothing will happen at all. If you're okay with that, feel free. Just don't say I

didn't warn you."

"Yeah, I know. Thanks."

We followed after Edel, headed for the laboratory.

A small part of me wondered what it meant that Edel had no problem obeying Lorraine's orders when he was *my* familiar. Was she superior to me, in his eyes? I supposed he wasn't wrong about that. I *was* freeloading in her house. The landlady's word was law around here.

I decided to ask Lorraine about it.

"I don't have their absolute obedience or anything," she said. "We just struck a deal. They listen to my requests, and I supply them with food, magical items, and things like that."

"When did you set that up...?"

"A while ago. They've done a lot of work for me. You didn't know that?"

Lorraine was referring to how I was connected with my familiar.

"Well, I can read his thoughts or see what he sees if I try, but it's not as if I can keep that active constantly. Edel's free to do whatever he wants most of the time. I knew he'd helped you out a time or two, but I didn't realize he did it so often."

"Really now? It wasn't my initial intention, but he was good at what he did. These days, I basically see him as an assistant, or maybe a supplier who drops in on the regular. He does a lot for me."

"I'm glad he's helpful...but now I'm starting to wonder whether he's still even my familiar." From the sound of things, he was more Lorraine's.

"I'd like to have my own familiar too, but unfortunately, I'm only human. A monster tamer could manage it, but they keep the majority of their methods close to the chest, so it'd be no easy feat to learn... Actually, do you think your foster father would teach me if I asked, Rentt? I've been thinking recently that it'd make my research a lot easier, including this experiment on the cup."

Recently, we had found out that my foster father in Hathara had the extremely rare and potent ability of being a monster tamer. This ability had

been passed down among the residents of Hathara from ages past, and he was even able to command a lindblum—a powerful monster that usually could not be tamed.

That would definitely be an extremely useful skill to have, particularly for a monster researcher like Lorraine. I had no doubt she was just itching to learn it.

“That’s a good point. Let’s drop by Hathara sometime soon; things have settled down a little, so it wouldn’t be a bad idea to give them an update on how we’re doing. It’d be nice to see Capitan and Granny Gharb, and we can ask him about training you while we’re there.”

It wasn’t just that I wanted to see them—it would be necessary preparation for the Silver-class Ascension Exam too. If I wanted to review my fundamentals, then there was no better way than to ask the advice of the very people who’d *taught* me those fundamentals. Capitan and Gharb had been my first teachers in the fields of swordsmanship and magic.

Oh, and I also wanted to visit Isaac and get his opinion on the skills my monster body gave me access to.

Lorraine nodded. “That sounds fun. Even if it’s not complete mastery, getting monsters to obey me to any degree would expand my options and advance my research!” Then, she laughed aloud.



We entered the laboratory, where Edel and Lorraine directed Edel’s henchmen to place the containers they were carrying on the spacious workbench.

“The slimes are in those, right?” I asked.

“Mm-hmm. Those containers are magical equipment I provided them with, designed to hold slimes of the size you frequently see in the town’s sewers. Regular-sized ones would have been too big for Edel’s henchmen to catch.”

“You made the containers?”

“I did. The puchi suri couldn’t very well have carried the slimes back in their mouths, after all. I settled on this design after a little thinking.”

In short, they were containers customized for the puchi suri to use. Would she be creating more and more personalized equipment for them as time went on? The thought was a little scary—though, it *would* benefit me in the sense that Edel was my familiar. His henchmen getting stronger was kind of like me getting stronger too.

“Let’s see here...” Lorraine opened one of the containers on the workbench and examined the contents.

Slowly, a tiny slime oozed out. It was about as big as my pinky finger, a tenth—or even a hundredth—the size of a slime you’d see outside of town or in a dungeon. Naturally, its magic crystal was tiny too. Not so small that you’d need a microscope to see it, but you’d certainly have to strain your eyes.

The reason these tiny slimes inhabited the sewers was because anything larger or more powerful would be detected and exterminated as it approached the town. At this size, however, they could easily creep in without being noticed.

They might become a problem one day after going through Existential Evolution, but the bigger they got, the easier they were to find and eliminate. Your average Copper-classer was enough for an ordinary-sized slime.

Besides, Existential Evolution was a considerably rare occurrence in the town’s sewers. The monsters that resided there were just too weak.

“This slime’s mostly free from outside influence, just like I asked,” Lorraine noted. “I can begin experimenting on it right away.”

“About that...how are you going to give it the cup?” I asked. “It’s too small.”

“That’s a good point, but it’s not as if there aren’t any options. I’ll start with the most obvious.”

“Which is?”

“Well, you see...”



“All right!” Lorraine cheered. “Come on! You can do it!”

“No, not like that!” I exclaimed. “Like *that*! Yes! Go!”

I was cheering too. What for, you ask? The answer was simple—Lorraine and I were watching the center of the workbench, where the cup was fixed in place. Inside it were two tiny slimes, entangled with each other as they fought. They were each trying to consume the other.

Unlike goblins and orcs, which had a degree of inherent sympathy for their brethren, slimes were emotionless monsters who wouldn't hesitate to attack others of their kind. Thus, if you stuffed them into a confined space like the cup, they'd immediately begin fighting.

Regular-sized slimes fought by consuming their targets and dissolving them, or using other methods like Acid Blitz, an ability that launched highly acidic liquid at you. However, it appeared that slimes this small were too weak to use such tactics. All they had been doing this whole time was trying to swallow each other.

Lorraine and I had been bored watching them, so we'd started betting on who would win.



There were arenas where you could go to see monsters pitted against each other, and bet on the outcome, but I'd never been anywhere that had one. Now that I'd tried it, though, watching these tiny slimes duke it out was pretty fun.

Since monsters didn't take commands from people (except monster tamers, of course), the results were always unpredictable when they fought. It was exciting how difficult their actions were to predict. Martial contests between people had a general flow to them that you could anticipate. That was engaging in its own way, but fights between monsters had an allure of a different kind.

Establishing a monster fighting ring in Maalt might be a pretty profitable venture. There were already puchi suri racetracks, but I was fairly certain there was nothing combat focused.

Then again, you'd need to secure monsters to do the fighting. I doubted anyone would be interested in watching a miniature fight between puchi suri, and capturing anything bigger seemed like a lot of effort...

I decided to just hope someone else would set one up someday, and content myself with slime combat for now.

"Looks like it'll be over soon," Lorraine observed, as she watched the battle taking place in the cup.

She was right; both of the tiny slimes looked pretty worn out. It felt like whichever one ran out of willpower first—did slimes even *have* willpower?—would lose.

Lorraine was cheering for the one with a faint red tinge, while I was backing the slightly blue one. Their coloring wasn't because of any magical attribute; as far as I could sense, both of their mana signatures were neutral. It was probably just from something they'd eaten.

Finally, the battle was reaching its climax. For a brief second, the blue slime stopped moving, giving the red slime the opportunity to spread open wide and engulf it.

"Yes!" Lorraine cheered.

"Seriously...?" I groaned.

The red slime slowly digested the blue one, absorbing it until not a trace was left and its tiny core dissolved, releasing a burst of static mana.

Lorraine's expression became serious. "This is the moment of truth, Rentt," she said.

For a moment, it almost seemed as if the static mana was going to disperse into the surroundings—but before it could, a strange presence emanated from the cup. The mana immediately changed direction and began gathering into a single point: the red slime. More specifically, it was gathering in its core.

Lorraine and I watched it, careful not to miss anything.



"And here's the results..." Lorraine murmured. She didn't seem surprised so much as deeply satisfied.

In contrast, I was still skeptical. "It doesn't look like it's changed much..."

The victorious slime was still in the cup. While it had been the size of my pinky before, it was now as big as my thumb, because it had absorbed the mana from the loser and increased the scale of its existence. That much I could recognize.

However, that was nothing out of the ordinary. Most monsters were capable of absorbing the strength of those they defeated. You couldn't tell where that strength would go, but it generally improved their base ability in some way.

I had experienced that exact phenomenon myself. Defeating monsters had improved my reserves of mana and spirit, made my body more durable, and increased my physical capabilities. Of course, my exact experience might have been an outlier, given how unusual my circumstances were, but it did confirm that monsters *were* capable of undergoing a process like that.

Therefore, the fight between the slimes and the subsequent digestion of the loser hadn't seemed like anything surprising, at least to my eyes.

"It's difficult to tell at a glance, but the mana was absorbed very efficiently. I saw it with my magical eyes," Lorraine explained. "I know how much power monsters take from each other after they've fought. Compared to that, the slime absorbed an unusual amount. Of course, eyeballing it isn't as good as

getting an exact measurement.”

She then showed me the indicator on the measuring instrument she’d set up on the workbench before the slime fight. This tool wasn’t one of her own making. I’d never seen anything like it in magical equipment stores before, but apparently she’d ordered it from the Empire, where it was a commonly used implement at their Tower and Academy.

In short, this was a tool meant for researchers and educational institutions, not something an ordinary citizen like me could get their hands on—both from a connections standpoint and a financial one. It was indispensable when it came to measuring experimental results, though, so naturally Lorraine owned a variety of such tools.

Usually, a layman like myself wouldn’t be able to read the result on such an instrument even if I had it in front of me. However, I’d known Lorraine for a long time and had assisted with her experiments more than once or twice. I’d helped her set up equipment or measure results often enough that I made for a fairly decent assistant at this point. She’d taught me how to read them, so I had no issue understanding what I was seeing.

“You’re right—the efficiency looks pretty good,” I agreed. “Compared to the usual rate, it’s...”

Lorraine had given me the results of a trial test without the cup, and the mana transfer rate was less than a third of what it was inside the cup. That meant that simply *having* the cup allowed a monster to increase its strength at more than three times the normal rate. What a terrifying thought. If I’d had this back when I’d been a skeleton, I would’ve only needed to go through a third of the hardship I’d suffered.

“Of course, while we can’t rely on the result of a single trial, it’s clear that the cup is a potent object,” Lorraine said. “Let’s keep experimenting.”

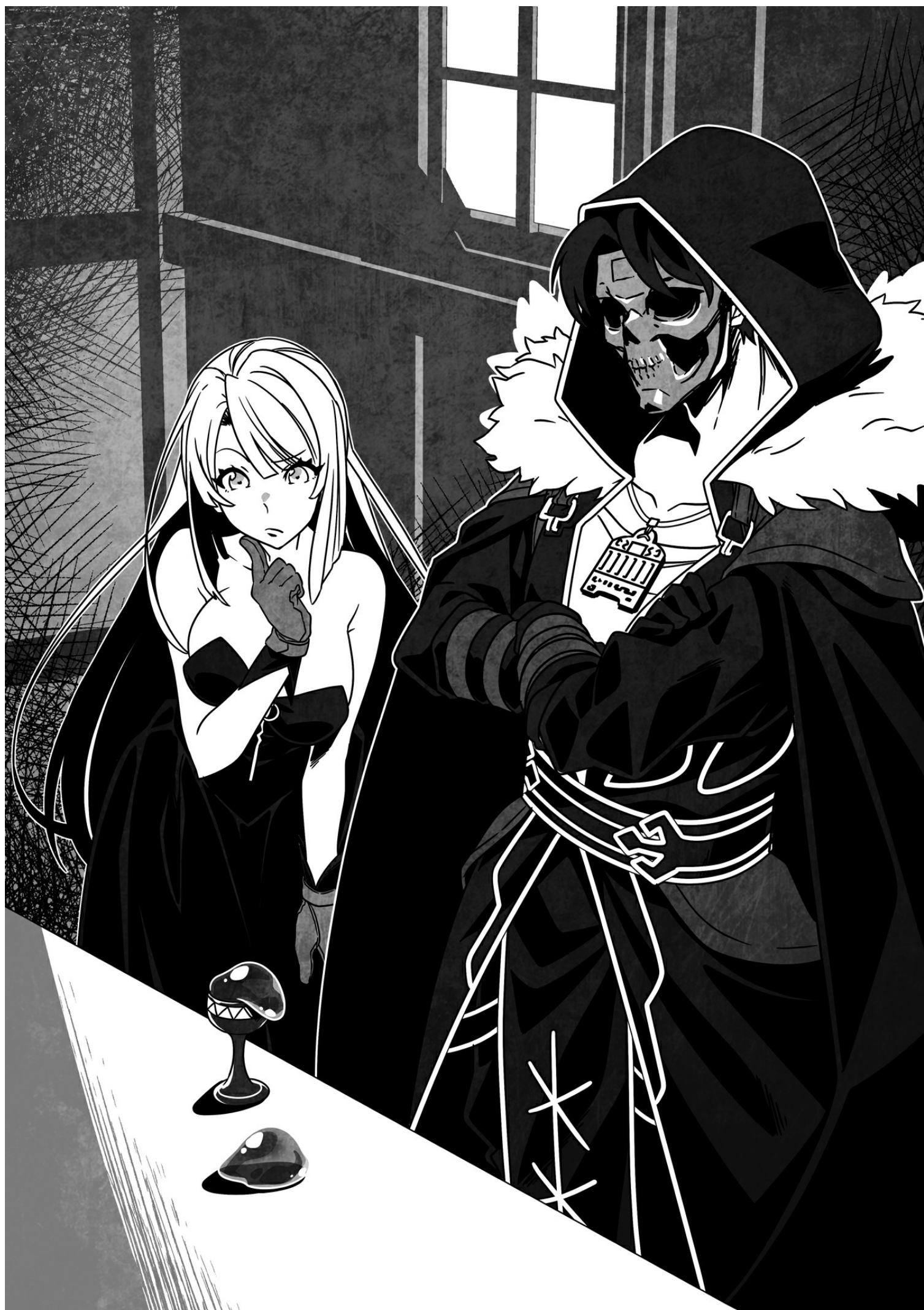
Using the slimes that Edel and his henchmen had gathered, we repeated the process of making the slimes fight (and betting on them), recording the results each time. The conclusion we reached was that the cup did indeed increase the amount of mana absorbed roughly threefold.

We had set it up so that as the slimes grew bigger, they would continue to

fight others of a similar size...but eventually that became a problem.

“I don’t think they’ll fit anymore,” Lorraine observed. “The cup just looks like a tiny slime bath now.”

A single slime now fit snugly into the cup, jiggling. While it had been the size of my pinky at first, it was now as big as an egg after all the fights it had gone through.



Edel and his henchmen had brought around twenty or so slimes, but now there were only two: the one in the cup, and another one of similar size on the workbench. They'd both ended up like that after absorbing the mana from their compatriots.

"Now that we've come this far, it feels right to pit them against each other so we can end up with a single one," I said. That will make it easier to contain too.

"Well, they won't be able to fight in the cup," Lorraine replied. "We'll have to figure out a way to hold it somehow while they go at it instead. But how do we get them to obey?"

"If that's the problem, then..."

Tossing the slimes into the cup and making them fight was one thing, but getting them to hold it was another. It was possible, since slimes were capable of hardening specific parts of their gelatinous bodies, but it wasn't like they were capable of listening.

An idea suddenly occurred to me. "Should I make one my familiar?" I muttered.

Lorraine shook her head. "That would contaminate it with your mana. It might force Existential Evolution and even possibly change its species, so..."

She was right—that was how blood bonding with a creature worked. It could turn people into ghouls or thralls, or make creatures like Edel observably more powerful. There was a good chance the same would happen to the slime if it absorbed some of my mana, biasing the experiment. That made my idea a no-go.

"So...what do we do?" I asked.

Lorraine thought over it for a moment. "As I suspected," she said eventually. "Our best option for getting monsters to obey is to ask a specialist."

In other words, my foster father.



My foster father, Ingo Faina, was both the mayor of Hathara and a monster tamer capable of commanding powerful monsters like lindblums. He'd even

brought us from Hathara on the back of one when the vampire Shumini had attacked Maalt.

He'd returned home after that, of course, so if we wanted to see him, we would have to make the trip. The problem was that Hathara was a long way away. It would take a decent horse-drawn carriage about a week, and that was just one way. Not a huge deal in the grand scheme of things, but I was preparing for the Silver-class Ascension Exam and time was precious. It was under a month out—I couldn't afford to spend two weeks just traveling.

"But we've got a solution to that problem, haven't we?" Lorraine said. In her hand, she held an innocuous blue stone. It looked like something she could've picked up off the ground, but it was actually a magical item that Gharb the herbalist and Capitan the hunter had given to us the last time we'd visited Hathara. The stone could create a permanent teleportation circle at a designated location.

In the modern age, nobody could create magical items of such power, so we'd had to keep it secret. If this stone were put up for auction, it would fetch an astronomical price.

Neither Lorraine nor I were particularly greedy for money, though. The stone's teleportation ability was a much bigger draw for us, and something we had little hesitation in using. We just hadn't decided on where to place the circle yet.

Also, having little hesitation didn't mean we had *none*. Whenever you used an item that could gain you vast riches if you sold it, it was inevitable that doubts would pop into your mind. Still, given the circumstances, we didn't really have a choice.

Besides, the exit was already fixed, set by Capitan to the underground city of Good King Felt in the Lelmudan Empire. There were a number of other teleportation circles there too, which led to places like Hathara or the royal capital of Yaaran. Some hadn't been investigated yet, but so far there were none that led to Maalt. If we made one here, though, it would mean we'd have easy access to any number of cities right on our doorstep. Given how convenient that would be, there was no particular need to hem and haw over

the decision.

I still felt a little hesitation, but that just showed I was stingy down to my core...

Lorraine, however, was the type to make a decision and commit to it completely.

“Here goes,” she said, tossing the blue stone onto the floor.

Incidentally, we were doing this in the basement of a different house that Lorraine owned, which was located on the outskirts of Maalt. From the outside, the house looked as ordinary as can be, but it had a surprising amount of room underground. That wasn’t too strange by itself, since Lorraine had purchased this house and land in order to carry out dangerous experiments, but when I’d marveled at how she’d been able to find something so convenient, she’d informed me that she’d personally ordered the basement to be expanded.

That only made sense. It had been a little silly of me to think that this had just been lying around waiting for her—nobody living in this area would’ve needed a basement that spacious and sturdy.

It was a good thing Lorraine owned a place like this, though. It had been difficult to decide where the teleportation circle should go—our first thought had been to use her home in town, since it also had a basement that could keep it hidden from prying eyes, but one little thing going wrong could result in monsters suddenly appearing in the middle of Maalt.

That wasn’t *likely*, since usage of the teleportation circles required the blood of someone from Hathara, but it wasn’t *completely* outside the realm of possibility. A monster that had attacked someone from Hathara, for example, might happen to step on a circle while still covered in blood.

We also couldn’t rule out the possibility that the teleportation circle itself would malfunction and cause a huge explosion. Descriptions of failed magic circles that made the surrounding mana go berserk and cause accidents were so common that they even showed up in picture books. Though it hadn’t happened to us personally, we couldn’t say it *never* would.

Given all that, we were reluctant to set up the circle in Lorraine’s house in the

middle of town. We figured that establishing it on the outskirts instead would limit the collateral damage in the event of any accidents. There was a lot of open land around here with not much around, and we could put several barriers and magical tools in place for protection. It was great from a secrecy standpoint too—nobody really came out here, so if anybody *did* show up, we'd immediately be able to designate them as suspicious.

All together, those were the reasons we'd decided to place the teleportation circle here.

The blue stone struck the stone floor with a *crack*, shattering into pieces. Lorraine hadn't put much strength into the toss, but the fact that the pieces vanished was proof that it hadn't been an ordinary stone.

All of a sudden, a magic circle began to draw itself out from the center point of where the stone had broken.

"No matter how many times I see that, it's incredible..." Lorraine murmured. Then, her words took on a self-mocking tone. "But even after getting such a close look at teleportation magic, I still can't puzzle it out."

Apparently, being able to fully analyze the magic circle and exactly how it was drawn would mean the revival of teleportation magic in the modern age. However, just figuring out the pattern wasn't enough—you needed to understand any number of unknown techniques, starting with the stroke order and mana input method. It wasn't something you could just look at and figure out.

The fact that even Lorraine hadn't managed to fully analyze it meant that the revival of teleportation magic was still far into the future.

"All right, it's done," Lorraine said. "Let's drop by Hathara and say hello, Rentt."

I nodded. "Sounds like a plan."



We stepped onto the magic circle and found ourselves teleported to the underground city of Good King Felt. After a short wait, a massive tiger approached us, having caught our scent.

This was a powerful monster called a shakhor melekhnamer. Aside from its imposing physical size, it possessed dense mana reserves that radiated from its body and a glint in its eye that revealed its intelligence, albeit one different from that of humans. Just standing in front of it was enough to make me shiver.

I could never beat one in a straight fight, and Lorraine's chances weren't that much better. If she were allowed plenty of time to lay traps everywhere and was able to fight from a hidden position, she could possibly win—but even that exaggerated hypothetical had one-in-a-hundred odds. This monster was just that powerful.

Lorraine and I had nothing to fear from it, though. We knew it held no animosity toward us—on the contrary, it began to rub its huge head against me, a low purr rumbling from its throat.



As it was, it was hard to see it as anything other than an oversized cat. Who could be scared of that?

“No matter how many times I see it, that never gets any less strange...” Lorraine murmured, watching the tiger nuzzle against me.

“It’s usually not the kind of monster that’s friendly with humans,” I agreed. “I wonder how they tamed it, back in ancient times.”

According to Gharb, this particular shakhor melekhnamer felt a bond with my blood. In other words, a long time ago, people had found a way to train monsters to have affection for certain families.

I didn’t know exactly how long ago that had been, but did that mean a shakhor melekhnamer could live for over a millennium or two? Or had it been arranged somehow that this lineage of monsters would react to my—that is, the people of Hathara’s—blood, no matter the generation? I doubted I’d be able to reach a conclusion.

Lorraine seemed to be thinking along similar lines. “You could write an entire thesis on the answer to that,” she said. “Though while you’re at it, you could write one on the existence of this shakhor melekhnamer alone too. Revealing the method of taming one sounds like a bad idea...”

“That treatise would fly off the shelves,” I agreed. I knew exactly what she meant about it being a bad idea. “You’d have a lot of dangerous people doing whatever it takes to lure it to their side.”

“Still, would *you* want to pick a fight with someone who could order a shakhor melekhnamer around?”

That was an exceedingly good point. “You’re right—but you *would* get some people who’d think they could manage if it was just the monster by itself. Maybe they’d even bring a Mithril-class adventurer along in case it turned into a fight.”

“Just thinking about that is exhausting... Let’s keep quiet about the shakhor melekhnamer. If we didn’t have it around, we’d really be in trouble.”

“You’re right about that.”

We hadn't waited for the shakhor melekhnamer just because we'd wanted to feed it a treat like a pet. We *did* toss it some orc meat we'd brought, which it skillfully caught out of the air, but that was just to be nice.

The reason we'd waited was because we'd wanted to ride it out of the underground city. We knew the teleportation circle to Hathara was here too, and I could locate it with my Map of Akasha, but the sheer size of this place would make for a long trek. Not only that, but Good King Felt's underground city was actually located on the sixtieth floor of the Old Insect Dungeon in the Lelmudan Empire. As you might expect, the monsters around here were no joke. If Lorraine and I wandered a place like this on our own, we'd be in for a bad time.

However, if we rode on the back of the shakhor melekhnamer, the other monsters wouldn't attack us. Sixtieth-floor monsters were terrifying, but the shakhor melekhnamer outmatched them all. I couldn't be more glad that it was on our side.

"All right, let's go," Lorraine said, climbing onto the tiger's back.

I took up a position in front, while she wrapped her arms around my waist. Obviously, the shakhor melekhnamer wasn't fitted with a saddle, so it was difficult to maintain our balance without arranging ourselves like this. Sitting in front put a number of handholds within my reach, and the strength afforded to me by my monster body meant we'd be fine.

"Right," I said, patting the shakhor melekhnamer's head. "Thank you. You can go now."

With a rumbling growl, it set off, running through the underground city. I guided it using the directions Gharb had given me, and it obeyed without complaint.

A thought occurred to me. "Does this count as taming a monster?" I asked.

"Of course," Lorraine replied. "What monster tamers usually do is form a one-to-one master-servant bond, though. This shakhor melekhnamer would obey anyone from Hathara, right? That suggests the methodology used to tame it is fundamentally different...though I couldn't tell you how."

“So do you think my old man used a special method for the lindblum too?”

“It looked like what a regular monster tamer does to me, but they *do* say higher order monsters like lindblums aren’t tameable at all. It seems natural to assume he’s doing something differently.”

“I wonder what it is. Well, to begin with, how do regular monster tamers do it?”

“They keep that a trade secret, so the exact details aren’t clear. But my understanding is that it depends on the tamer. They don’t all practice the same methods.”

“What do you mean?”

“For example—and we’re talking the most basic of the basics here—some tamers say that monsters are just like regular animals, so training them is like teaching a pet to do tricks. Others see it completely differently. I don’t know the specifics, but I’ve heard they use mana to construct a bond between themselves and the monster, or something like that. Anyway, my point is that the rumors support the idea that a monster tamer’s methods are different depending on the individual.”



This was the shortest interval between my visits to Hathara in the past decade. In all that time, it hadn’t changed a bit: a tranquil little village where the people lived in peace.

Usually, I only visited once a year—and sometimes not even that frequently—so it must have seemed strange to everyone that I was back before a few months had even passed. And yet, they didn’t comment on it at all, welcoming me back with smiles. That was home for you.

“This is my second time here, but it’s just as lovely as the last,” Lorraine said warmly. After stepping through Hathara’s teleportation circle, we hadn’t taken any breaks in our walk from the ancient fortress in the forest—which took about half a day, if you went slowly—but her breathing was still steady. That was a testament to the unusually high stamina that adventurers possessed, regardless of gender. Lorraine had also enhanced her physical abilities with

magic to lessen the burden even further, but she would've been fine without it too. You couldn't cut it as an adventurer if you couldn't manage a half day's walk.

"You can say that again," I said. "I'd like to set up a teleportation circle closer to the village, though. It would make the trip easier."

I was actually half serious, but I still knew it was wishful thinking. There were two good reasons that would never happen—which Lorraine promptly brought up.

"Well, we only have the equipment to make one more pair of circles. I won't go so far as to say it'd be a waste, but this is a weeklong journey that we've already cut down to half a day. There are better places to put another teleportation circle. Besides, I'm rather hesitant to set one up so close to the village anyway. Anyone from Hathara can use one, so..."

"Yeah. One wrong step and they'd find themselves in Good King Felt's Dungeon City. Any ordinary person would be at their wits' end, especially since only Gharb, Capitan, and my old man know about it."

"Essentially. Still, if it's just a faster travel method you're after, it might be worthwhile to put some thought into other ideas."

"Other ideas?"

"Mmm. Using your father's lindblum, for example."

"That *would* make the trip quicker. Though...we don't have to get *too* crazy. An ordinary wyvern would do."

If we used the teleportation circle from Maalt to the fortress, then a wyvern for the trek to Hathara, we could reduce the travel time to an hour. It was worth looking into.

Riding the shakhor melekhnamer had also made me realize how convenient it was to have a mount. Monster tamers practiced their trade so they could have monsters fight in their place or alongside them, but I was more interested in learning it to secure a new mode of transportation.

Ingo was my foster father, sure, but he was still my *father*. Part of me

wondered if maybe he'd teach me if I was nice about it.

"Oh, we're here," Lorraine noted, interrupting our conversation and coming to a stop.

Up ahead was my family home. It was nostal—okay, not *really* nostalgic, given how recently we'd been here. My foster mother, Gilda Faina, was out in front, pushing the door open with her shoulder because of the stack of firewood in her arms. I ran over and held the door for her.

"Oh, how kind of— Rentt?! And Lorraine too!"

Apparently she'd thought I was someone else at first. She looked surprised to see me, and the emotion renewed itself when she spotted Lorraine a little ways away. I didn't blame her—Hathara was remote enough that you couldn't just drop by whenever you wanted. I doubt she expected us to come back again so soon.

Nevertheless, Gilda didn't look bothered at all—instead, she gave us a welcoming smile. "I'm glad to see you back. I was worried, since you left in such a hurry last time. Every time I asked, he would only insist that you were 'okay,' so..."

She had to be talking about my foster father, Ingo. After he'd taken us to Maalt, we hadn't had any contact. I'd intended to come back and let everyone know I was okay once things settled down, but with how busy I'd been recently I just hadn't found the chance. On account of that, it sounded like Ingo had had a hard time giving Gilda an explanation.

I felt pretty guilty about that. Ingo wasn't the type who was any good with explanations or excuses. You'd think he would be, since he was the mayor and all, but there just wasn't much occasion to get up on a podium in a rural place like Hathara—and even when he did, he had Gharb and Capitan around to help.

My foster father's job was mostly just keeping the village unified and running well. I couldn't blame him for clamming up in the face of his wife's interrogation.

"Well, he wasn't wrong about us being okay," I said. "We actually came to speak with him today, now that things have settled down. I'm also going to be

taking the Silver-class Ascension Exam soon, so I wanted to ask Gharb and Capitan to drill me on the fundamentals. I'm a little worried that I'm not ready yet."

"Silver-class?!" Gilda's eyes widened. "That's incredible, Rentt! You were stuck in Bronze-class for so long!"

She sounded so happy for me that it was hard to tell her that it was only going up in rank because I'd become a monster. I decided to evade the topic.

"It's...not *that* rare for adventurers to suddenly break out of their shells."

"Really?" Suddenly, Gilda leaned in close and whispered in my ear, throwing glances at Lorraine. "You wouldn't have Lorraine to thank for that, by any chance?"

"What's that supposed to mean...?"

"Come on—you know. Oh! Don't tell me you came to tell us about your engagement?"

"No! What?! Look, let's just go inside." I pushed her indoors with a sigh. If I'd let her continue, she'd have gotten carried away and said something really out of line.

At that point, Lorraine headed over. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"Just...thinking about how mothers are the same wherever you go."

"Hmm? What do you mean?"

"Don't worry about it. Let's just go inside."

"Right..."



"Rentt...and Miss Lorraine too? What brings you here?"

Upon entering the house, we saw my foster father, Ingo, locked in battle with a stack of documents. A closer inspection revealed that these were the account statements for the village's incomes, expenditures, and taxes. Ingo took his job as a mayor seriously, even if he was hopeless against his wife.

"Well, we never really got in touch after what happened, and it's been a

while. We came to talk.”

There was also the matter of asking him to teach us how to be monster tamers, but Lorraine and I would make that request later.

“I see. I *am* glad to have you here...but aren’t you busy? You didn’t have to come all this way to the middle of nowhere.”

Despite Ingo’s words, he knew exactly how we’d gotten here—he was just keeping the act up for Gilda. Maybe he was also warning us in a roundabout way that we shouldn’t be too quick to use the teleportation circles.

As far as Hathara was concerned, though, I knew nobody would let the secret slip. The solidarity of country folk was much stronger than city people realized it was, especially in places as remote as Hathara. You couldn’t survive out here if you didn’t work together. That was also why it was rare for anybody to be ostracized from the community. Maalt was rural too, but it was a sizable town with a lot of people and goods moving in and out. It was worlds apart from Hathara.

“I probably wouldn’t have if it was just to check in, but there’s more,” I explained. “I’m going to take the Silver-class Ascension Exam soon, so I’m here to retrain myself from the ground up.”

“Oh? Congratulations! Not that you know your result yet, I guess...”

“Stop, you’ll jinx me. Anyway, there’s a third reason too. Lorraine?”

“It’s a pleasure to see you again, Mayor Ingo,” Lorraine said. “I’m Lorraine Vivie.”

“How polite of you—ah, but don’t feel the need to stand on ceremony on my account. You’re Rentt’s... How should I put it? You’re very important to him.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that. Likewise, this might be a little late, but...please treat me the same as you would Rentt.”

“Oh? Certainly, if you don’t mind. May I call you Lorraine?”

“Of course.”

I was expecting Gilda to shoot Ingo a look, since they were such a close couple—or rather, since she was rather mad for him. One that said, “How dare you be

so casual with another woman!” But when I looked over, I saw that she was smiling, clearly in a good mood. She wasn’t the slightest bit angry.

That was rare. Back when I’d lived in Hathara, she’d snapped whenever he’d said anything more than the bare minimum to female traveling merchants or dancers.

What was more, Gilda wasn’t looking at Lorraine, but at me. Why?

No amount of thinking got me any closer to an answer. Well, so long as she wasn’t angry, I supposed everything was fine...

“So, Lorraine,” Ingo said. “Rentt said you two had business with me?”

“About that...” Lorraine glanced at Gilda.

The Gilda I knew would’ve snapped seeing that too, but instead, she said, “Oh, I’m sorry. I’ll step out for a moment. I forgot I promised Reggie some of the jam I made the other day!”

After that unnecessarily detailed explanation for her own actions, she placed some jam into a basket in the kitchen and hurried out of the house.

I couldn’t shake my suspicions. She’d been weirdly considerate this whole time. Just what, exactly, did she think my relationship with Lorraine really was? I’d expressly told her earlier that this wasn’t about marriage, actually. Had she been listening?

Ah, well. I doubted I’d get through to her if I tried...

Once the door had closed behind Gilda and the sound of her footsteps had faded away, Lorraine resumed.

“You have my sincerest apologies for driving your wife away...”

“No, it’s fine. She’s just happy to gain a new daughter.”

“No, I couldn’t possibly be... I doubt she would be happy with a daughter as old as I am.”

Lorraine was only twenty-four, but given how rural Hathara was, it wasn’t a strange thing for her to say. In areas like these, most people married before they turned twenty. After all, since the city was so far away and danger was

always just around the corner, life expectancies were shorter. Child deaths were more common than in the cities too. It was only natural that people out here put more of an emphasis on marrying younger and having more children.

These days, the average age of marriage in the cities was trending upward, especially in Lorraine's homeland, the Empire. Theirs was a country on the cutting edge of technology, where the men and women both had elite mindsets. Rumor had it that most people over there prioritized their career over marriage.

That wasn't a bad way to live, but if it were me, I'd want the best of both worlds. Easier said than done, though.

"I wouldn't call you 'old,'" Ingo said. "Hathara tends to marry later than other villages anyway."

"Is that so?"

"Indeed. We've followed that trend for a while, according to Gharb. My guess is that it's because we've always had brilliant mages and herbalists like her around. Children rarely pass away prematurely here, so we believe more strongly than other villages in waiting for the right partner."

"I see. No wonder Rentt's not at all in a hurry. I'd thought that was just a problem stemming from his personal views on marriage, but now I know where he gets it from."

I was twenty-five. If Lorraine was past her prime, then I was right there with her.

"I think Rentt's got a few more problems than that, honestly. Still, it gives me peace of mind that he has someone like you with him. Now, I don't mean to repeat myself, but what business was it that you had with me, Lorraine?"

I was sorely tempted to answer Ingo's insinuations, but they were already moving on as though he'd never said anything.

"Yes, regarding that," Lorraine said. "I was wondering if you would be willing to teach me your art."



“My art?” Ingo cocked his head.

Lorraine retrieved containers like the ones the puchi suri had been carrying out of her magic bag, though they were slightly larger. They weren’t empty, but you didn’t need me to tell you that. She opened them and a pair of gelatinous somethings oozed out onto my family home’s table.

“Slimes...? They look a lot smaller than average.”

Surprise briefly crossed Ingo’s face, but otherwise his reaction was muted. Of course a monster tamer wouldn’t be bothered by the targets of their art, though. Besides, the slimes were small enough that he could probably tell they wouldn’t pose much of a threat to a person.

Now, if it had been one of the villagers or an ordinary citizen from Maalt, they would have definitely still been surprised and frightened.

“Yes. They’re from the sewers underneath Maalt,” Lorraine confirmed.

There was a dungeon underneath Maalt, but it was quite deep and constructed from antiquated materials no longer in use today. Fortunately, it hadn’t caused much damage to Maalt’s water system. There had been a few problems—the massive changes underground meant issues were inevitable—but repairs had been carried out and everything was already back to running in good condition.

Part of that was because Maalt’s tradesmen were excellent, but I suspected that the Latuule household was pulling strings behind the scenes too. I hadn’t heard anything from them firsthand, but you could tell they were doing a diligent job of maintaining the town.

But getting back on topic...

Ingo nodded, accepting Lorraine’s explanation. “Ah, so it’s a small variety that slipped through the town’s defenses—though it’s hard to say for certain if it’s *actually* a small variety, since slimes scale in size quite differently from other monsters. Supposedly they can get as big as mountains, if left to their own devices for long enough. I’ve never seen it myself, of course. The ones around here can get as big as Gran Slimes, but the smaller varieties are rare.”

“You’re quite the expert on monsters. I would expect no less.”

“He was the one who taught me about slimes,” I said. “Other monsters too, of course. Although, I didn’t study anything beyond the stuff passed down through the family, so there’s probably a lot of discrepancies when you compare what I know to a city scholar’s research.”

“It *does* differ from what is usually held as common knowledge about slimes,” Lorraine said. “For example, I’ve never heard about a slime as large as a mountain.”

I hadn’t heard of one either—the largest I’d seen was a Gran Slime. There were several other types I knew about, but most seemed beyond my ability to fight, and I wasn’t reckless enough to seek them out to test that.

“You don’t see them anymore,” Ingo said. “Or rather, they don’t get that big unless you have a very special set of circumstances. My father told me that they were artificially created in ancient times. It’s likely impossible for them to naturally occur.”

“But...how?”

“I’m sure you’ve already guessed, Lorraine. Existential Evolution, carried out by human hands. Slimes as a species scale in size, yes, but at certain thresholds they still undergo Existential Evolution as well. Even the smaller varieties can grow bigger and bigger until eventually, they become one of the more unique variants of their species. That’s how Existential Evolution works for them.”

“You...*used* Existential Evolution?”

“Not me personally, no. People from ages past. All I have are scraps of knowledge passed down from back then. I couldn’t tell you how to make a slime grow that big. What I *can* tell you, though, is the lindblum you two rode used to be a small species of wyvern. I tamed it, bonded with it, and induced Existential Evolution to train it into what it is today.”

“But that’s impossible!” Lorraine exclaimed. “It’s common knowledge that monsters who’ve been tamed lose the ability to undergo Existential Evolution!”

“It actually depends on the method,” Ingo said calmly. “You’ve seen the lindblum with your own eyes. I’m sure you can tell. And there’s no reason I’d lie to you, after everything.”

He might not have been lying, but he'd certainly never mentioned anything like this before. Why was he giving us such a thorough explanation now?

"The reason you're only telling us this now..." I began. "Is it because this is something that shouldn't get out?"

"Yes, that's a factor. After all, it's a secret passed down only to the bloodline of the village's mayor—ah, sorry, I mean the ancient king. But when I saw the slimes Lorraine had brought, I figured it would be better for me to explain. And the art she wants me to teach her is monster taming, isn't it? It all works out, then."

My father's tone was lighthearted, but he wasn't being frivolous. He must have already seen right through us.

"That's true, but are you sure it's a good idea?" Lorraine asked. "It might be strange to hear that from me, since I'm the one asking you to do this, but..."

That was quite considerate of her, but she was right; we'd come expecting to be refused. She must have been surprised that Ingo had taken the initiative and started explaining even before she could.

"It's not exactly a *good* idea, no," Ingo said. "But we've entrusted you with the teleportation circles already. You already know one of the village's secrets, so why not another or three? You can even make it publicly available, Lorraine—I know you must want to, being a scholar—as long as you don't mention that it came from Hathara. What's more, the slimes you brought... They didn't get this big naturally, did they?"



"You can tell?" Lorraine sounded surprised. Only a little, though—part of her must have expected it.



From what Ingo had been telling us, we could plainly see his depth of knowledge on monsters, as well as how that knowledge differed from what was commonly accepted. It was no wonder he'd immediately spotted the peculiarities of the slimes we'd brought.

"Of course I can...is what I *want* to say, but sight alone isn't always enough to tell if a monster's growth has been induced by special means."

"Then how did you know these slimes were?" Lorraine asked.

"I got the sense they'd been forced to grow—similarly to how you'd artificially force crop growth. Not that a fast rate of growth is a bad thing for monsters, but you should let these slimes rest for a while if you're planning on evolving them any further."

"I'm surprised you can discern that much! What makes these slimes' growth bad, though? If growing fast isn't bad for monsters, then..."

"It doesn't just apply to monsters. You know how ordinary animals develop faster than humans, don't you? After we're born, we can't do anything for ourselves. It takes a year before we're even able to move properly under our own power. But animals gain their legs mere hours or even minutes after birth, because their world is harsh. Movement is the minimum they need to be capable of, if they're to escape death. And when it comes to monsters... Well, I'm sure you've figured out the rest already."

"They need to be able to fight for themselves, or they'll die..." Lorraine mused aloud. "You're right. They have the ability to absorb the strength of other monsters they kill. That, in turn, makes them juicier targets for other monsters too."

It was actually more common for monsters to hunt other monsters than it was for them to go after humans or animals. They banded together to attack humans when we encountered them, but the rest of the time, they were usually tearing into each other, fang and nail. And by killing other monsters, they absorbed their mana.

There were exceptions to this, of course, with plenty of examples of monsters coexisting. It could also differ based on special circumstances, like within

dungeons, so it wasn't a hard rule. But in general, it *was* a trend.

That all meant monsters had good reason for needing the strength to be independent, and as quickly as possible. It certainly made sense to me.

Ingo nodded at Lorraine. "Exactly. That's why it's not a bad thing for monsters to experience rapid growth. However—and this even goes for humans too—growing *too* quickly overburdens them. I'm sure you know already, given the size of your mana reserves, Lorraine, but a sudden increase in mana comes with quite a few problems, doesn't it?"

"You're well-versed in magic too, it seems. Yes. In my case, my mana reserves were no greater than your average mage's at first, but they suddenly multiplied in the span of a single year when I turned three, causing me a lot of physical pain. All I can remember of that year is writhing around in various states of agony."

"My condolences. But you know what I'm talking about, then. Even monsters are living beings. Their growth has a natural progression to it. Departing from that can result in abnormalities or impairments. These slimes are quite overburdened right now."

I found myself suddenly curious—it *definitely* wasn't because I was worried about the slimes, though. "What would happen if they were made to keep growing?"

Ingo considered it for a moment. "There are a few possibilities," he said. "The most likely is that their growth hits its limit. We call a monster's inherent potential for growth a 'capacity.' It's said that if that capacity is broken, a monster won't ever be able to grow again. This is why monsters lose the ability to undergo Existential Evolution when tamed by your common monster tamer."

"A capacity..."

"Yes. I was able to evolve a wyvern into a lindblum because I know a method of taming monsters that doesn't damage their capacity."

"And that's the method you're willing to teach me?" Lorraine asked.

Ingo nodded. "That's my intention, anyway. It's not something that can be learned overnight...but you're a talented mage. As long as I teach you the

theory, I'm sure you'll be able to put it into practice eventually."

"I take that to mean it requires the use of mana?"

"The method I know does, yes. It requires some rather complex mana manipulation, so progress would usually be measured in years. If you're already capable of that, though, then you only need to know *how* to do it."

Lorraine looked extremely relieved to hear that, and quite frankly I was too. We had been worried that he'd tell us it required ten years of training, or something equally as arduous. We always could have given up and looked for other methods, of course, but it was nice that our first option had worked out.

"I can't tell you how glad I am to hear that," Lorraine said. "Then, please. I'd love to learn it."

Ingo nodded in reply. "Likewise, it'll be my pleasure to teach you. Ah, but first, could you tell me about how you induced the growth of these slimes? I know a few methods myself, but this looks different. I find myself rather curious..."

"From my point of view, I'm shocked that you know multiple methods...but I'll save that for another time. I made these slimes grow...with this." Lorraine produced the cup from her magic bag and showed it to Ingo.

"What's this...?"

"It's a cup."

"I can see that much."

"R-Right. Well, it's a long story..."



"I see," Ingo murmured to himself. He'd picked up the cup and was examining it. "Skeletons... Crask Village... Hmm..."

I'd told him about the skeleton-hunting job I'd accepted and what that had turned into, as well as the strange magical object I'd found there.

"Can you discern anything about it?" Lorraine asked.

"Sorry to disappoint you, but, no," Ingo said. "Though, I *have* heard that there used to be magical items which could promote monster growth, a long time

ago...”

Lorraine leaned forward in excitement. “Truly?!”

“All I’m saying is I’ve heard about them. There aren’t any around here, nor do I know how to make them.”

Lorraine’s shoulders slumped. “Oh... I’m glad you’ve even mentioned it, though. The fact that they once existed means there’s a chance the technology to create them still exists somewhere. And as for the items themselves, we might find more out there than this, if we go looking.”

“Indeed,” Ingo agreed, mumbling to himself. “Although, that reminds me of...” His eyes flew open, as if in realization, but then he quickly shook his head.

His reaction piqued my interest—I wasn’t used to seeing him like that. “What’s wrong, old man?” I asked.

“It’s... No, it’s nothing.”

“Come on, you’re creeping me out. If you’ve thought of something, you might as well say it.”

“I...suppose you’re right. This is just a stray thought, mind you, but...this cup can spur monster growth, and when you had slimes fight inside it, the victor absorbed the loser’s mana, correct? At a high rate of efficiency you don’t normally see.”

“That about sums it up, yes—though we still have to check if they need to be *in* the cup or if merely holding it will do, as well as its range of effect and whether it has any other uses.”

“No, those aren’t relevant for now. It just occurred to me that it reminded me of something.”

“Yeah? Of what?”

“A dungeon.”



Though Lorraine and I were a little surprised, it made sense. At first, you might think what Ingo had said was absurd, but given the things we’d seen...

Well, we could confidently say that he was right. There *was* a resemblance.

It was easier for monsters to experience Existential Evolution in dungeons—far easier than in the outside world. This wasn't exactly a proven *fact*, but the experience and studies of leading adventurers and researchers suggested it was as close as you could get to one.

But why was that the case, you ask? What made dungeons different from the outside world?

There were many different theories, such as the mana within the space itself being denser or the enclosed area preventing mana from escaping outside. One particular theory seemed to match up with what Ingo was saying, though.

"Some people claim...that a dungeon is just a massive magical object," I said.

"Yes," Lorraine agreed. "And if that's true, then I suppose it wouldn't be surprising that they have the same effect as this cup. I still remember the explanation about dungeons that Laura gave us while we were searching the one below Maalt with her—she mentioned that there were different kinds. According to her, Maalt's underground dungeon was an example of one created using magic crystals or magical objects. So...I suppose it wouldn't be inaccurate to call the product of that process a magical item in itself."

"So dungeons artificially created by magic have the ability to encourage monster growth?"

"We can't say for certain that natural ones, if they even exist—we won't know unless we ask Laura—don't have the same ability. What we *do* know is that this cup *resembles* a dungeon. Perhaps it's...a miniature one, or something like that."

"That sounds crazy—for one thing, it doesn't have a maze of pathways in it."

"Well, we're merely talking about a resemblance in function...but that *does* suggest the possibility that they were created with the same technology. The knowledge that created this cup might be the foundation of what could eventually become the knowledge of how to create dungeons. Isn't that exciting?"

"I don't know... I get the feeling things aren't that simple."

First of all, there was the difference in scale. Just because you could play with building blocks didn't mean you could erect a castle. At most, this was the mere suggestion of a possibility of a connection.

"It sounds like my random musings have been rather helpful," Ingo said, smiling.

"Yes, they are a wonderful source of inspiration," Lorraine replied. "I think I'll take my future experiments on this cup in that direction. Not that I'll go in with preconceived biases, of course—with things like this, it's fairly common to find out there is no connection whatsoever."

Sometimes, you threw all your effort into advancing, only to find out you were going in the opposite direction. That didn't just happen with scientific research, but with everything in life.

You had to keep your mind open to new possibilities and advance with great care—and if you did that, sometimes you'd have the good fortune of discovering a new perspective that you'd previously missed.

The cup closely resembling a dungeon in ability was obvious in hindsight, but because of the difference in scale, we'd completely overlooked it. Maybe that was why it hadn't been Lorraine and I who'd spotted the connection, despite all our experiments, but Ingo and his fresh perspective.



"Now, going back to why you're here: learning to become a monster tamer."

Lorraine and I nodded.

"I mentioned this earlier, but Lorraine is excellent at mana manipulation," Ingo continued. "So it would be better for her to move straight into practical implementation after mastering the basics—unless you have any objections, of course."

"No, not at all," Lorraine replied. "If that's what you think is best, then I'll gladly listen. I'm a complete amateur in this particular field."

"Great. And what about you, Rentt? Gharb tells me you're rather skilled at mana manipulation yourself. You could probably pick up monster taming if you

put in the effort.”

“Huh? Me? Well...”

I’d returned to Hathara to be retrained by Gharb and Capitan, but what if I learned how to tame monsters too? Would that help me in the future?

It was less than a month before the Silver-class Ascension Exam, so I knew that if I got greedy and stuck my fingers in too many pies, I’d run out of time. Still, for as long as I could remember, I’d had to learn all kinds of new skills to eke out a living. That was a core part of who I was, and that same part was now nagging at me about not letting this new opportunity pass me by.

I decided to be honest. “Like I said earlier, I came back to have Gharb and Capitan assess my combat skills for the upcoming Silver-class Ascension Exam,” I said. “I’m not sure how much time I’d be able to dedicate to learning monster taming, so...”

“Fair enough,” Ingo said. “You’ll have to discuss the matter with them. I’d only be teaching you the fundamentals, so it shouldn’t take long—but I suppose that will vary depending on whether you’ve got a talent for it. You should make your decision after you talk to Gharb and Capitan.”



“So then you came to me.”

Gharb was an old woman who was both Hathara’s herbalist and a formidable mage. I had come to her home—which was also her apothecary—without any advance warning, but she hadn’t been surprised. She did know about the magic teleportation circles, after all. She had asked me why I’d come, though, so I’d given her the broad strokes.

Incidentally, I was alone today; Lorraine was starting her monster taming lessons with my father. I was fine waiting until I’d made a clear decision, but I knew she wouldn’t be able to resist the chance to learn something new, so I’d told her to get going on it without me. Besides, if she got a head start, she could help me out later by teaching me any tricks she’d picked up. From what I remembered of my childhood, teaching wasn’t my father’s forte, so maybe it’d actually be faster if I got Lorraine’s organized version of his lessons.

“Yeah,” I said. “You and Capitan were my first teachers. Lorraine can teach me about magic, sure, but I wanted to be retrained from the ground up. Herbalism from you, and swordsmanship and combat from Capitan.”

You might think that I didn’t need the herbalist training, but you’d be wrong. While Gharb had drilled a lot into me in the past, I hadn’t had much cause to use the full extent of my education during my time as an adventurer in Maalt. As a result, I was hazy on some of the parts I hadn’t brushed up on in a while.

A Bronze-class adventurer eking out a living by slaying monsters every day didn’t get many chances to show off his knowledge of herbalism, but identifying and using beneficial plants was a valuable skill—and one I wanted to maintain.

As for swordsmanship, that was self-explanatory, and Capitan was also an expert in the usage of spirit. I could use it myself to a degree, but I wasn’t anywhere near his level. There was no getting around it: I needed to be retrained.

Gharb’s gaze sharpened slightly upon hearing my explanation. “You’ve forgotten the recipes and mixing methods I taught you, haven’t you?”

Crap. She was definitely going to give me an earful. Still, there was no use in trying to lie here. “A little...” I admitted.

Gharb sighed, and the look she was giving me softened. “Honestly... I suppose it’s no surprise, though, given it’s been over a decade since I taught you, and it’s not as if you’re a professional herbalist. You might use some of that knowledge for adventuring work, but it’s only natural the rest would grow dusty.”

“Thanks for understanding.”

“Still, we don’t have much time. That means we should focus on anything you’ve forgotten that will also be useful for your exam.”

“Of course. I’d like to relearn the rest too, though, so could I ask you to teach me more at a later time?”

“Certainly, I don’t mind... Ah! I almost forgot. Your mana reserves have increased considerably, haven’t they? I can teach you about magic potions now.”

Her suggestion took me by surprise. When Gharb sold medicine to the villagers, she never went out of her way to say whether it was an ordinary elixir or magical one, even though she dealt in both and it was common practice to give much more thorough explanations, since prices differed depending on the product and different people could react differently to the same medicines.

However, that had never been a problem for Gharb because her mixtures were only purchased by other residents of Hathara, and she knew all of them. She was also familiar enough with their constitutions that all she needed was a description of their symptoms to whip up a prescription. Although she was an herbalist, she essentially did the job of a doctor or healer.

At any rate, I was grateful for her offer. Lorraine was an expert in magic potions too, but she'd been educated in the Empire, which meant her methods were significantly different from what Gharb had taught me, and since her work required knowledge of alchemy too, my progress would have been measured in years if I'd been learning from her.

That all meant that whenever Lorraine brewed magic potions, I couldn't contribute much more than menial assistance. Of course, if I'd had as much mana ten years ago as I did now, I could've spent some of the time learning from her, but my mana increase was a pretty recent thing. I had prioritized learning magic, leaving the potions to her.

But if Gharb was saying that she would teach me... Well, then it wouldn't require alchemy knowledge, as Lorraine's methods did; it would just be an extension of my skill as a herbalist.

There was still one factor that worried me, though.

"Do I have enough knowledge and mana reserves to learn it right now?" I asked.

"More or less," Gharb said. "But don't get the wrong idea. I won't be teaching you *everything* I know about brewing magic potions—just the fundamentals. Even still, knowing how to brew a recovery potion or two makes a big difference in a pinch, no?"

Recovery potions came in both mundane and magical forms, but as you might expect, the latter was more effective. There were other benefits to the magical

ones too—they were faster to produce, for one thing. They weren't *strictly* better in all respects, though. Mundane potions could have greater efficacy if truly made with care, so having access to both options was the clear best choice.

"You're right," I agreed. "Thank you. Though, if I'd been good enough all those years ago, we wouldn't even be having this conversation."

"Better late than never. People who can brew magical potions are rare, just like mages, but you've gotten good enough to start learning. You should be grateful for that."

"Yeah...you're right."

The downside to my advancement in power was that I'd become a monster, but there was no use crying over spilled milk. I was going to return to being human one day anyway, if I could manage it. That aside, there was one more thing I had to ask of Gharb, besides the herbalist training.

"Oh, right. Do you know where Capitan is? I went to his hunting hut, but he wasn't around."

I had actually gone to see Capitan first before I went to Gharb, since I'd figured I should prioritize my swordsmanship and spirit training. However, he'd been out, which was why I'd come here. Capitan was usually at his own house or the hunting hut, where all the hunters gathered, but I hadn't seen him at either. The other hunters hadn't known where he'd gone either, so I'd thought I'd try Gharb.

"Now that you mention it, Capitan went to the seaside. I asked him to get some medicinal ingredients for me."

The way she said it was so matter-of-fact that you might think it was an everyday occurrence, but I was sure any resident of Hathara would have done a double take.

"The seaside?" I repeated. "How many kilometers away is that?"

You guessed it: there were no oceans anywhere near Hathara—not even within a week's worth of travel.

Gharb smiled. “You’re really fussing over distance, knowing what you know? Didn’t you *just* skip over a whole week of travel time yourself?”

Ah, right. So that was how Capitan had done it.

“Oh. He used a teleportation circle...”



“You got it,” Gharb confirmed. “If you want to see him, you’ll have to go yourself, Rentt.”

“Why?” I asked. “He’ll be back soon enough, won’t he?”

“Sure, but you’re pressed for time, aren’t you? He might be back in a month, but he also might not be. Hard to say.”

“Huh...?”

“Your timing is terrible. The ingredient I asked for is a bit of a bother to acquire, and sometimes it’s not even available at all. If I’d known you were coming, I would’ve held off on asking him to get it.”

“What is it?”

“A marine plant called sea spirit herb. You hardly ever see it for sale in Yaaran. It’s an effective treatment for manarust disease, though, so...”

“What’s that?”

“It’s a disease that causes mana to coagulate externally, forming a rust-like film on the body. I suppose you don’t really see it in Yaaran; it’s somewhat of an endemic disease, mostly limited to the areas in the Empire close to mines.”

“But you need the medicine for it, which means...someone in the village caught it?”

“Oh, no. One of my friends in the Empire did. A rather severe case too, so they asked if I could help.”

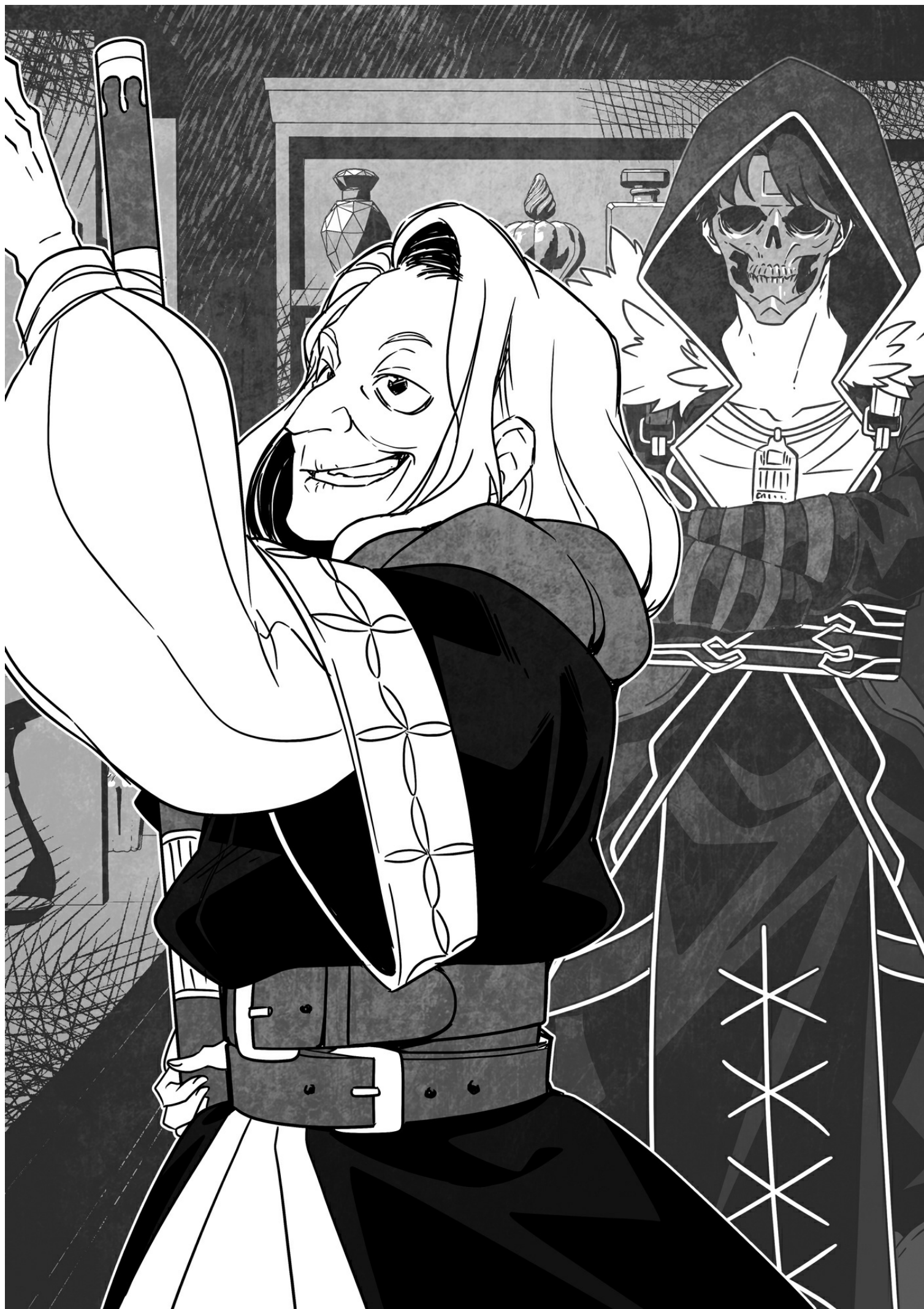
“Why go to you? Couldn’t an herbalist in the Empire have made the cure?”

“Actually, manarust disease is primarily treated with divinity. But what you can and can’t heal with divinity depends on the ability of the wielder, as I’m sure you’re well aware. My friend’s case was beyond their local saint’s

capability to heal.”

“If that’s the case, I guess I can’t just go and drag Capitan back.”

“Fortunately, it’s not an immediately lethal disease or anything. Makes daily life a pain, though, since it inhibits your movements. It’s definitely something you’d want to treat quickly.”



“I get the picture,” I mumbled, slightly disappointed. “I’ll give up on Capitan.”

Gharb pondered for a short while, then looked up at me. “Actually...”

“Yeah?”

“Just a sudden thought—do you think you could go to Capitan and help search for the sea spirit herbs?”

“Well...are you sure I won’t just get in the way? I don’t even know what they look like, much less how to harvest them.”

“Yes, but you’re an herb harvesting veteran, aren’t you? You’ll find them faster together than just Capitan alone. As for what they look like, I can give you an illustration for reference, and you can get him to double-check. Besides, you came back to train, didn’t you? The monsters out there are decently strong, so I think they’d make good opponents for you. Just have Capitan teach you how to handle spirit while you search for those herbs. Two birds, one stone.”

“I’m not sure that idiom strictly applies here...”

“Sure it does. Look, just go and scope things out, and if Capitan thinks you’re getting in the way, just come back. In the meantime, I’ll come up with some lessons that will be useful for your exam preparations. I’m afraid I can’t teach you anything about spirit, so you’ll have to make do with something else...”

“That’s fine—you can just give me the intensive course on magic potions. If I try to cover too many different things, I might not end up properly learning any of them.”

“Is that so? Let’s do that, then. You have yourself a safe trip, Rentt.”

“Will do.”



“So, you’ll be going to where Capitan is tomorrow?” Lorraine confirmed.
“Alone?”

We were seated around the dinner table in my family’s home, eating a meal together. Gilda was out delivering extra portions to the other villagers, so it was just me, Lorraine, and Ingo. That meant we could talk freely about the

teleportation circles—though when Gilda returned, we'd switch to something safer.

"Yeah," I said. "So I won't be able to take any monster-taming lessons. I've got enough on my plate as it is, so chasing after anything more would just be plain greedy."

"True enough," Lorraine said. "You can learn from me later anyway, once I've gotten a handle on it. Mastering spirit is a higher priority for you right now, I imagine."

The art of monster taming involved training other creatures to obey your commands, so it didn't directly increase your combat ability. Considering that my goal was passing the Silver-class Ascension Exam, improving my use of spirit was obviously the better choice.

"Where is Capitan right now, though?" Lorraine asked. "'The seaside' could mean a lot of different places."

"Since he used a teleportation circle, he's probably in the Ariana Maritime Republic to the south," Ingo said. "One of the circles takes you quite close."

"Ariana... Merchants have a lot of influence there. I've been seeing more of their merchants in Maalt recently too. There never used to be that many."

"Oh, yeah," I said. "You played peacemaker when one of them was arguing with Rina's friend, didn't you, Lorraine?"

"I wouldn't describe it like that..."

"I don't know—I think it would've turned into a whole incident if you hadn't stepped in. That aside, that merchant was not a typical example, if I'm remembering right. They were carrying cursed items, for one."

"I wonder about that. Ariana sees a lot of people coming in and out, and I've heard they're rather loose about checking for that sort of thing. I doubt it's that difficult to take cursed goods in and out of the country—that is to say, they're likely not that hard to get your hands on with a little effort."

"Sounds like a scary place..." I muttered.

"Whether or not you think it's scary, it *is* true that Ariana is pretty lax when it

comes to inspections,” Ingo said. “I’ve been there myself, and they don’t even ask for proof of identity when entering a town.”

“Doesn’t that negatively affect public safety?” Lorraine asked.

“It didn’t feel particularly unsafe,” Ingo said. “Any disturbances were quickly pacified by some influential merchant’s private guards. For better or worse, it really hammered home the fact that the country’s run by merchants, and it would be a good idea to avoid getting on their bad side. You should be careful, Rentt—you’re the type who always gets into trouble.”

“Come on. I’ll be *fine*.” At the very least, I could guarantee that I’d never *intentionally* tried to stir up trouble. Probably.

“You don’t sound convincing at all,” Lorraine remarked. “Still, I suppose if anything happens you can escape using the teleportation circle. Just keep your eyes peeled, all right?”

Chapter 4: To the Maritime Country

“Let’s see here...” I muttered to myself.

It was now the next day, and I was heading toward the fortress containing the teleportation circles. Capitan being in the Ariana Maritime Republic was all well and good; the problem was *finding* the right teleportation circle to get there. The underground city was filled with them, and I had no idea where most of them led.

I’d have loved to do a cursory check of all of them, but unfortunately, I was on a relatively tight schedule. The Silver-class Ascension Exam was quickly approaching, so I couldn’t spare the time.

Now, as for how I was going to find the one that led to Ariana...

“Good thing I have the Map of Akasha. Thank you, mysterious lady who gave it to me. Seriously...”

I meant it too. The Map of Akasha was a unique magical item given to me as some kind of apology by a woman with a terrifying presence and palpable degree of strength, whom I’d encountered in an unexplored area of the Water Moon Dungeon. The map automatically recorded every location I traveled through, even the interiors of dungeons. It had a number of other abilities too, but I hadn’t figured them out yet. However, its depiction of Good King Felt’s Dungeon City conveniently listed all of the teleportation circles I’d seen, along with their exit points. It was a real blessing for someone like me who didn’t have much time on his hands.

I’d be sure to keep that to myself, though. I think if that mysterious woman heard that I was treating her map as a mere time saver, she’d flip out at me.

Whatever the case, that was why I was walking the road to the fortress with my eyes fixed on the Map of Akasha, looking for the teleportation circle that led to Ariana.

“Ariana, Ariana... Ah, there we go.”

At last, I'd found it. The label on the map read: "To: the Port City of Lucaris, Ariana Maritime Republic."

I pictured a map of the continent in my head, trying to remember where Lucaris was. Since it was a port city, it would be on the coast...and I was fairly sure there was a dungeon nearby. That meant there'd be a Guild there too. Most cities had Guilds, but it was rare to see one in a village, and towns below a certain size usually only had small branch offices. That made it more difficult for local adventurers to find work—both in terms of accepting jobs and finding information on them in the first place.

In a city the size of Lucaris, though, that wouldn't be a concern: it was much more metropolitan than Maalt.

Then again, maybe it was unfair to compare the two in the first place. Maalt was thriving, but at the end of the day, it was still a frontier settlement in a backwater country. The recent discovery of a new dungeon nearby had injected some liveliness into it, but that was all. Compared to a port city in a country where trade was its lifeblood, Maalt looked like a plain little country hamlet.

"I hope they don't just dismiss me as a hick..." I muttered to myself as I reached the fortress and stepped onto the teleportation circle. The next moment, I was in Good King Felt's Dungeon City. A short wait later, the shakhor melekhnamer came over, and I hopped onto its back.

"Thanks," I said. "Let's go."

I pointed in the direction I wanted, and the monster broke into a brisk trot. We reached our destination in a matter of minutes.

"Thank you. I'm counting on you to look out for me on the way back too."

I tossed it some orc meat, which it adeptly caught, letting out a mewl like a cat's—only much, *much* louder—and striding away as it devoured its meal.

"If only I could keep it in Maalt...not that that'll ever happen."

State the obvious, why don't you? I retorted to myself before turning toward my intended teleportation circle.

I'd never used this one before, so I double-checked the Map of Akasha to be

sure. Yep, it definitely said: “To: the Port City of Lucaris, Ariana Maritime Republic.”

This was the one, then. I was a little scared, though—who knew what awaited me on the other side? There was every chance it could spit me out deep in a forest, a mountain cavern, or even the bottom of the sea. And that was the *lucky* outcome. My body could handle environments like that, but if it spat me out in a collapsed cave or something, I’d be stuck. I just had to pray that didn’t happen.

If the teleportation circle itself was damaged, it wouldn’t work, but as long as it was intact, it could pop you out literally anywhere, which was a terrifying thought. I’d probably be fine though, since Capitan had used it too.

I’d just have to steel myself and hop in...

Gingerly, I stepped into the teleportation circle. It reacted to my blood and began to shine, the light enveloping my entire body and turning my surroundings a blinding white. When the light faded, I was somewhere else.

“Well, here I am...”

I scanned my surroundings. It was immediately apparent that I hadn’t ended up anywhere too strange—it was just the inside of a cave.

There was hardly any light, but my undead eyes revealed the area with no issues. A regular human would’ve had to fumble around quite a bit...but then again, Capitan had probably brought some way to make a fire. That, or he was so used to the trip that he hadn’t needed light to navigate.

Actually, that last one seemed more like him.

The cave wasn’t that large, and there was an opening that seemed to lead outside, so I headed right for it. When I exited the cavern, I found myself in a forest; turning back, I saw that the cave entrance was small and mostly hidden by grass. Wait, no—on second glance, there was some kind of perception-inhibiting magic at play there. Capitan must have... Nah, it had to have been Gharb.

The enchantment didn’t seem that old, so it was probably the type that needed to be renewed on a regular basis—there was a good chance I wouldn’t

have been able to see the entrance otherwise. It took something quite strong to fool my undead body's senses, especially if I'd already seen through the illusion once. I was fairly certain that if I left and came back, I'd still be able to spot the entrance. It went without saying that Gharb could see it, since she'd likely cast the illusion in the first place, but Capitan probably had some kind of magical detection equipment on him. Otherwise, he'd be stranded without a way to get back...

But I was getting distracted. I put my hypothesizing aside for now and tried to determine where Lucaris was. Despite the Map of Akasha listing the port city as my destination, I was surrounded by forest. Did that mean I was on the outskirts? Or did it instead mean...?

Well, I supposed it didn't matter. One way or the other, the city had to be close by. I'd be fine as long as I headed in the direction where I could sense people.

Incidentally, I could thank my vampiric sense of smell for that ability. All of my undead body's various functions really reminded me how far I'd strayed from humanity...

Ah, whatever. For the time being, I started walking.



It actually didn't take long before I was out of the forest. There was a wall up ahead, so I just continued toward it.

The early morning sky was clear, giving me a good view of the area—a highway stretched toward the city walls, and the number of people around gradually increased as I approached. It wasn't just wagons on the road either—there were a lot of people traveling on foot.

Additionally, the people I saw comprised a number of different races. I wasn't surprised, exactly, but this definitely wasn't a sight you usually saw in Maalt. That sight being a lot of beastfolk.

Beastfolk was the generic umbrella term for humanoid races with animallike traits, and they were actually divided into a number of different categories; it was just that humans like me had found it easier to lump them all together.

If you wanted to get more specific, you had wolffolk, avianfolk, and more. I'd even heard that there were dragonfolk out there, though they were rare and I'd never seen one. Beastfolk showed up in Maalt every now and then, but they were few and far between. That was generally true of Yaaran as a whole, but Maalt's particularly backwater location didn't make it an appealing place for them to live.

I suspected the biggest reason we saw so few, though, was simply that Maalt was so far out in the boonies that nobody saw any point in traveling that far. There were many other races out there in the world, but the beastfolk were among the most populous, and they could live anywhere with relative ease. That included Maalt, unless I was missing something, so all of that was only further evidence to support my "they don't come because it's in the middle of nowhere" theory.

In comparison, Lucaris was a city among cities, so it offered a lot for beastfolk. I'd bet if Maalt were more thriving, their numbers would increase there too. That'd be nice—beastfolk were quite capable, physically speaking, and there was a correlation between having a lot of them around and an improvement in the local Guild's strength of arms. In turn, having a lot of skilled adventurers meant that the area's population had an easier time of things.

That was enough daydreaming about the future, though. It was time to enter Lucaris.

I joined the throng of people waiting at the main gates. If this were Maalt, I would step through, show the guards my proof of identity, and that would be that. Even though this was a different country, the general process should still have been the same. Sure, there were different tax rates and paperwork, but Ariana was known for being quite open to foreigners, as well as for offering its people a high degree of freedom, just as you'd expect out of a country with "republic" in its name. Given its flourishing trade economy, Ariana probably didn't want to impose too many restrictions.

"Next! Come on through!"

The line progressed forward gradually, and before long I found myself in front of a guard giving me a scrutinizing look. I wondered why for a second before it

hit me: the guards at Maalt had grown used to it by now, but...

“Could you remove the mask, please?”

Yep, the skull mask. My first time trying to get into Maalt with it had caused a bit of a fuss too, if I remembered right. Rina’s presence had smoothed things over, but I was on my own today.

That being said, I had proper identification on me, and it wasn’t as if they’d immediately jump to the conclusion that I was a monster. Confidence was key here.

“I wish, friend,” I said. “Unfortunately, this mask is cursed. It won’t come off.”

“Really? I mean, I don’t want to call you a liar, but...”

I could tell he very much wanted to call me a liar, actually, but was too polite to do so. In deference to that, I refrained from pointing it out.

“It’s easy to prove,” I said. “You can try tugging it off, hard as you can. It won’t budge.”

“What if it does?”

“I’d be over the moon, in that case! I’ve tried everything to get it off, but nothing seems to work. Brute force, magic, divinity—everything under the sun, at this point. Here, give it a shot.” The explanation came easily to me, since not a word of it was a lie.

That seemed to pique the guard’s interest. “All right then, I think I will,” he said.

“Go ahead. Oh, could I ask someone else to hold me down while he pulls?”

“I’ll do it,” another guard said, stepping behind me. He looped his arms under mine and up, holding me back.

“Here goes, then. *Hng... Nggggah!*”

The guard gripped the edges of my mask and pulled with all of his strength, but it barely even shifted. I didn’t feel any pain, but it occurred to me that this might hurt an ordinary person quite a lot. After all, this was essentially the same as having the skin on your face pulled at. I guess it was a good thing it had stuck

to me, then, instead of someone who might've felt all that pain.

Wait, no—it wasn't a good thing for me at all.

The guard tried for a while longer, but ultimately...

"You're right—it's stuck fast. Looks like you weren't lying. Doesn't feel like magic either."

"See? It's caused me no small amount of grief. Actually, I heard that there's a variety of cursed items circulating the markets here in Lucaris. Do you know anybody who might be able to do something about it?"

"Hmm? Well...Malga the curse vendor might. You'd best be careful though. You might get it fixed only to walk out with a new curse to deal with."

"I see. Sounds promising! Oh, but I almost forgot. Can I go in?"

"Ah, right. Well, I suppose wearing an unremovable mask isn't anything especially suspicious, and you've got proper Guild identification too. Go ahead. Incidentally, though, what's the purpose of your visit?"

"I'm partly here for the dungeon and partly here to gather some medicinal ingredients."

"Oh, you're an herbalist, are you? Didn't expect that just looking at you. Guess you really can't judge a book by its cover."

"I'm more of an apprentice, honestly. I have my teacher's permission to sell some of the basics, though, so just let me know if you're in the market. If you put in a job at the Guild, I'll pick it up when I'm around."

"Hey, thanks. I'll keep that in mind. Welcome to Lucaris, Mr. Masked Herbalist Adventurer. Enjoy your stay."



As soon as I strode through Lucaris's gates, I was overwhelmed.

There were so many people here that their numbers dwarfed Maalt's population by comparison. I'd expected that much, though, since Maalt was just a little frontier town. What I *hadn't* expected was the sheer diversity of races—it was like I'd stepped into a different world.

Even Yaaran's capital didn't boast this much diversity. I'd always known it was a bit of a backwater country, but this really hammered that fact home.

What was more, the buildings were just fascinating to look at. There was commonplace brick and stone architecture aplenty, just like in Yaaran, but there were just as many colorful types of buildings I'd never seen back home. And was it just my imagination, or were most of the people going in and out of those buildings from nonhuman races? Was all of this architecture from their homelands, or just a quirk of Ariana's?

"Oops. Can't let myself keep getting distracted. Let's see—where can I find an inn...?"

Even just walking around Lucaris dug up fascinating new discoveries, but while I planned on going for a wander through the city later to search for Capitan, I needed to secure myself some lodgings first.

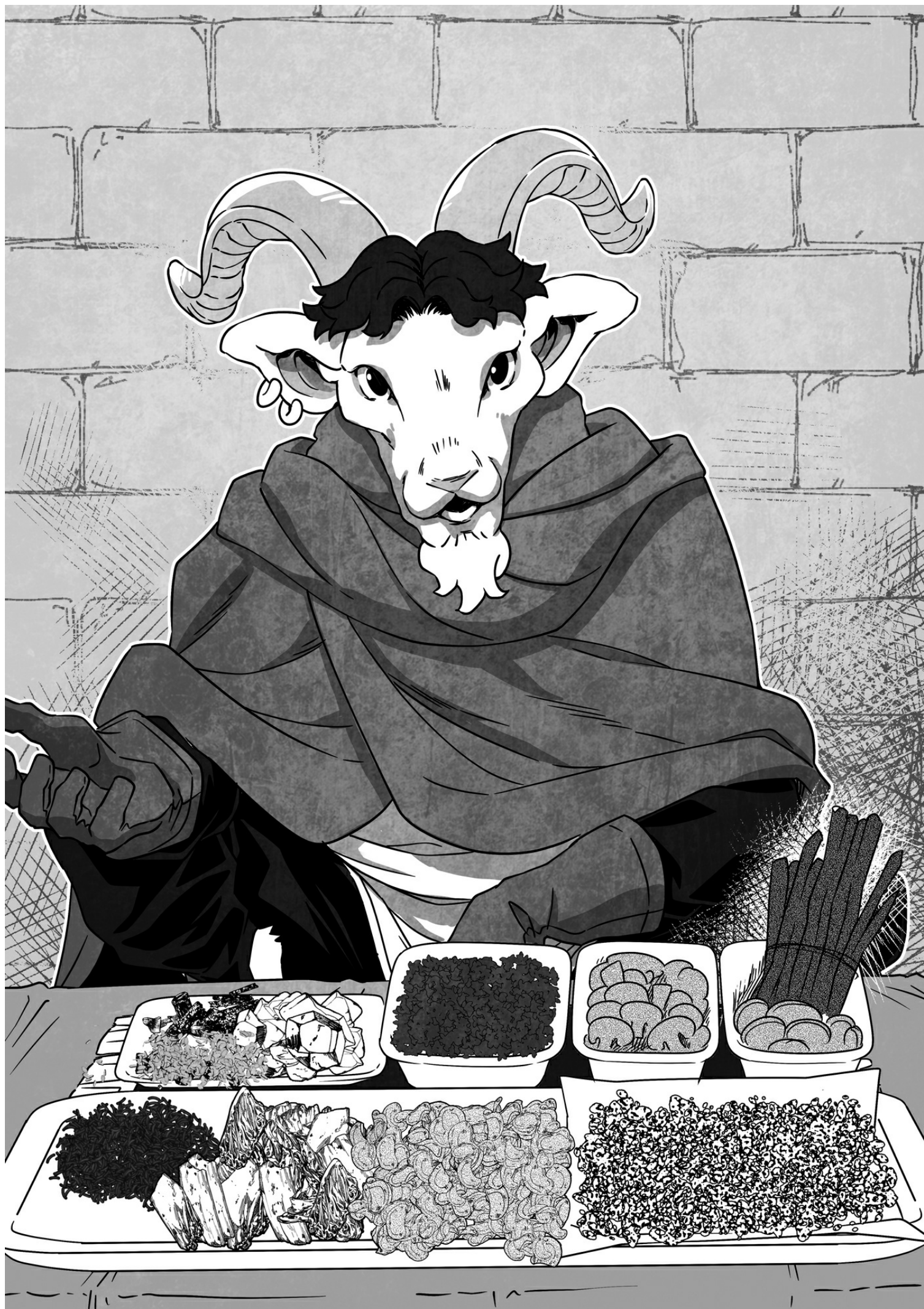
If possible, I wanted to find Capitan before the day was over, but locating a single person in a city this big would be difficult. Gharb had let me know of a few places he might be, but if he had stepped into some random back-alley tavern on a whim then my chances of tracking him down were bleak. Capitan had to have a number of establishments he frequented here, and he probably hadn't bothered mentioning every single one to Gharb.

"Excuse me, I'd like to purchase a bundle of those herbs."

As I walked the main streets looking for an inn, I spotted a number of vendors. It was somewhat of a hobby of mine to browse such stores as I strolled around Maalt, and I couldn't resist doing the same here in Lucaris either. But I wasn't *just* giving in to my whims, I promise...

"Oh? You've got good eyes, brother," said the beastfolk man as he handed over the bundle. "These are the best quality goods in my stock."

He had the features of a goat, so perhaps "goatfolk" would have been accurate. His fur was black, and a pair of horns sprouted from the back of his head. I recalled that his people hailed from mountainous areas, so it was rare to see one of them in a city.



As for the herbs, I'd purchased them because they were a variety I never really saw in grasslands or forests.

"I'm an herbalist, or near enough to one," I explained. "You could call me something of a veteran when it comes to picking out flora."

"Y'don't say? Then you might be interested in these too." The goatfolk man opened one of the baskets in the stack behind him and lined up several different plants on his mat.

"You'd have to climb extremely tall mountains to harvest all of these plants... I'll take the whole lot."

"My, how generous of you! Are you sure?" The goatfolk pointed at the rarest herbs in the lineup. "These ones aren't cheap."

I nodded. "I can afford it—and if I let this chance slip by, it'll be ages before I come across these again. Unless you harvest them pretty regularly, I suppose."

"The others, yes, but you have to be lucky with these ones. How does...three gold for the whole lot sound?"

"Seriously?"

"Is that...too expensive?"

"The opposite—it's a *bargain*. I'll take that deal. Here." I handed over the money.

"O-Oh. I thought you'd try to haggle me down..."

"Do your customers always try to do that?"

"More or less... Us beastfolk tend to be fish out of water no matter where we go. Makes it harder to hold our heads high or talk back. This is one of the better places I've lived in, though." The goatfolk's expression looked somewhat sad.

Humans often viewed other races with prejudice, and beastfolk were no exception. There were all sorts of different reasons for it, but a big one was that humanity simply tended to be clannish and exclusionary.

Of course, I didn't have that kind of outlook myself. Maybe it was more of a city thing—no one around Maalt really cared what race you were. This was

making me appreciate rural areas more.

“Is the Ariana Republic a good place to live?” I asked. “Ah, though I guess I mean the city of Lucaris specifically.”

“Yeah. This city has its own problems, but goatfolk like me can lead good lives here. I lived in the Empire before, and it was awful; but here, the worst I have to deal with is a little bit of browbeating and having everyone try to haggle for lower prices.”

It was probably already clear from what he was saying, but beastfolk had a greater tendency to be wanderers than humans, never staying in one place for long. If they disliked an area, they were quick to put it behind them. Maybe that contributed to humans viewing them with prejudice.

Still, the Empire, huh? I could see it. It wasn't universal or anything, but Lorraine's homeland had a strong sentiment of human supremacy. That was because it was a tenet of the Church of Lobelia, and they were everywhere over there. It was also the reason I didn't want their faith to spread in Maalt—Yaaran's principal religion, the Church of the Eastern Sky, had none of that.

As for Ariana, I didn't think any religion had much of a foothold here, which was probably why its populace treated beastfolk no differently than any other foreigner—that is, with open-mindedness. It was a country that saw a lot of foreign trade, immigration, and emigration.

“That's good to hear,” I said. “Given my appearance, I tend to worry that someone will want to start a fight whenever I'm in a less-than-welcoming place.”

“Yeah, that mask would give anyone a fright at first glance. Did you just get here recently?”

“Earlier today, in fact. Oh, right—there's something I'd like to ask.”

“Yes?”

“Do you know any good inns? I'm looking for somewhere quiet, with good food. It's fine if it's a bit on the pricier side.”

This was another one of the reasons I'd been browsing the street vendors. I

could've asked at a tavern too, but that was more likely to get me dragged into a fight, and my appearance meant stopping anyone on the street would've scared the daylights out of them. Thus, I'd figured approaching a street vendor was my best option.

Plus, since this particular vendor seemed to travel between the city and the mountains quite often, he likely stayed at inns on the regular and knew which ones were good or bad.

Just as I'd hoped, the goatfolk man *did* know a decent inn, so after he gave me directions, I thanked him and went on my way.



"Now, what should I do first..."

I sat on my bed in the inn, planning my next move. If I wanted to find Capitan, the first thing I would have to do was...

Right. Conduct a search based on what Gharb had told me.

If I couldn't find Capitan, then I'd have to go around gathering more information. It was a haphazard plan, but I didn't have much in the way of other options.

Ah, though it'd be best if I stopped by the Guild first. Capitan was registered as a Bronze-class adventurer, so he might have accepted a harvesting job while he was searching for the sea spirit herbs.

In that case, he would've gone to the Guild at least once, and would have to do so again to hand the job in. If I asked them to pass a message along, then even if I couldn't find him on my own, I'd probably still be able to get in touch with him in a day or two.

Simply waiting at the Guild was the sure option, but if Capitan planned to gather all the requested items before delivering them, then there was a chance he wouldn't show up for several days.

In the end, my best option really *was* just to go out looking...

Whatever the case, I had a plan now. After telling the innkeeper that I'd be out for a while, I headed for the Guild.



Lucaris's Guild was both far larger than Maalt's and much more colorful. If you were being generous, you could call Maalt's Guild building stern and no-nonsense, but the fact remained that it was fully dedicated to function over style.

Lucaris's Guild building, however, was completely different. It had beautiful murals on the walls and decorative ornaments hanging from every pillar, eave, and awning. From their complex designs and engravings, even an amateur in the fine arts like me could see the artistic creativity that had gone into it all.

Part of me worried for their longevity—wouldn't a Guild full of ruffians break it all?—but maybe Lucaris's adventurers were well-mannered types. That, or they all had an appreciation for the arts. It wouldn't be totally out of the question, given this was a big city.

But that was neither here nor there. I walked into the Guild, appreciating the artistry as I went. As per my expectations, the interior bore the markings of a finer touch. It was all very cosmopolitan.

While Maalt's reception counters were all placed in one long line, presenting a rather mundane first impression, each receptionist here had a separate desk with a decent amount of space in between. Adventurers were commonly bothered by eavesdroppers after dropping off a delivery of goods, but this design would prevent that.

It was a welcome change from Maalt, where the Guild paid no mind to those kinds of finer details...

As my country-boy sensibilities quietly soaked in the metropolitan atmosphere, I looked around. I could feel someone watching me. But who?

After a few moments of doing my best owl impression, I realized that all the men in the lobby—adventurers, by the look of them—were glaring at me.

What had I done to deserve this? Had I committed some kind of faux pas? Nothing came to mind when I thought about it...until I remembered what I looked like.

It's the mask, isn't it?

It made sense if you thought about it. One day, a stranger in a skeleton mask and jet-black cloak walks into your Guild. Your first thought would probably be: “Who the hell is this guy?”

Still, it didn’t seem like any of them were about to confront me—they were just keeping a close eye on the stranger. I could probably just ignore them.

If they did confront me, I’d be forced to deal with it somehow, but I wasn’t hotblooded enough that a few people staring daggers at me got on my nerves. In fact, you could argue that I could use *more* hot blood—after all, I always wanted to drink more of it.

If I told a joke like that to them, though, they’d probably pull their weapons out on the spot...

I picked out one of the reception counters and walked over to the young female receptionist. “Excuse me, may I have a moment?” I asked.

“Of course. How can I help you? Are you here to post a commission? Or perhaps accept one?”

While the glares from the other adventurers had disheartened me a bit, my appearance wasn’t all bad. Back when I’d been human, whenever I’d walked into Guilds that weren’t familiar with me, they had always assumed that I was a client come to post a job. But now that I looked like this, they always seemed to know that I was an adventurer come to take one.

Well, excuse me for looking like a common citizen back then. I’d been an adventuring veteran, you know...

Maybe the blame lay with the guild employees’ personal biases, though. Proper procedure was to ask about both in succession, like this receptionist just had.

“Neither,” I said. “I’m looking for another adventurer who’s probably in the city, so I’d like to leave a message here for him.”

“I see. Pardon me, but are you an adventurer yourself?”

“I am. Bronze-class.” I handed over my adventuring license.

After checking it, the receptionist said, “Yes, everything seems to be in order. I

see you're from the Kingdom of Yaaran. That's quite the journey."

If you're wondering why she asked me if I was an adventurer too, it was because passing on a message from another adventurer was a free-of-charge service. If I'd been an ordinary citizen, however, it would have cost me several bronze for a local—that is, limited to the city—message. If it wasn't set up that way, everyone and their mother would just use the Guild as a free message board.

"Yeah, it's my first time in Ariana. It's a lovely place, though. Lucaris is a huge city—beautiful too—and the Guild here is really spacious."

I couldn't say anything about the quality of its adventurers yet. Well, except for the fact that they seemed like the unsavory type who might invent a pretext to get into a fight with a stranger who'd just walked in...but there was no need to go out of my way to voice that.

The receptionist seemed pleased by my praise. "Thank you for your kind words. There are many sights to see in Lucaris, so even just going for a stroll is enjoyable."

"I'll try that," I replied. "By the way, the name of the adventurer I'd like to leave a message for is 'Capitan.' Has he come by?"

It was a relatively unusual name, so I figured it'd be enough to narrow down the man in question, but the receptionist's reaction took me by surprise.

"*The* Capitan?! You know him?!"



I blinked. "I do. I take it you do too?"

The receptionist nodded vigorously. "Of course! He doesn't live here, but he shows up periodically and cleans up all the commissions that have been left to rot in one sweep, even if they're hard ones that everyone else avoids. He's single-handedly responsible for the recent rise in our commission completion rate!"

She seemed so happy that I actually felt a little smug. It was nice to hear my old master being praised.

“Is that so? Does that mean he’s out on a commission right now, then?”

There was a chance that Capitan had only come to the city this time to fulfill Gharb’s request for sea spirit herbs, but the receptionist’s story made that seem less likely.

“Yes. Like always, he took a number of commissions that had been gathering dust and set off. They were all in the same place, though. I think he had a destination in mind already.”

In short, he must have only taken the jobs in the same location as the sea spirit herbs, and probably had no plans to go anywhere else. That made sense; Gharb wanted the herbs as soon as possible.

“May I ask where that destination is?” I had an idea already, since Gharb had told me where Capitan would be searching for the herbs, but I wanted to double-check, just in case.

“The Dungeon of the Sea God’s Daughters. He left this morning, so I don’t think he’ll be back until after sunset.”

The Dungeon of the Sea God’s Daughters was located near Lucaris, and it was the location Gharb had told me about—that was all well and good. There was just one problem...

“If I recall correctly...that’s at the bottom of the sea, isn’t it?”

“Oh! You’re well-informed for someone who’s not a local. Yes, that’s right. The entrance is below the water, off the coast. The ferry only makes the trip twice a day, in the morning and evening—though when the waters are rough, leaving the dungeon is impossible. In any case, he won’t be back until evening.”

It was just as I’d feared. Dungeons existed in pretty much every location you could imagine, but even among them, the Dungeon of the Sea God’s Daughters was one of the harder ones to access. It wasn’t the worst, though—there was a confirmed dungeon whose entrance was the mouth of a volcano.

You might be wondering how anyone is even supposed to get inside, but there was no underestimating human ingenuity. Apparently, there was a reliable method of entry that a decent number of people used on the regular.

I'd never been myself, of course, but I would have to go one day, given how I had my sights set on Mithril-class. I would do whatever it takes to get stronger...even if part of me protested at the thought of jumping into the mouth of a volcano.

Anyhow, given how troublesome dungeons could be, the Dungeon of the Sea God's Daughters didn't seem so bad by comparison. It went without saying that the materials you could find in it were hard to come by, and the sea spirit herbs were one such example. Their natural environment was deep areas of the sea floor—not a location humans could simply stroll into. Usually, your only option was to ask a fishfolk to gather some for you, but the herbs grew at such depths that only certain fishfolk could even manage the trip. That being the case, the next best choice for finding the herbs was to go dungeon delving for them.

Each dungeon had a different variety of materials and items that could be found in it. The one in Maalt had its own unique set, and other locations were no exception. Since the Dungeon of the Sea God's Daughters was underwater, many of its harvestable materials were aquatic in nature—hence why Capitan had gone there in search of the sea spirit herbs.

Still, he wouldn't be back until evening, huh?

"Will I run into him if I go to the port at sunset?" I asked.

"You should, unless you miss each other," the receptionist confirmed. "Capitan comes by every day to drop off his harvest, though, so it'd be a surer bet to come here, er..." She looked at me inquisitively.

"Rentt."

"Rentt," she repeated. "I'll let him know you came by, so he'll probably wait for you."

"Yeah? Thank you. Just in case we still miss each other, though, here's the inn I'm staying at. Could you tell him to drop by?"

"Of course."

With that sorted, I was sure to meet up with Capitan today or tomorrow, barring any exceptional circumstances. Now, how was I going to spend the rest of the day?

A stroll around the city sounded nice. I left the Guild, looking forward to doing some sightseeing.



Instead of heading straight back to my inn, I took a meandering path through the city.

Lucaris had a number of stores catering to adventurers, so I made some rounds—stocking up on medicinal herbs, recovery potions, and finally, both preserved and perishable rations for when I delved into the dungeon. I also stopped by a blacksmith's for some equipment maintenance.

Once that was all done, I continued with my stroll, feeling greatly satisfied. I'd started out on the main streets, but the paths I was walking gradually grew narrower and darker. I wasn't headed back to the inn, though. Rather, I was headed in the complete opposite direction.

My original plan had been to return to the inn and do some herbalist work until evening, but the eyes I could feel on my back had put a stop to that plan.

Yep, you heard me right: I was being followed.

My pursuers couldn't have been too close, since I didn't see anybody when I turned around, but the feeling of their gazes on me was unmistakable. I wouldn't say it was bloodlust, but I could tell they certainly weren't thinking anything pleasant.

Well, I supposed I should start things off...

"This should do," I said. "Why don't you all come out? It's the least you can do after I did you the favor of coming all the way to this gloomy place."

Quietly, they showed themselves. Their gear had no unifying factor, but I could tell they were used to handling their weapons. You could find people like these everywhere you went, and I was very familiar with their way of life.

They were adventurers.



"Lo," said one of my pursuers. "So you noticed us? Not bad."

There were three of them in total. Not a big number, but not a small one either...

“You weren’t exactly being subtle about tailing me,” I said. “So, what’s your business? I only arrived in this city today, so I can’t have done anything worth holding a grudge over.”

I couldn’t guarantee that I wouldn’t in the future, but as things stood, I was pretty sure I had a clean slate. They didn’t look like they were champing at the bit to start a fight either, even though they’d been following me.

It’d be nice if we could resolve this diplomatically, but it appeared that they had other ideas.

“It’s nothing personal, friend. We just saw how generous you were at that street vendor. I mean, three whole gold coins? To a *beastfolk*? Was wonderin’ if you could spare a little of that bleeding heart for poor folk in need like us.”

Ah, so it *was* coin they were after. That was troublesome. They must’ve been watching pretty closely when I’d paid the goatfolk vendor—they even got the exact amount right.

“Oh, so you’re herb salesmen too?” I said. “I’d be happy to take a look at your wares.” Obviously they weren’t, but I wanted to exhaust my options first. I really wanted to avoid causing a fuss. That said, I knew there was only one way they’d interpret that...

“What? Are you all right in the head? Look, just give us the money!” The lead man stepped toward me, reaching for the weapon at his waist.

Okay, fine—so maybe I’d known this would happen and had intentionally been a little sarcastic. You reaped what you sowed, I supposed.

“Are we really doing this?” I asked.

“Look at that, lads! Big man over here’s still pretending he isn’t quivering in his boots! Come on—let’s get him!”

The man who’d spoken charged at me. I could respect how he’d come at me himself instead of making the other two—who looked like his underlings—go first. Most people like him tended to just blow hot air and make their

henchmen do the dirty work.

Still, that didn't change what I'd have to do to them.

I drew my sword and dashed forward. I had a good grasp of their level of ability already, and I wouldn't hurt them too badly...even though they could probably do with a good beating that left them out of commission for a while. I didn't want to overdo it.

Channeling mana into my legs, I instantly closed the distance with the man in front. Suddenly face-to-face with my skeleton mask, his eyes flew open in shock. His sword, though, was still mid swing.

"You'll have to be faster than that."

My horizontal slash slammed into his torso, colliding with his armor and sending him flying. He crashed into a wall and slumped to the ground, unconscious. As for the other two...

"A-Ahhh!"

"Wh-What?! H-How did...?!"

They were quivering in fear. The outcome of the fight had been obvious to me, but evidently not to them. It's not even that I was terribly strong—they were just on the weak side. I'd been able to tell from both their movements and the fact that they weren't good enough to make three gold coins through taking commissions.

In short, they were about as powerful as I used to be—maybe even less so. I couldn't possibly lose. Still, just like I'd had to respect their fallen leader, it appeared that I'd have to reevaluate my opinion on these two as well.

"You're not going to run?" I asked. I brought my sword up one-handed and pointed it straight at them. Even a child would be able to get the message: *You're next.*

And yet, they didn't flee.

"Wh-What, is your head as empty as that skull makes it look?! We're not gonna leave our friend behind!" yelled one.

"Y-Yeah!" the other chimed in. "H-Hold on, Niedz, we're coming for you,

man!”

Both of them turned their glares on me. All of a sudden, I felt like the bad guy here. What was the deal?

I took a mental step back and looked at the situation objectively. In a back alley, a guy with a skull mask and black cloak stood facing three adventurers. One of them was unconscious at the masked man’s feet, while the other two were standing up to him to save their friend, struggling to overcome their terror.

Wow, talk about easy to misunderstand.

“H-here goes! W-Waaaaghhh!”

“T-Take this, Skullface!”

The pair ran at me, screaming. They never managed to follow through, however, because the next moment...

Thud.

They both collapsed to the ground. Why, you ask? Well, I can tell you that it wasn’t because I’d taken them out with a ranged spell or anything like that.

“I *thought* something was unusual about this,” I said. “Do you have business with me too, then?”

A man walked into view behind the fallen pair of adventurers. My eyes, which could see in the dark, allowed me to discern that he wasn’t human, but a beastfolk.

The figure had glossy, jet-black fur that looked pleasant to touch, and feline irises that glimmered, making them stand out in the gloom. Size-wise, he was slightly taller than the average human, and his build was lithe, clearly trained for agility rather than brute strength.

My point being, he was much more capable than the two adventurers who had just attacked me. If he was thinking of doing the same, I’d have to go all out.

“You noticed me too?” he asked.

“I sensed someone other than those guys, yeah,” I explained. “Couldn’t pin down where you were, though.” He’d been quite good at concealing himself. I’d still sensed him...but he might’ve let me notice him on purpose.

“Is that so? I suppose there wasn’t much point in it after all. I doubt this is even worth asking, but are you all right?”

“I assume from your question that you’re not with those guys, then? And it doesn’t seem like you came to attack me either.” It seemed the man’s intentions had been to do the exact opposite, in fact, since he’d intentionally made his presence known to me.

“Yeah,” he confirmed. “I saw them tailing you on my way home. Didn’t look like they were planning anything good, so I followed, just in case.”

“You were going to step in and rescue me?”

“Yes...though I soon realized my assistance would be unnecessary.”

“Oh, not at all. Thank you. Those two were pretty terrified at the end, and you never know what a desperate person is going to do. A quick blow from behind to knock them out was the cleanest solution.”

“Glad I could help. Incidentally...”

“Hmm?”

“What would you like to do with them?” The man glanced at the unconscious adventurers. “Shall we hand them over to the authorities?”

I considered it for a moment. That was definitely an option, but... “I only arrived in this city recently,” I said. “What would happen if we handed them over?”

“Let’s see... Well, since they seem to be adventurers, they’d have their licenses revoked first. Then, they’d likely have to spend a month or so in a cell. You’re unharmed, unfortunately—ah, my apologies, I didn’t mean it like that—so it’s very probable that’s the only punishment they’ll have levied against them, given the lack of damage.”

There wouldn’t be much point in handing them in, then. Having their licenses revoked was a significant punishment, but it would mean taking away their

source of income. That would likely just force them to attempt this kind of thing again.

This was going to be a pain to deal with, but maybe it was some kind of fate. They didn't seem like bad guys—well, not *too* bad anyway—so beating some morals into them was probably worthwhile.

“I'll stay here and wait for them to wake up.”

“Pardon?”

“They attacked me because they didn't have any coin. I figure I'll teach them the bare minimum of what it takes to earn a living. Otherwise, they might attempt this again, and there's no guarantee their next victim will be as capable of dealing with it as I was.”

The man looked at me incredulously. “You're a real softy, aren't you?”

“I wouldn't say so. If they'd been rotten to the core, I'd have just dumped them in the lowest levels of the dungeon or something and damn the consequences. I won't be in town for long, you see.”

“Okay, I take back what I said about you being a softy. Hmm. Waiting here for them to wake up would be rather dull, so why not bring them to my place?”

“Your place? Are you sure? I wouldn't want them holding a grudge against you.” What if they came back later down the line and burned his house down or something?

“Oh, it's fine. If they try anything, I'll just kill them.”

“Ah. Well...you certainly seem capable enough...”

“Let's get this over with, then. I'll carry these two. The first man you knocked out is all yours.”

“Got it. Sorry about all this.”

“If anybody should be apologizing, it's this lot,” the beastfolk man said, hoisting the pair of unconscious adventurers onto his shoulders.

“You've got that right. I'll be sure to get an apology out of them once they're awake.”

“Are you going to torture them?”

“Hmm... It’s certainly an option. I can heal any damage I do, so...” I picked up my guy and set off, following the beastfolk’s lead. “Oh, I didn’t get your name, by the way. I’m Rentt Faina. Call me Rentt.”

“Diego Malga. Just call me Diego.”

“Malga? You wouldn’t happen to be the curse vendor, would you...?”

“Oh, you’ve heard of me? Yes, that’s my shop. Being called a curse vendor hurts a little, though... I’m just a general store.”



Diego led me through the alleyways, taking a number of twists and turns. “It’d be faster to take the main streets,” he said, “but while we’re carrying this lot...”

Yeah, hauling three unconscious adventurers was not a good look. People would think we were kidnappers. We could just explain our circumstances if asked, of course, but then we’d be taken in by the authorities—them to be locked up, and us for questioning. I wanted to avoid that, so sneaking through the back alleys suited me just fine.

The problem was I had no idea where we were going. For all I knew, Diego was a criminal taking me straight to his associates. All I could do was quietly follow along.

I doubted I needed to worry about that possibility, though. If that had been his objective, he wouldn’t have taken the time to explain why we were taking the back alleys. In any event, if worse came to worst, Splintering would let me get out of almost any situation, even ones a normal person couldn’t.

It looked like I hadn’t been wrong about Diego, though, because we reached our destination after half an hour of walking.

“Come on in,” he said.

We were at the rear entrance of a sturdy-looking stone house. Despite carrying an additional body, he deftly opened the door and held it for me. I felt a little guilty; I wouldn’t have minded going first.

“Ah, sorry,” I said. “Let me get that.”

I stepped over and closed the door behind us as Diego went inside. Following after him, I found myself impressed as the dark interior began to light up automatically as we advanced.

“That’s a pretty luxurious magical setup you’ve got there,” I noted.

Diego shook his head. “They’re just artifacts my father retrieved from the dungeon. I can’t take any credit.”

“Yeah? Is he an adventurer?”

“He was, yes. He also ran a general store...though I’ve taken over, of course.”

“I see...” We hadn’t exchanged many words, but it had been enough for me to read between the lines. Diego’s father was no longer with us. “So when the gate guard told me about ‘Malga the curse vendor,’ he was talking about this store?”

“Must’ve been. We never picked a formal name for it, you see. They called it ‘Raul the curse vendor’ in my father’s day.”

So Diego’s father’s name was Raul. “How come you never named it?” I asked. “Isn’t that inconvenient?”

“My father only ran this store as a hobby, and I’m the same way. Adventuring was—and is—our main profession. Like him, I only open the general store when I feel like it, or when a regular lets me know they’ll be dropping by.”

“Can you make enough to get by that way?”

“Like I said, it’s just a hobby. Besides, curse vendors are actually rather in demand in Lucaris. Ah, it’s this room.”

We’d reached our destination, it seemed. Diego stepped over to the sofa in the center of the room and put the two adventurers down, so I followed his lead with mine. Their bodies took up so much space, though, that we were left with nowhere for us to sit.

Diego rustled up a chair from somewhere and brought it over. “It’d be a little strange for me to tell you to make yourself at home, given the circumstances, but have a seat. I’ll bring you some tea.”

“You don’t have to go out of your way on my account.”

“It’s fine—you’re a guest. Sit.”

On that parting remark, Diego headed for the kitchen. I suddenly felt rather guilty—I’d basically barged in out of nowhere, and now he was treating me so politely. He’d had no reason to take me in, much less these three adventurers on top of that.

Diego had called me a softie, but I was beginning to wonder if he wasn’t one himself.

Still, I was grateful to have his help. I’d do my best not to inconvenience him, where possible.

Tnk. A steaming teacup was placed on the table in front of me.

“That smells lovely,” I remarked.

“It’s imported, not locally grown.” Diego said. “It’s good tea.”

Due to the climate, Ariana wasn’t a major agricultural center. Its development as a nation was reliant on its booming trade economy. As a result, tea was difficult to grow here, and the end product wasn’t all that delicious.

However, when I tasted the tea Diego had given me, it had a distinct flavor that suffused my mouth and nose. It seemed he wasn’t lying about it being imported.

“A friend of mine’s very particular about her tea, so I’ve tasted some high-quality leaves in my time,” I said. Of course, I was talking about Lorraine. “But this would give any of them a run for their money. Is this also a hobby of yours, Diego?”

“What, do I have the face of a guy who’s particular about his tea?” he replied. “I’ll take the good stuff if it’s available, of course, but that’s about it. I got this blend from a customer.”

“Ah, one of the regulars you mentioned earlier?”

That meant he had some fairly well-to-do clients, then. A common citizen wouldn’t have brought him such high-quality tea. Lorraine could afford its like, but it was above most people’s pay grade.

“Yes. Is it strange that such well-off customers would visit an establishment

like mine?”

“It’s a little unexpected, but I wouldn’t go so far as to call it strange.”

He’d mentioned how his store was an irregular side thing to his main occupation. Curse vendors were rare in Maalt, but Lucaris likely had a selection to choose from, and I hadn’t noticed anything that might set him apart from the others, hence my surprise.

“I’ve undergone training at a temple of the God of Appraisal, so I can appraise cursed objects to some degree.” Diego explained. “People value that. Lucaris is a big city, and we have more than our fair share of keen eyes, but I’m the only curse vendor who’s gone through the trouble of learning the skill. So there you go.”



“Does that mean you’re a priest of the God of Appraisal?” I asked.

“Nothing so grand,” Diego said. “I mean, they kicked me out halfway through. You can probably guess how they felt about me appraising cursed objects all the time...”

Come to think of it, the priests I’d met hadn’t been too keen on cursed objects, had they... “Yeah,” I agreed. “Priests of the God of Appraisal are pretty strict in that regard. So you’re saying you studied curses all the time despite that?”

“Essentially. That’s why they chased me out, in the end. I picked up a lot about the art of appraisal, though. And the way I see it, it doesn’t matter if it’s cursed or not—objects aren’t inherently sinful.”

Appraisal was a skill anyone could learn. The Guild had specialists, and many merchants knew how to do it too. The foremost experts in the world, however, were the priests who served the God of Appraisal, and many went to their temples seeking to learn their ways.

From what Diego had said, he had done exactly that. But to learn their methods, you had to become a priest too—they’d refuse to teach you otherwise. In a sense, that was only natural. But if Diego had become a priest, only to study cursed objects so often that he was excommunicated as a result...

Well, an adventurer like me would be extremely grateful to have an appraiser who would identify *anything* for them, but I had no doubt the priests saw the matter quite differently.

“You don’t regret it?” I asked. He’d gone as far as joining a priesthood to learn the art of appraisal. Could it be that he really had wanted to dedicate his life to it, at one point?

Diego shook his head. “Not really, no. I only learned it in the first place so I could run my store here in Lucaris. I’d always planned on coming back once I’d learned enough. I stayed longer than I’d planned to, actually, since it was more enjoyable than I expected, so getting the boot worked out perfectly.”

“Why Lucaris, then? Is there a particular reason you’re hung up on this city?”

As an appraiser who’d been good enough to become a priest of the God of Appraisal, Diego could’ve set up shop in an even bigger city and been in huge demand—and yet he simply ran a small shop like this as a side gig. Well, it had been passed down to him by his father, so maybe that was why.

“This is the city my father spent his life in,” Diego said, confirming my suspicions. “Besides...”

“Besides?” I asked.

“I...” Diego cut himself off, shaking his head. It seemed he wouldn’t be elaborating any further, because he suddenly changed the topic. “Come to think of it, Rentt, you said you were going to discipline these three?” He looked over to the unconscious men on the sofa. “What are you going to do to them?”

“Ah, right. Well, first I was going to get their side of the story when they woke up.”

“And then?”

“Make them help me out with a job. I’m planning to teach them a few things while we’re working too.”

“A job?”

“Yeah. Do you know about sea spirit herbs?”

It was kind of an abrupt topic change, but like any good general store owner

and appraiser, Diego seemed to be well-versed in botany. “They’re a type of herb that grows on the seafloor, right?” he said. “Fishfolk harvest them on occasion, but you only ever see them in Lucaris once a year or so. Oh—though I’ve heard you can sometimes find them in the Dungeon of the Sea God’s Daughters.”

“You know your stuff.”

“Who do you think you’re talking to? I’m a great and mighty appraiser who went through all that training!”

“You’re not wrong. I’m a little amazed you’d call yourself ‘great and mighty’ though.”

“Anyway, about the sea spirit herbs...?”

“Right. An acquaintance of mine needs a number of them, but like you mentioned, they’re not exactly in general circulation. So, the only choice is to go get them myself, right?”

“Ah, so you’re...”

“Technically speaking, another acquaintance of mine is already looking for them, but it seems to be slow going. I figured I’d add another set of hands or four to the search.”

“That’s the job you’ll be using this lot for?” Diego examined the unconscious adventurers skeptically. “Are you sure they’ll be any help?”

I understood how he felt. You couldn’t just order someone to help you search for herbs and expect them to know what they were doing. Since it was only the one kind of plant, however, I could just drill the relevant information into them beforehand. As long as I did the final check of what they picked, we’d be fine.

“I won’t say it’ll be easy going, but they’ll be more of a help than a burden, I think.”

“Fair enough. At least they weren’t poor enough fighters that they’d get in the way. Does that mean you’ll be delving into the Dungeon of the Sea God’s Daughters, then?”

“That’s the plan. It’s underwater, right? I’m looking forward to seeing it,

though, uh... I'm not quite sure how I'll be delving it. Do you know what people usually do?"

I'd heard about this kind of thing even while I was back in Maalt—more detailed strategies for entering and exploring dungeons generally tended to be unavailable until you were in the area. That was less because Maalt was a backwater town and more because the information was worth its weight in coin. It tended not to leak too far unless large sums of money changed hands.

Purchasing it was an option, but back in Maalt I'd never felt inclined to spend my hard-earned coin just to find out something about a specific dungeon in some faraway country. Now that the need was upon me, my plan was to meet up with Capitan and ask him. Only if that turned out not to be enough would I consider purchasing more information.

Until I'd linked up with him, though, it would be a waste to go around buying knowledge that he'd end up telling me anyway. I wouldn't have minded doing that in an emergency, but as things stood, all I had to do was wait until evening.

Since the ferry only traveled twice a day, the earliest I could explore the Dungeon of the Sea God's Daughters was tomorrow, so that was no problem.

"In general, you get to the dungeon by boat," Diego explained. "Then you just dive into the water, swim to the entrance, and you're in. Simple."

"Isn't that a little *too* simple? What about breathing?"

"Well, you're underwater, so you can't."

Correctly reading my expression as "*What, are you telling me to die?*" Diego burst into laughter, then added, "Don't worry, I'm not telling you to stop breathing. There *is* a way."



I cocked my head. "A way to get there without breathing?"

It wasn't turning into an undead, was it?!

Just kidding—I knew he wouldn't say that. Incidentally, I didn't actually need to breathe. I could get to the dungeon with no problem, but I had to maintain the act or people would get suspicious. Not only that, but I was now planning to

bring the three unconscious adventurers with me too, so I needed to figure out how to get around them drowning. You might argue that they couldn't complain if they did die, given what they'd tried to do to me, but I had no intention of being that cruel.

No intention *yet*, anyway. Depending on the circumstances, that option was still on the table.

"No, there's no method for doing that," Diego said. "But there *is* a way to breathe underwater. Take a look at this."

He retrieved a small, long glass pipe the width of a person's ring finger from a shelf. At first I thought it was stained, but upon closer inspection, it was just that it had minute, densely packed magical symbols engraved onto the exterior...no, they were on the *interior* of the pipe. It was obviously a...

"Is that a magical tool?" I asked.

"Close, but not quite. It's a cursed one."

"What...?" I'd been about to touch it, but I jerked my hand back, afraid that it would stick to me.

Diego laughed. "It's fine. Cursed tools come in all kinds. The curse on this one isn't the usual sort, you see."

"Are you sure?"

"I wouldn't be so casual about holding it if I were lying, would I?"

"True..."

That said, just because someone else could hold it without a problem didn't mean it wouldn't curse me. After all, my mask hadn't stuck to Rina's face when she'd had it, though maybe that was just because it would be inert unless someone tried to put it on. Still, that was proof there were cursed items that didn't activate unless you did a specific action.

Of course, I knew that Diego had no reason to bring me an item like that.

"So this'll let me breathe underwater?" I asked.

"Yes. Don't get me wrong, though—it's still a curse. Make sure you don't

attach it while you're on land, or you'll suffocate."

"Oh, so it's one of those..."

It was quite common for cursed objects to give the wielder some benefit in exchange for taking something away—for example, offering an extreme improvement in your vision in exchange for removing your ability to hear, or vice versa. You could use the former to scout over long distances, and the latter to receive verbal messages. They could even be useful for blocking out your vision or hearing, if you needed to do that.

Cursed items weren't in ready circulation in Maalt, so nobody really used them, but people who did showed up once in a blue moon in other towns, so knowing about them was indispensable. I felt I should revise my impressions of Ariana—the people here likely used them quite often. After all, this city had curse vendors like Diego—though he called his shop a general store.

I was worried about my ability to use this pipe. Despite having some knowledge about cursed objects, I had little practical experience with them. These things were a matter of time and practice, though. I'd never figure out the trick unless I tried it.

Not that the glass pipe would have any effect on me in the first place...

"By the way, how much is one of these?" I asked.

"Five gold."

"That much...? I don't suppose you could give me a discount..."

"I already am—haggling with you would be a pain. Five gold's basically at cost. You can check at other curse vendors, if you'd like. The biggest rip-off I've personally seen is a place selling them for fifty gold."

"Five gold it is, then. I'll take four." I retrieved my coin pouch from my breast pocket and handed the money to Diego.

"Huh. Are you sure? You don't want to test them out first?"

"I've got no reason to distrust you. If there's a problem with them, I'll just bring them back... You'll replace them, right?"

"That's not normally a service I provide, but I'll do it for you. I don't get the

impression you'd break them intentionally and come complaining to me about it."

"Do you get people like that often...?"

"More often than you'd think. Curse vendors tend to have a few screws loose—not that I'm one to talk. Even harassing rival stores isn't unheard of."

"Oh, so it's not the customers, but others in the same profession..."

I got the impression this was a pretty dog-eat-dog world. Given how there were people selling a five gold product for fifty, maybe I wasn't too far off. Although from another perspective, maybe *they* thought Diego was a business rival who was selling their product at one-tenth the value...

"Just for reference, how much do these usually go for?" I asked.

"These? Twelve or thirteen gold, generally speaking."

"You gave me a pretty big discount, then."

"I did, so you'd best be grateful."

"Of course I am."

"In that case, mind hearing out a request of mine?"

Diego's delivery was so smooth that I almost missed it, even though I'd been expecting something like that. He wouldn't have given me such a large discount for nothing, after all, and he'd practically said himself that curse vendors were a crafty lot. Still, it wouldn't cost me anything to listen.

"I can hear you out, but I won't make any promises about accepting," I warned.

"That's enough for me. It's not anything momentous, anyway—just a simple request. You'll be delving into the Dungeon of the Sea God's Daughters with this lot, won't you?"

"Yeah."

"Have you heard what the dungeon's particular trait is?"

"I...haven't, no. I was going to look into it later."

“Well, it’s pretty common knowledge, but cursed objects tend to turn up pretty easily there. Much more frequently than other dungeons, in fact.”

Like magical items, cursed items were a common product of dungeons. You rarely saw them in the ones around Maalt—Yaaran’s dungeons in general tended to have low numbers, actually—but they were definitely out there. It didn’t take much imagination to surmise that there were probably dungeons on the other side of the coin.

That explained another thing too. “Is that why Lucaris has so many curse vendors?”

“Sure is. But as for my request—if you come across any cursed items, could you bring them to me?”

“For free...?”

“Of course not. If I see anything I want, I’ll pay you for it.”

“Does that even count as a request? It sounds like a regular business deal—and one that’s nothing but beneficial for me, at that.”

“Will you accept, then?”

I couldn’t see a trace of deception in Diego’s smile. There was probably something he wasn’t saying, but it didn’t seem like it was anything that was going to affect me negatively. That being the case, I figured it’d be fine.

“All right. I accept.”

Intermission: Niedz the Adventurer

My misfortunes began with a simple sentence.

“I saw a real strange-looking guy earlier, Niedz.”

I was at the guild commission board, looking for easy jobs that would make me some fast coin. I was an adventurer, but only in a sense—I was the kind of small fry whose ability had hit a dead end after he’d reached Bronze-class.

Maybe things would’ve been different if I’d kept up my training, but after seeing so many younger adventurers blow past me with ease, at some point along the line I lost any motivation I’d once had.

In the end, adventuring was a profession for those with talent. All guys like me could do was scrape together enough for our daily bread by picking up the drudge work.

Even so, I took my job seriously, in my own way. If I accepted a commission, I shouldered full responsibility for seeing it through to the end—and when I failed, I made sure to report it and apologize to the client.

I figured all that was why the Guild let a half-assed guy like me stick around.

Don’t believe me? Fine. You want the truth? The truth was that I knew they left me alone because I didn’t matter.

Even when I walked up with a commission slip in my hand, the receptionists’ eyes and attitudes were always cold. I knew what those eyes were saying—I’d known for the last two or three years.

Hurry up and retire already.

My job completion rate wasn’t particularly high, and my strength was nothing to boast about either. The Guild didn’t need a guy like me.

I got it, okay?

If I’d been capable of it, I would’ve quit and gone back to my hometown. But I couldn’t even do that. I didn’t have the coin.

Everything I tried to save went to bed and board. I was trapped in a cycle I couldn't escape, and it gnawed at me every day. But even a guy like me had friends.

Gahedd and Lukas were adventurers in the same position as me. Though they'd been at it for less time than I had, they were the only two people in this city I could truly call my companions.

Gahedd was the tall, slender type, and he always looked like he was unsteady on his feet, but he was passionate, and a good guy too. Whenever I talked about giving up, he'd encourage me, saying that a better future awaited if we just kept working hard.

Lukas was the opposite in appearance, being short and fat, but he was brave and willing to charge into any kind of danger in a pinch.

Their skills as adventurers weren't all too different from mine, so we partied up as a trio sometimes when certain jobs required it, and that was pretty much the broad strokes of our relationship.

Lukas was the one who'd spoken to me at the message board, but it wasn't long before Gahedd had walked over to join the conversation.

"Strange how?" I asked.

"He bought a bunch of herbs I'd never seen before from a goatfolk for three gold. It was a total scam—had to be."

"Herbs *you've* never seen before? That means..."

Lukas knew a fair deal about herbalism. There were some plants out there that fetched outrageous prices, so three gold wasn't a ridiculous number, but if Lukas didn't recognize them, the guy must've been conned into buying some old weeds.

"The fact he was happy to spend three gold on some herbs means he's gotta be pretty rich, right?" Gahedd said. "Must be nice..."

I scoffed. "Yeah. Not like us. It's like gold coins can't stand the sight of us."

Gahedd laughed. "You got that right."

We were just joking around and talking nonsense, but it was carefree times

like these I enjoyed the most.

“Anyway, I’d better go get a commission done,” I said.

“Sure thing. See y— Wait.” Lukas’s head looked over at the man who’d just entered the Guild. “Isn’t that man...?”

His strange appearance meant you couldn’t actually tell if he even *was* a guy under there, but given the way he walked, I thought it was pretty likely. That was further supported by the sound of his voice when he began talking to a receptionist.

“What about him?” I asked, still watching him.

“He’s the guy I was talking about,” Lukas explained.

“Oh, Mr. Three Gold? He doesn’t look *that* rich...”

A jet black cloak and a mask—the former didn’t look particularly expensive, and the latter actually looked cheap, given how creepy it was. He couldn’t have had that much money on him.

“Yeah, but still...” Lukas’s eyes focused as the man produced his license. “O-Oh. He’s a Bronze-classer? But he has enough gold to drop three on some herbs...”

Bronze-class—meaning he was only as strong as us. But the fact that his financial situation was so much better? That was a bitter pill to swallow.

As I watched him absentmindedly, I noticed that he was hitting it off with the receptionist too. She had a friendly look in her eyes that I knew *we’d* never be on the receiving end of. An unpleasant feeling settled at the bottom of my stomach.

Life really wasn’t fair.

After a while, the guy left the Guild. I ignored the commission slips, instead heading for the exit after him.

“Huh? Hey, Niedz!” Gahedd called out. “What happened to taking a job?”

“Not today,” I said.

He seemed to get what I meant immediately. “Don’t tell me...you’re planning

on following him?”

“Mmm.”

“Why?”

“Three gold’s nothing to him. I bet he won’t mind showing me a little of that generosity.”

“So that’s what you’re after... I’m coming too, then. He’ll be quicker to fork it over if there’s two of us. No, wait—Lukas, you come too. It’ll be even easier with the three of us.”

Despite what he was saying, I knew Gahedd was planning on stopping me. He was probably going to try to persuade me as we walked. He always intervened whenever I tried to do something stupid.

Lukas had realized the same thing I had. He nodded. “Fine. Guess I’ve got no choice.”

The three of us left the Guild together. We spotted the masked guy and began tailing him. As I’d suspected, Gahedd and Lukas tried to talk me out of it along the way.

As I walked, my head cooled. I realized I’d been pissed off and desperate, and I’d let my emotions talk me into trying something stupid. But just as I was about to turn away and leave, the masked guy suddenly stopped.

“This should do. Why don’t you all come out? It’s the least you could do after I did you the favor of coming all the way to this gloomy place.”

He was speaking to us. There was no turning back now. We stepped out of the shadows and faced him.



What happened after...is still pretty hard to believe. I probably don’t have to explain that apparently I am a bad judge of people.

After bailing on our plan ceased to be an option, I demanded money from the guy as I’d initially planned. Everything up until that point had gone smoothly...but part of me couldn’t get over how strange the guy was.

There were three of us and only one of him. Since we were all Bronze-classers, that meant he was facing a threat three times his own ability. And yet, he was completely unbothered.

I started to get madder and madder. I called out to Gahedd and Lukas to join me, then charged him.

I couldn't make them go first—I mean, I'd basically just dragged them along. If I lost to the masked guy, at least they'd be able to make their escape.

If I was the only one who went down...well, that wouldn't be *too* bad. He might chase after them, but I didn't think he'd be so vindictive. He was just a Bronze-classer, after all—not that I was one to talk, I guess. And who'd bother going to the trouble of tracking down two people in a city as big as Lucaris?

So, I charged.

But the results of that were more pathetic than I imagined. I couldn't even remember it clearly—my memories cut off around when I was bringing my sword to bear. The masked guy had still been way out of my range, standing there in a casual way that was weirdly difficult to pin down. He had a weapon at his waist, but showed no sign of reaching for it.

Yet, in the span it took me to inhale a single breath, his mask was right in front of my face.

I almost screamed, but no sound came out. The skull mask was exquisitely modeled, and up close it had a strange appeal to it. I had the out-of-place thought that it probably wasn't as cheap as I'd first assumed it to be.

Come to think of it, that was probably when I instinctively gave up. I could tell my sword would never reach him.

He'd closed the distance in a mere instant. How was a two-bit adventurer like me supposed to beat a guy who could do that?

It had been wrong of me to even consider robbing him in the first place. Maybe my entire way of life until this point had been wrong too.

No, I'd done one thing right: I'd charged at him first. Gahedd and Lukas were still behind me. I didn't know if they'd be able to make it out, but as long as they

ran now and the masked guy didn't give chase, they'd get away.

They were my only genuine friends in this entire city. Even if I was a goner, I wanted them to live. If they survived, I could go out knowing my life hadn't been that bad after all.

If I had one regret, it was probably that I hadn't gotten to go on one last job with them.

No use crying over spilled milk, though. I'd just have to make sure I partied up with them again in my next life.

That was the last thought that went through my mind before everything went black.



When I slowly opened my eyes in a dark, quiet room, I was extremely surprised.

I didn't know what had happened after I'd been knocked out, but I'd been sure I was going to die. The masked bastard had definitely been strong enough to finish me in one strike, and since I'd tried to rob him, he'd had no reason to show me any mercy.

And yet...

Suddenly, a human skull appeared in my field of vision. "Oh, you're awake," it said.

I barely managed to stop myself from screaming.

The skull man stepped back, and a beastfolk appeared. "He woke up later than the other two," he said. "You might've put a little too much force into your blow, Rentt."

The man had a jet-black coat of fur, the kind of glittering eyes only felines had, and a lithe build. He was probably a pantherfolk.

Pantherfolk were pretty rare, and all the ones in Lucaris were relatively well-known among adventurers. He wasn't an acquaintance by any stretch, but I recognized his name and face.

“You’re...Malga...?” I asked.

“Oh, you know me?” The look in his eyes was sharp as he studied me. “I don’t remember a customer like you ever stopping by...”

I smiled bitterly. “What, is that your idea of a joke? A Bronze-classer like me could never afford anything from your shop.”

Malga considered that for a moment, then turned to Skullface. “Hear that, Bronze-classer?”

“What do you want me to say?” he said. “I get what he means, though. It was only a short while ago that I came into some coin. I’m only as well-off as I am now thanks to a few lucky strokes of fate.”

“Lucky strokes of fate, huh? I guess our meeting counts as one of those.”

“You think...?” Skullface approached me. “Hey. Drink this. I didn’t mean to hit you so hard. Must’ve let my control slip a bit.” He held a cup that smelled of flowers and herbs. The scent reminded me of medicine.

“What is it?” I asked.

“An herbal infusion. It’s effect isn’t that potent, though, so it’s more to calm you down than anything. Better than nothing, though. It’s also a bit of an experiment. Just drink it.”

As he held the cup out, I realized he’d slipped something kinda terrifying in at the end there. I wanted to refuse...but then I remembered how he’d taken me out in one blow.

My body must’ve instinctually realized how meaningless it was to resist him, because I obediently took the cup and brought it to my mouth.

Upon drinking the infusion, I was surprised at how invigorating the taste that spread through my mouth was. The warmth diffused through my body, and I could feel my muscles and joints relaxing. The dull pain in my side that had been throbbing since I’d woken up quickly faded away.

“How is it?” Skullface asked.

“I feel better,” I said. “Dunno why, though. Still...thanks.”

That was how I met Boss Rentt and Brother Diego. At the time, I had no idea what was going to become of me. I thought I'd be handed over to the authorities, be forced into slavery, or even killed. The possibility of anything else didn't even occur to me.

Instead, that was when it all began—when I started to think that maybe, just maybe, lucky strokes of fate really did exist.

Afterword

Thank you very much for purchasing *The Unwanted Undead Adventurer* Volume 13! This is Yu Okano.

The twelfth volume of the manga will be going on sale at the same time, so please check it out too!

I think this every time a new book is published, but reaching the thirteenth volume makes me happy beyond words. At the same time, I'm filled with a sense of despair, because I once again have nothing to say in the afterword.

Nothing interesting enough to report has happened to me recently, so what should I even write here?

I haven't really pursued any hobbies lately either. I often feel like I have too much time on my hands. I do my best to space out and let it flow past, but quite frequently I think about how much of a waste that is.

If only I had something to do. I don't, though...

Writing is probably my best option, but I can only really do it when inspiration strikes and I have something to write about. That never happens when I'm parked in front of my computer the whole time, so it's often a struggle for me to get the words out.

To combat that, I've recently been reading books on story writing to see if I can't pick up some techniques or new ways of thinking independent of talent or luck.

I've been fortunate enough to have a number of volumes published, so I know there's a part of me arrogant enough to think that I have a general idea of how to write and tell stories, but reading these books made me realize how little I really know. It's been really enlightening.

The real question is if I'll be able to properly put that knowledge into practice with my future writing, but that can only be solved with diligent effort. I'll just have to keep steadily chipping away at it.

Additionally, whenever I neglect my diet and sleep schedule too much, the ideas just refuse to come. But when I get a good night's sleep and feel well rested, I can write smoothly, with ideas coming around every corner. That makes me wonder if what I need is just a healthy lifestyle.

To achieve that, I'd need to stop drinking and eating too much, exercise regularly, and settle into a systematic routine, but I haven't managed to make any of that a habit yet. I'll keep on trying my best...

Now then, I think that more or less makes for a thousand characters, so please let me off the hook for this afterword. If I am fortunate enough to have another volume published, I'll try to include something more interesting here.

I would be eternally grateful if you continued to support *The Unwanted Undead Adventurer*. Thank you.



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The Unwanted Undead Adventurer: Volume 13

by Yu Okano

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