

three

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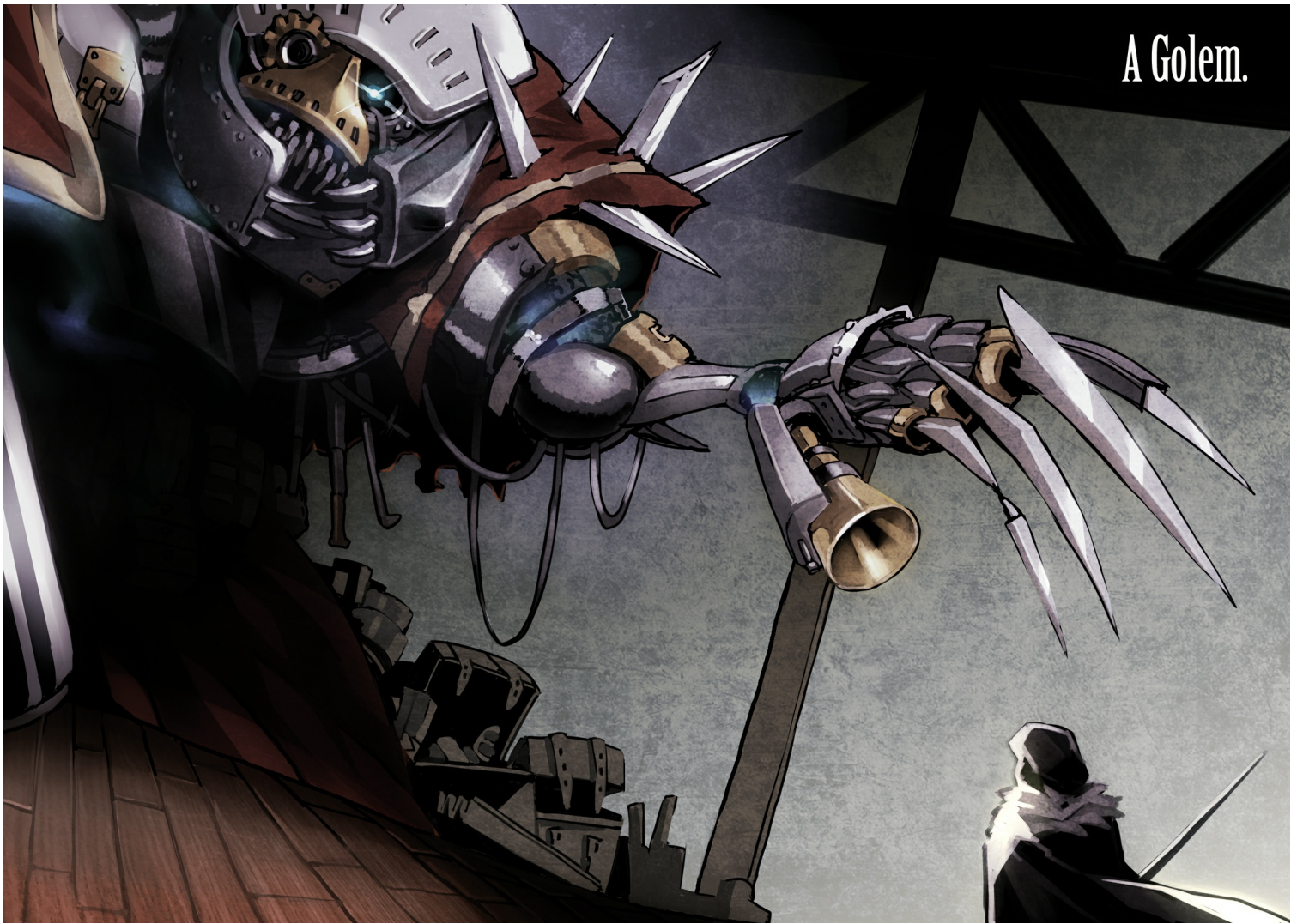
The Unwanted Undead Adventurer





The Unwanted Undead Adventurer [3] Yu Okano / Illustration: Jaian

A Golem.



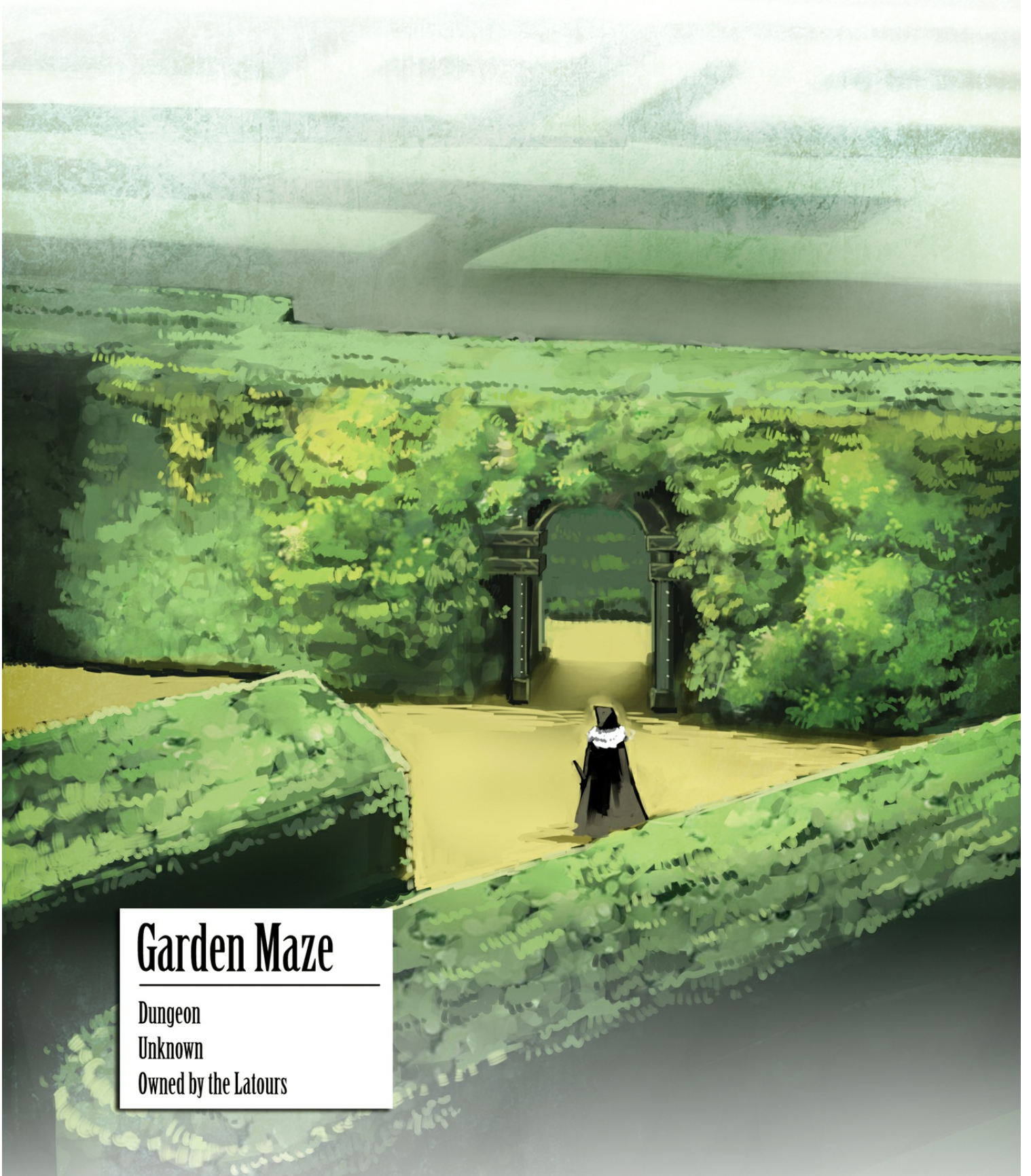
"I am...completely lost."

Garden Maze

Dungeon

Unknown

Owned by the Latours



third
3

The Unwanted Undead Adventurer

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[C O N T E N T S]

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Chapter 1: A Peculiar Man

“Oh...? How very rare, to chance upon another person in these depths.”

The man had a surprised expression on his face and spoke in a relatively non-threatening way, as if to declare he wasn't a dangerous individual by any means. Upon closer inspection, he hardly looked like someone who bore me ill will. He didn't seem like an adventurer of questionable morals, specifically the kind who wouldn't hesitate to prey on their fellow adventurers.

I still kept my guard up, for there was no way of knowing if my observations held water. At the very least, we should have a conversation.

“I am... Surprised, as well. After all... No sane individual... Would wander. Into the depths of the... Swamp of Tarasque.”

The man smiled at my response.

“It is almost as if you claim you are not very sane yourself, kind sir. I do beg to differ, though, as I am very much in control of mine own faculties. In no small part to these—I assume you are similarly equipped?”

The man held up what appeared to be a magical tool, one for nullifying the poison, if I had to guess. In addition, he was also armed with several vials of actual holy water, purchased from an established church, no doubt. In his other hand was a high-quality, well-annotated map of the swamp. Compared to myself, who charged into the swamp with nothing more than my unique constitution as my defense against the elements, this man seemed much more prepared.

A seemingly true explorer of the Swamp of Tarasque.

I lowered my head slightly at his words. I was hardly as prepared as he was, though that wasn't a fact I had to disclose.

My circumstances were quite different: my Undead constitution staved off the poison, and my divinity had gotten me out of a tight bind with a Tarasque. But I didn't explain this to the man.

I simply couldn't.

I only nodded, somewhat halfheartedly.

"...It is, as you say."

"I see! As expected of one who challenges the swamp. On another note...are you here for Dragon Blood Blossoms as well?"

"...Yes. You are after... The same? It is a good thing, that. We do not need to fight over... The flowers. To think another adventurer... Would arrive at the same time as myself."

Honestly speaking, few adventurers were capable of making it to this point. Even if they were skilled, purchasing the adequate equipment required a fair sum of coin. In addition, the typical adventurer wasn't partial to exposing themselves to potent poisons on a regular basis. If an adventurer were truly skilled enough to trek through the Swamp of Tarasque, they would instead be exploring the labyrinth depths, and making good coin in the process.

If one desired a Dragon Blood Blossom, however, this was the only place to go. Even so, few dared venture this far into the swamp.

Raising my head to look at the man again, I couldn't help but notice his beauty. His skin was pale, almost like it had never been touched by the sun. There was a certain coldness to his features, accompanied by an almost unfeeling gaze. His face was framed by long tresses of silver hair, hosting the very look of a noble.

At his waist was a rapier, and on one of his arms a well-made, lightweight metallic shield. For one reason or another, I couldn't shake the notion that the man's equipment was decorative more than useful. If anything, finer clothes suited this man; in fact, he would look at home in finery and formal dress alone, sword and shield be damned.

The contrast between the dreary swamp and the finery of this man couldn't be more striking. It wouldn't be strange if he had ventured into the swamp for the express purpose of picking these flowers.

"Ah, you see..." the man continued, "I am not an adventurer."

“...Is that right?”

“Verily so. How should I describe it... I am something akin to a butler, serving a certain esteemed individual. My master desires Dragon Blood Blossoms on a regular basis, hence my trips here.”

Unless I misheard the man, he was a butler, on orders from his master to gather Dragon Blood Blossoms. What a wonderful master-servant relationship, given the dangers involved.

Turning toward the black mouse perched on my shoulder, I grunted, then turned back to face the man.

Edel... This mouse would never do anything of the sort for me.

Making a mental note not to expect much of anything from my familiar, I posed a question to the man: “...Forgive my. Bluntness. Is your master... Unwell?”

“Ah, yes. I suppose you could say so. Recently, even getting up has been quite the chore... Frankly speaking, I should be at my master’s side right now, not out here picking flowers. Even so, it is undeniable that my master requires Dragon Blood Blossoms. While the extract could be easily made into a potent medicine, my master has developed quite the taste for...freshly-pressed flowers, if I may say so. Speaking of...would you happen to know of any methods to preserve freshly-extracted Dragon-Flower Blood? Perhaps you might have such knowledge, given that you are an adventurer...?” the man asked, somewhat inquisitively.

While a Dragon Blood Blossom could be processed into medication, freshly-extracted Dragon-Flower Blood was much more potent. While I didn’t know the specifics as well as an herbalist would, I understood Dragon-Flower Blood degraded in a few days’ time and had to be used within that time frame. If one required a regular supply for any reason, one had no real choice other than visiting the swamp repeatedly.

For the average person, this would be an impossible feat, requiring a great amount of resources and hard work. While a magical tool would remain potent and functional once purchased and adequately maintained, holy water was another matter. Given that a single bottle deprived the purchaser of a few gold

coins, the protection it offered from the swamp was proven.

While I had never given it much thought until now, the monopoly that churches had over the supply of holy water almost seemed illegal.

Regardless, I had no idea how to preserve Dragon-Flower Blood. While I learned many tricks and skills from my short tenure as an herbalist's apprentice, what the man was asking for was clearly beyond me. Even if such a method did exist, it was likely still undiscovered.

"...No. If I did know... Such a method. I would... Stop adventuring and. Become an herbalist."

Such was my answer. A flat-out lie, given the fact that I had to become a Mithril-class adventurer. If I did discover such a method, I wouldn't stop adventuring; even so, the man before me didn't need to know this, either. I was, however, telling the truth when it came to not knowing very much on the specifics of preserving Dragon-Flower Blood.

The man, as if expecting such a response, merely smiled. "I suppose so, yes," he said, in a well-practiced manner.

"I... Apologize. For being unable to help."

The man's expression softened upon hearing my apology, an equally apologetic look tinting his features. "No, no. Please, do not worry of it. In fact, I should apologize for expecting so much from someone I have only just met. Think of it more as a casual question, good sir. Do not trouble yourself over it."

The man seemed genuinely apologetic.

"Thank you for... Your concern." I decided to offer some pleasantries of my own. "I am... Not. In the business of... Disappointing people I have just met. I would be glad... To help. If there is something I could... Do, however."

The man seemed taken aback at my words, and he paused momentarily as if in deep thought. "Is that right...? In that case...even if you do not bear the knowledge I seek, perhaps it is fortunate that I made your acquaintance on this day. My master would certainly feel that way."

I tilted my head, not exactly understanding the man's statement.

“Ah, I do apologize. I occasionally get lost in mine own thoughts. I refer to what you mentioned prior, if there was anything you could do to help.”

“I did say... That. Yes.”

“To tell the truth, we have been searching for a reliable party to bring us Dragon Blood Blossoms at regular intervals. The search is not progressing well, of course...”

“Hoh...?”

I suppose that would be the case. If the adventurer in question was of a high rank, it wouldn't be in their best interests to continually expose themselves to the Swamp of Tarasque. Even if the rewards were grand, or in some cases of questionable legality, most adventurers would refuse such a request if there were no good reasons behind it.

This was why that orphanage girl, Alize, was so troubled. If the details of the request weren't so difficult, someone would have surely aided her with it, given the client was an orphanage.

A sudden thought flashed across my mind—

“...I see. By reliable party... Do you mean. Me?”

“Quite so. I do apologize for the reckless nature of this request. We will, of course, submit a formal series of requests via the guild, and arrange for an agreeable set of contracts and rewards. If you will accept, I would be most indebted... Please do forgive me for asking after all this time, but you are an adventurer, yes?”

It was almost like he already knew I was an adventurer. I supposed I should introduce myself, then.

I told the man my name and adventurer rank: “Yes. I am a Bronze-Class... Adventurer. Rentt... Vivie. I am here because of... A request. I picked up.”

Yet another surprised expression crossed the man's features. I understood the reason for this: my adventurer rank, if nothing else.

“...I would not have thought you would be a Bronze-class adventurer...” the man continued.

“Are you less... Eager. To entrust me with the... Task, now?”

The man shook his head. “No, nothing of the sort. I was indeed surprised at your rank, but that was all. The fact that you stand before me uninjured is a testament to your skill. I would be honored if you would accept our request, or at least consider it, good sir.”

“...You are a strange. One.”

The average person wouldn't think much of entrusting a Bronze-class adventurer with such a task. But the man hardly seemed bothered by my rank. I suppose he was more concerned with my actual abilities.

Personally, I didn't know if I was up to the task, but the fact that someone else felt that way brought some joy to my heart.

The man, as if remembering something important, continued on. “Ah, yes... How careless of me. My name is Isaac Hart. Do feel free to call me Isaac. I would introduce you to my master...but of course, only after the formal proceedings are in place.”





Although I ended up having quite a discussion with Isaac, the Swamp of Tarasque was hardly a place for such lengthy conversations. Now we both knew we had reliable means to combat the swamp's poison; we hardly would have stayed to talk otherwise. Even if one was impervious to the poison, the same could not be said for one's possessions. The best equipment could be corroded by unnecessary exposure to the swamp. Isaac, however, seemed to have noticed this before I raised my concerns on the matter.

"It would seem like our discussion has gone on for some time. I do apologize. I must return soon, with flowers of my own, of course. By your leave, good sir," Isaac said, bowing his head slightly as he ended the conversation.

I suppose we both had to get going relatively soon.

"...Yes." I nodded in response. "About the request... I will await contact. From the guild. Is that... Acceptable?"

"Yes, that is fine. We will be formally requesting you through the guild; good of them to contact you on our behalf. Even so...I hardly think anyone would accept this request—other than you, that is," Isaac said, a wry smile flitting across his face.

That much was true; one would be hard-pressed to find an adventurer who was willing to enter the swamp in the first place, much less at regular intervals for the purposes of flower-picking. Enough coin would send one skilled adventurer on a single trip, but there were some things even money couldn't readily buy.

Few adventurers would be convinced to ruin their health in this fashion; an adventurer's body was their greatest asset, after all. Even if the profits were great, a sick adventurer would eventually become a hungry one.

I was an outlier, being unaffected by the swamp's effects in general. I suppose it also goes without saying that individuals like me were exceedingly rare.

I nodded, before giving Isaac a quick wave of farewell. Waving back, Isaac seemed somewhat pleased by the outcome of our conversation. He also seemed pleased enough to throw something in my general direction.

I caught the item with a free hand. "...A bottle of holy... Water?"

Isaac offered an explanation as I tilted my head, confused.

"Please, do use it if you would like. It seemed like you did not have any on your person," Isaac said, somewhat concerned.

How did he know this? Curious, I asked Isaac for an explanation.

"Why do you... Think so?"

"Holy water has a particular smell to it, you see. Nonetheless, it would seem like you possess other methods of protection. While this is a walled garden protected by the Dragon Blood Blossoms, I sense something even more pure on your very person."

The Swamp of Tarasque was many things, but it was also a place that smelled...adequately terrible. Between the poison in the air and the muck on the ground, this much was understood.

This garden of crimson blossoms also had a stench of its own, namely, the overwhelming fragrance of the Dragon Blood Blossoms themselves. Maybe it was the fact that these flowers purified the poison and miasma, or perhaps they smelled this way for some other reason altogether.

Either way, one would be hard-pressed to smell anything in this garden, let alone the alleged smell of holy water.

While holy water did have a unique smell to it, its fragrance would eventually diffuse into the air with time, much like perfume. In fact, one only had to walk past a priest or a healer of the Church in a town to smell such a fragrance. Could this man really discern such a faint smell here, amidst the stench of the swamp and the thick fragrance of the blossoms? Or perhaps he was confident in his sense of smell...?

No, there has to be more to this.

He mentioned he could "sense something even more pure." My divine aura, I suppose?

There was also the fact that he had ventured into the Swamp of Tarasque alone. Maybe there was more to this man than I thought, skills and

appearances aside.

“...I see you have... A good eye. I am able... To use divinity, you see.”

It wasn't something I had to hide. While few humans had the ability to channel divinity, such individuals did exist. After all, I hadn't even run into Sister Lillian, who had taken care of the orphanage all her life, on the streets of Maalt.

Having reserves of divinity within oneself wasn't something worth fussing over, nor was it worth hiding, especially before someone who had already noticed me utilizing it.

With this, I could safely assume Isaac possessed honed senses, and for some reason I felt like I could trust him. At least, when it came to not carelessly disclosing information.

As if agreeing with my assessment, Isaac nodded. “As I suspected, good sir. Well, then...was the holy water an unnecessary gesture?”

“... No. In fact, I am... Grateful. Although I made it here... In one piece. I was having doubts... About the return trip. I am thankful... You have aided me with such... A blessing.”

“Is that so? I am glad I was of assistance.”

“...But. Is this really all right...? This is quite... An expensive item. I can tell from the... Bottle alone. In fact... It is a top-grade... Bottle of holy water... Blessed. By the Church of Lobelia.”

The Church of Lobelia... This church in particular didn't have much of a presence in Yaaran, but it wielded immense power and clout in the great kingdoms to the west. While they did have a church established in Maalt, its congregation was relatively small.

Despite its size and lack of presence in Maalt, however, they did sell high-grade holy water, albeit at a price that bucked all market trends of whatever location they had set themselves up in.

To be precise, the bottles weren't exactly sold so much as they were rewarded to those who showed great faith...and also to those who donated large sums of coin to the church. A transaction in some ways, but at the same

time not quite an outright sale. The higher the donation, the more potent the grade of the holy water. Higher grades of holy water, in turn, were housed in increasingly ornate bottles. Even holy water had different grades to it: although basic holy water could be sold by various churches, high-quality bottles could only be made by churches that possessed the means to produce them.

Various factors determined a bottle of holy water's grade: the duration of its effect, its density, fragrance, transparency... Variations in each of these factors could greatly alter the value of a bottle. The Church of Lobelia's top-grade bottles, on the other hand, were in a class of their own. A single drop from these bottles had as much potency as an entire bottle's worth of lower-grade holy water from other institutions. Under normal circumstances, one wouldn't give such a bottle to a stranger casually.

But Isaac just shook his head.

"Would you not need it later? I simply thought it made sense to hand it to you here and now."

Isaac's statement struck me as slightly odd; I hadn't even agreed to the request at hand yet. Was he acting on the assumption that I would do so?

Even so...

"Did you not think... I could simply run off with... This bottle. Without accepting your... Request?"

"If that does happen, good sir, well, then that is that. I suppose I would have been a bad judge of character in that case. In addition, neither my master nor myself are in dire financial straits, so to speak."

It would appear Isaac and his master have enough coin to throw around, seeing as they were wealthy enough to be offering top-grade bottles of Lobelia holy water to strangers.

I was somewhat envious of their finances, though I suppose this was why they had issues finding someone to fulfill their request in the first place. Now, if an adventurer was offered aid here and now, the chances of them accepting such a request would increase.

As expected, even I found it difficult to refuse, especially after Isaac's gesture

of charity. I hadn't even begun to consider refusing.

"In that case... I shall gladly. Accept... Well, then... Until next time."

"Yes. Do be careful on your way back."

Isaac and I parted ways.

Nothing of note occurred as I retraced my steps. Given that I could now avoid the Tarasques with Isaac's gift of holy water, I suppose this much was to be expected.

The other denizens of the swamp weren't much of a threat to me, either—so long as I didn't fall into the water again, that is. Even the Goblins kept their distance. Some Goblins escaped the moment they saw me; perhaps a few had escaped their encounters with me. They were mostly Goblin Archers who mainly shot at their enemies from a distance. It wasn't strange to see them running when faced with one such as myself.

Given how much I intimidated them, I would be hard-pressed to fulfill any Goblin-slaying requests in the swamp, should I ever receive them in the future.

Yet...Goblins didn't have a very good memory; they probably would have all but forgotten about me in a little over a week.

I couldn't help but feel like Goblins were creatures who lived in and for the moment. This wasn't a critique against their character, however. Living this way probably had its merits. Those of them who had built villages and lived alongside humans probably didn't think very highly of such a lifestyle—but that was a question for another time.

Maybe I would make it a point to ask a friendly Goblin about that, sometime in the future. I would have to learn how to speak Goblin, though...

Thinking so, I found myself finally out of the Swamp of Tarasque.

Climbing the steps, I emerged on the main road, waiting for the horse-carriage that had brought me here earlier in the day. After waiting for a while, the familiar sound of carriage wheels resounded in the distance. Closing in, the

coachman hopped off, staring at me with a mixture of surprise and wonderment.

“So, you’re still very much alive, huh...? I’m s’prised. You’re pretty good!”

“Actually... I am already a Mythril-class... Adventurer. This mask... Is just to keep... My movements hidden. From the world.”

A silly response, and a funny one. The coachman laughed.

“Ha! Look’it’chu, quite the joker ’spite how ya look! Lemme know if ya want me to bring ya here again. I’ll give ya a discount!”

Heartily agreeing, I hopped into the carriage. The horses were soon off, bound for the familiar township of Maalt.



The first thing I did upon returning to Maalt was report my findings to the guild—and so off to the guild I went.

While I wanted to make my way to the orphanage and deliver the Dragon Blood Blossoms right away, I had something else that required my immediate attention: the carcass of the Tarasque I had slain.

I wanted to cure Sister Lillian’s illness as soon as possible, but she wasn’t in danger of immediately losing her life. As long as I handed some materials over to the local herbalist and picked up the relevant medication tomorrow, I suppose having her wait a single day was acceptable.

Entering the guild, I immediately made my way to Sheila; as usual, she was standing behind the receptionist’s counter. Sheila knew of my circumstances, and she often assisted me with guild business.

“Oh, Rentt...! Were you looking for something specific today? Wait... Don’t tell me—you are already back from the swamp?”

Even Sheila wasn’t expecting me to return so quickly. This was to be expected, given she knew of my prowess, or lack thereof, in life. I had also cleared most of the Bronze-class ranking progression exam with prior knowledge, as opposed to relying on individual skill.

Exploring a place like the Swamp of Tarasque, however, was a league of its

own. A lack of skill would easily result in one's death.

Due to neither Lorraine nor myself giving Sheila a complete briefing of my capabilities, I suppose her reaction was, for the most part, normal.

"Yes. I have retrieved... The requested Dragon Blood... Blossoms. I intend to... Deliver. The flowers to the orphanage... Soon. And have the client... Sign off on my request."

"I'm surprised, Rentt. To think you would finish the job so quickly... I thought your hard work only bore fruit when you went Orc-hunting, but this is something else altogether. You have gotten strong, Rentt."

"...Is that right. Personally... I am not. So sure."

Those were my honest thoughts; I was by no means fishing for praise.

Sheila was right, I was stronger than I used to be. That was a fact I couldn't argue against.

Have I truly become stronger in all senses of the word, though? Was I more skilled, more capable? Somehow, that didn't feel quite right. I couldn't help but feel I had only obtained this strength due to my monstrous constitution. No matter what I did, I couldn't shake the thought.

I wasn't disgusted with what I had become, yet I felt a deep fear in my mind: the fear of losing this newfound strength if I should one day become human again.

Will I be able to live with that fact?

I had obtained some strength in return for my efforts, but would restoring my humanity cause that to fade? If I did return to my previously powerless self, my goal of becoming a Mithril-class adventurer would be all but impossible. Would that break my will, if not my very sense of self?

That was what I feared.

But of course, I suppose I would just continue trudging stubbornly toward my goal regardless of what would happen in the future. There was no way I could predict how I would feel if this hypothetical scenario came to pass. I suppose this was the proverbial fear of the unknown.

In any case, it was pointless counting my chickens before they had even hatched. I gave those thoughts a rest, turning to Sheila once more.

“If you can venture in and out of the Swamp of Tarasque on your own unharmed, you’re more or less already Silver-class in terms of capability, Rentt! You would do well to remember that!”

I could only stand there and nod sheepishly as I accepted Sheila’s encouragement without a word of protest.

Even if I would one day lose this power, it was now unmistakably present, and unmistakably mine. It was important to have an accurate measure of my own strength; acknowledging one’s skills was as important as actually having them, after all.

“I understand, Sheila. On another... Note. I have a request... Of my own.”

“Ah, yes, that. Since you are not turning in the request yet... Would it be the sale of materials?”

As expected of Sheila and her five years’ worth of experience, I didn’t even have to explain what I needed.

“Yes.” I nodded in response. “However, some... Processing. Is required. A regular dissection room... Would be... Impractical. For the task.”

“I see. You bagged something big, I guess? Well, you did rent quite a high-capacity bag, Rentt.”

“Yes. It is... Relatively. Large.”

If it was a matter of size, I could have dropped the carcass off right here, but there were other adventurers within earshot, and I didn’t want to be piled with strange offers and requests after the fact.

Sheila nodded, understanding my intent. “In that case...you could make use of the dissection chamber in the back. I’ll lead you there.”

Sheila approached one of her colleagues to replace her spot at the counter before packing up some documents and walking off. I followed close behind.



A few dissection rooms existed at the guild, but they were relatively simple and small, if only because most adventurers tended to deliver pre-dissected items, or just the specifically requested part of a client's order. If an adventurer had to work on a significantly larger carcass, they were led to a dissection chamber located in a building at the back of the guild halls.

Most adventurers sought the services of the dissection specialists who worked here, most of whom were former adventurers. Due to their histories of being former adventurers or butchers, these individuals possessed highly detailed knowledge regarding dissection techniques. It wasn't uncommon for adventurers to pay them for more complicated tasks, or if the adventurers had multiple carcasses to process.

While I was considerably skilled in the art of dissection among my peers, having had many opportunities to practice back in my home village, dissecting a Tarasque was another story. Due to the sheer size, armored scales, and poisonous nature of the carcass, I had no choice but to bring it to this chamber. While poisons did not affect me in any way, dissecting a Tarasque in the street would cause its bodily fluids to flow into the ground, eventually polluting the town's groundwater system. I, for one, did not wish to be responsible for a mass-poisoning incident. Luckily, this chamber housed the necessary infrastructure to ensure this didn't happen.

"Dario! Mister Dario!"

Stepping into the entrance of the large building, Sheila took a deep breath, shouting out the name of the specialist we were here to see.

Due to its nature, the dissection chamber was a large building; if Sheila hadn't shouted, no one would have heard her. But there was no response. Undaunted, Sheila continued shouting.

"Yeah! Yeah, I hear ya! Hold on!" A gruff response in a gravelly voice answered Sheila's call.

Soon after, a seemingly indomitable man stood before us. This person was none other than Dario Costa, the guild's head dissection specialist. I had met him several times in life, but Dario didn't recognize me as I was now, which was to be expected.

“My bad! Didn’t want ya waitin’... We just got tons of Orc carcasses in the morn. Short-staffed as usual! Gotta love Orc meat, though... Worth its weight in gold, anywhere ya go.”

It would seem like Dario was done with his Orcish dissection.

While such occurrences were rare, capable individuals or groups might eventually transport a large amount of carcasses into the guild. Such parties were handsomely compensated by the butchers who sold Orcish meat, with said butchers issuing the requests in the first place. I suppose we were now in the middle of Orc season for this to be the case.

With my Dragon Blood Blossom request fulfilled, it would do me well to keep an eye open for other, more lucrative requests. I would hate to miss any valuable hunting opportunities.

If only Orcs lived in the Swamp of Tarasque... But if they really did live there, the Tarasques would just have them for dinner. Orcs were quite delicious to both man and beast. Maybe one would pity the Orcs for being eaten by just about everything, but such was the way of life in these lands.

Leaving me and my thoughts behind, Sheila walked up to Dario, briefing him on the specifics of my request.

“I do apologize for disturbing you at a busy time, Mister Dario...but I promise this is worth your time. Rentt over here has brought you a considerably rare carcass to work on today!”

I had informed Sheila of what I hunted on the way here, hence her description of my harvest. Dario, however, didn’t seem very convinced.

“A rare carcass? Young lady, I don’t get s’prised often, y’know?”

Sheila continued on, and Dario’s eyes opened wide in response.

“Rentt has brought you a Tarasque. An entire Tarasque full of materials, fresh from the swamp. It has to be dissected, of course.”



“A Tarasque...?! You’re pullin’ my leg, Sheila.”

I could understand Dario’s suspicion. Tarasques were strong monsters that

only lived in an extremely inhospitable environment, and were also armed to the teeth with a potent venom. One would have to be an adventurer of Silver-class or above to reliably slay it. I was an exception, I suppose, what with my immunity to poisons and all that.

As a matter of fact, due to my unique circumstances, the only real challenge the swamp posed to me was that it slightly slowed down my movements. A normal adventurer would have gotten poisoned to death without the adequate equipment.

I couldn't tell Dario about my undead nature, so I held my peace. Sheila spoke up in my stead.

"Oh, come on now, Mister Dario. Why would someone waste your time like that? It is really true! Maybe you would believe it after seeing it with your own eyes...?"

"But where be this Tarasque, Sheila...? Did he leave it out front?"

It was a question with merit, at least, as some adventurers had a habit of leaving the carcasses of large monsters they had slain outside the chamber as a show of strength.

They were commonly loaded on giant wheeled carts and the like, however. Such carcasses would often be paraded around the streets of Maalt before stopping at the gates of the guild, after which they would be transported to the chamber for dissection.

This can be seen as a form of advertising: given that the adventurer in question had slain such a large beast, they would have rare materials for sale, and that was primarily the goal of such a venture.

But I didn't wish to stand out.

Though I drew some eyes in my direction when I was promoted to Bronze-class shortly after registering as an adventurer, Bronze-class adventurers weren't rare. If one had the required skills, one could easily make it to Bronze-class in such a short time, just like I did.

In response to Dario's question, I pointed to the magical bag on my tool belt. "It is... Inside this bag. Should I... Set the carcass down here?"

“No.” Dario shook his head. “That’s no good. If it’s really a Tarasque, that is. Come.”

Dario gestured as he turned, leading us to the central area of the dissection chamber.

Soon after, we followed Dario into a relatively wide, purpose-built room, one that was more than large enough for a Tarasque carcass. A complicated series of magical tools lined the walls—implements for containing poisonous fumes during a carcass cleansing prior to dissection.

These tools were highly specialized equipment, and they were a requirement for most established dissection chambers. But they were very expensive, and there couldn’t possibly be more than two of such rooms in the entire building.

“Well, here we are. Lessee it.”

Turning a crank, Dario raised a platform in the center of the venue, gesturing for me to unload the carcass there. He also supplied Sheila and me with safety masks as precautions against the poison. Since I already had a mask on, I looked ridiculous, but I suppose this much had to be done for appearance’s sake.

Affirming Sheila and Dario had safely equipped their masks, I opened the bag, preparing to unload the carcass. Just like how I had attached the mouth of the bag to the carcass when bagging it for transport, I did the same here, aligning the bag’s opening to the central platform. If one made a mistake while sucking in an item, they would be faced with great difficulty when getting it out. Luckily for me, I had plenty of experiences with this sort of magical tool in life. This bag was significantly bigger, but they fundamentally worked in similar fashions.

“I see you weren’t pullin’ my leg... She’s a big’un, even for a Tarasque,” Dario said, examining the carcass as he spoke.

The carcass had been neatly unloaded on the room’s central platform, severed neck, body, and all. Taking a good look at its armored shell, Dario ran his fingers along its surface, nodding in approval.

“Not a single scratch, eh? Don’t see that often.”

I was a Bronze-class adventurer, so to Dario, this meant my knowledge and experience of Tarasque-hunting should be relatively low. To slay a Tarasque,

one had to chop off its neck, or smash through its armor and crush its heart. The former was the easier choice.

Even so, was an undamaged Tarasque shell really that rare?

Curious, I asked Dario for an explanation.

“I get what you’re tryin’ to say. But see here... Doin’ that is problematic. The biggest problem’d be gettin’ close to the thing, poison breath and all that. So...if’n adventurer gets this close, they’d be exposed to the stuff. ’Course, Silver- ’n’ Gold-class fellers could buy magic tools to fend most of it off, but only those of the Platinum-class can afford a complete nullification. S’pensive stuff, y’know. Since most folks don’t have that, they kill it from a distance, see.”

Dario’s explanation was easy to understand. While I was impervious to poisons, normal adventurers and parties would probably choose to attack a Tarasque with long-distance spells and projectiles.

“So it has a hard shell,” Dario continued. “But the scales are hard, too, see. Both are equally difficult to cut through. Given the opportunity, most folks aim for the shell. Much bigger, yeah? A few strong attacks’ll break through the thing. Most adventurers who can slay Tarasques have a few tricks to do this. In that case, though, there’d be a hole in its shell. Y’show a broken shell to a dissection specialist, and y’just look at the reaction on their faces. What’re we supposed to do with that, huh?”

An attack from a Silver-or Gold-class adventurer could indeed penetrate its shell, but I suppose such a shell would be difficult to turn into functional armor. Armorers weren’t Goblins, though; even a cracked shell could be integrated into a suit of armor, as long as the crack had been strengthened and combined with other materials to achieve its former hardness.

But of course, most armorers would indeed prefer a pristine shell. In other words...

“So this is... Worth. Quite a lot?”

Dario nodded. “What’s it look like? Course it’s worth a lot! Well... Takes quite a bit’a time to take the thing apart, so there’ll be some fees for that. But even so, this’s worth quite a lot of coin. Neck’s good, too. Only injury’s the neck itself.

The poison glands seem intact... Been a while, y’know, since I’ve seen such a pristine Tarasque carcass.”

It would seem like Dario had given the remains his personal seal of approval.

“I see... In that case. I would like... To entrust you. With the task of selling... The shell.”

There were many ways an adventurer could deal with their spoils: some brought the relevant remains and left them for dissection here, before searching for an auction venue on their own time to put it up for sale. For those without the luxury of time, the dissection specialists could sell the harvested material on their behalf, albeit for a small fee.

Under normal circumstances, most adventurers left it all to the specialists. The entire process was too much work for the typical adventurer, who would instead commonly task a shop they were familiar with to sell the materials on their behalf. Rare materials, like the shell of a Tarasque, were often auctioned off at events.

In my case, a pristine Tarasque carcass would easily attract many potential buyers. Since I already entrusted the dissection of the body to Dario, I supposed I should just leave everything else to him.

“I don’t mind, but...really? Y’just have to look, y’know? Tons’a buyers out there.”

Dario was correct, but searching for buyers in my current state was a difficult, almost impossible task. I would have to interact, and continuously meet face-to-face, with potential buyers. It wasn’t something I looked forward to doing, at least not in this state.

Although I could task Lorraine with it, she wasn’t well-versed in the sales of rare monster parts, nor was she well-informed on their worth in the current market. If I were to sell it, I would at least like to sell it for a fair price, hence my request to Dario.

I turned to Dario, deciding to put my trust in the man. “...You have... My trust, Mister Dario. I am counting... On you.”

Dario chuckled at my overly-formal statement. “Ha! Now that’cha’ve put it

that way...guess I gotta do a really good job, eh? I'll get a good price for ya—just wait 'n' see.”



Leaving the carcass and other dissectible materials behind, I went through my spoils, handing over what plant matter I had gathered to Sheila. Due to the sheer amount of materials I had harvested, Sheila was unable to give me a quote for the items right away, but it should be quite the profit for my purposes.

The only thing left to do now was deliver the Dragon Blood Blossom to the orphanage, where Alize and Sister Lillian were awaiting my return. Though I suppose Sister Lillian wouldn't exactly be waiting, as Alize had kept all this hidden from her, but that was neither here nor there.

Either way, my next destination was set. I stepped out of the guild hall, and headed toward the orphanage in question.



Creak...

A truly dreadful sound. I paused, staring at the door knocker I had repaired with slime fluid on my previous trip here. It was, of course, broken, having come loose once again in my hand. While I did break it, I was also the one who had repaired it. I suppose I had to fix it again.

“Perfect...”

A singular voice interrupted me from behind.

“What's perfect now...?”

I was surprised—caught in the act!

Turning around, I came face-to-face with Alize, who was holding a paper bag full of what appeared to be food in her arms. Behind her, several older children of the orphanage stood, all hugging similar bags. It would seem like the children had just returned from a grocery trip of sorts.

Forcing myself to stay calm, I put on a cool façade to the orphans, turning around to greet them.

“Well... I was just. Reminiscing... About the request.”

Alize’s eyes opened wide. “Eh? What? Really? You must be joking!”

Although surprised, the doorway was hardly a place for discussion. Opening the door gingerly for Alize, who had her hands full, I took great care not to damage the fragile knocker, now once again appropriately glued in place.



“Well, then...is it true? You’re done? It’s done?” Alize asked as I sat down in the cramped reception room where we had first met.

Alize looked more surprised than doubtful. I suppose I did wrap up the affair relatively quickly.

What Alize didn’t know was what my previous statement truly referred to: the unfortunate fate of the broken door knocker. The truth, of course, would remain concealed in the darkness forever, if I could help it.

Masking my embarrassment from that entire affair, I answered Alize in a flat tone of voice.

“Yes. Here... Have a look. Yourself.”

I withdrew a single stalk from my magical tool pouch and set the Dragon Blood Blossom down on the rickety wooden table between us. I laid out a spare piece of cloth for fear of dirtying the table, old and worn-out as it was. The flower now sat on its covered surface, wrapped roots and all.

Alize, however, didn’t seem to care very much about the state of the table at all. She was instead entirely taken with the flower, and was currently gawking at it curiously.

“This...is it? It’s the first time I’ve seen one! What a pretty flower...”

Maybe it was the flower’s beauty, rarity, or potency when used as medication; whatever the reason, Alize seemed deeply moved by the plant before her.

But as Alize said, Dragon Blood Blossoms were quite beautiful. The flower never faced the sky with its crimson petals; instead, it drooped ever so slightly, with its broad leaves accentuating the blossom’s shape. Supporting the plant

itself was a sturdy stem, a testament to the flower's vigor and hardiness.

This quaint, yet almost miraculous balance was perhaps responsible for its popularity in proposals. If one didn't have anyone to propose to, they would at least be able to admire its beauty for what it was, or so I would assume.

"Is this all right...?"

"I can't say much," Alize, seemingly still lost in thought, finally answered, looking up at me as she did so. "I don't know if this is a real Dragon Blood Blossom or not... Ah. I don't mean that I doubt you. It's just that...I can't tell! This is beyond me."

"Did you not say... That you had an herbalist... Healer, friend? They were going to make... The medicine for Sister Lillian."

"Yes, yes. I'll go get both of them right now. You'd have to wait a bit—is that all right?" Alize asked, apparently intent on fetching the aforementioned healer and herbalist right away.

I, for one, would like my request form signed and returned as soon as possible, so summoning them would only accelerate the process. As such, I nodded at Alize.

With a quick nod of her own, Alize rushed out of the room in a great hurry, presumably on her way to both of their residences.

herbalists and healers in general were often found working for churches or medical institutions, most of which were a fair distance away from the orphanage. I supposed Alize wouldn't be back for quite a while, which also meant that I now had spare time on my hands. Waiting for her return in and of itself wasn't a difficult task, but dealing with boredom in general, however, was a pain.

Just as I was about to resign myself to a boring wait, Edel, who had been slumped over on my shoulder all this time, suddenly flew off his perch, landing neatly on the ground. Running off, Edel began scratching the walls of the room.

"...What. Are you doing, mouse?"

In response to my question, Edel looked up at the doorknob, before jumping

onto it himself. While he landed with an impressive thud on the old doorknob, it wasn't a type that responded to pressure, so the door resultingly did not open.

To think he had slammed into the Tarasque's neck with such force... I suppose mice couldn't easily open doors, given their physique. If anything, I found the sight somewhat amusing.

I wasn't sure if I should open the door, but I also didn't intend to confine Edel into this small reception room until Alize returned. As long as he didn't enter any restricted areas, I supposed a little stroll wouldn't hurt. Of course, if I received any complaints about my pet running wild, I would blame it entirely on the mouse himself. It technically wouldn't be a lie.

While I did have my doubts from the moment Edel had requested me to deal with the door, any questions and internal monologues I had were simply answered with a glare from the mouse. I suppose he really did want out of this room.

I stood up, walking over to the door. Giving the doorknob a good turn, I pulled the door ajar, and with that, the mouse was off. I followed after him, curious as to where he was headed to. A somewhat predictable destination, perhaps, but I soon found myself in the basement storage room of the orphanage—the very same room where I had first met Edel.

Scampering to the middle of the room, Edel stood up on his hind feet, before promptly unleashing a high-pitched squeak into the damp, cold air. Almost immediately, no less than five Puchi Suri appeared from the shadows with immense speed, lining up before my familiar in a perfect line.

Haven't I seen this somewhere before...?

I definitely recalled a similar scene of smaller Puchi Suri lining up before a larger one. In fact, these Puchi Suri looked familiar; I had seen these specific scar and fur patterns before. They did seem a little bigger, markedly so since the last time I had seen them.

As I continued to ponder upon the fur patterns of mice, Edel squeaked again, as if holding some sort of conversation with his compatriots. The vocalizations of the Puchi Suri were all squeaks, of course, so while these sounds made little

sense to most humans, I had the benefit of sharing a mental link with Edel. Slowly but surely, I began understanding the specifics of their conversation.

According to the many squeaking voices, the five Puchi Suri under Edel's command had, as promised, continued to protect the basement storage. In the process of doing so, they had been attacked by other gangs of Puchi Suri, who had wandered in from the streets of Maalt. Even so, they held their ground, eventually managing to protect the basement without any incursions. The reason for them being able to do this was because Edel had changed his compatriots slightly by infusing a small amount of mana and spirit into their bodies. In addition, these Puchi Suri were a little stronger than ones typically found in the streets to begin with, hence their victory.

In other words, they seemed close to an Existential Evolution of their own.

This point bothered me, though. In the first place, did that mana and spirit not belong to me? Edel's powers were taken from none other than his master, Rentt Faina.

Edel, however, turned around, staring in my general direction before squeaking somewhat fiercely. It seemed like my familiar would like me to keep my thoughts to myself.



What an unreasonable mouse!

In fact, I was the master, and Edel the servant! But he apparently didn't feel the same.

Due to the intensity of his squeak, I supposed I should leave him to his devices...for now. Plus, the conversation between Edel and his minions did prove somewhat useful to me. While they did defeat the Puchi Suri that tried to enter the basement, Edel's minions had also subjugated them in the process. As such, they received information on all of Maalt's buildings, roads, and hidden passageways, all through this elaborate urban-mouse network of theirs. Due to this newfound cooperation, the Puchi Suri living in this basement embraced a newfound age of prosperity, and were all able to live in peace. This was all because of their mouse-boss, Edel...

At least, this was what I understood.

I found myself at a loss for words... Although that was all well and good, the source of Edel's powers was none other than me...

I really wanted to say it out loud, but alas, I could not. Even if I did, these other smaller mice didn't understand human speech.

I also didn't have the charisma that Edel possessed; a real pity.

My bout of self-pity was quickly interrupted by a surprising thought from Edel, however. Apparently, he could instruct his underlings to gather information for me if I so wished it. Due to their size, speed, and overall mundane nature, Puchi Suri could be found in many corners of Maalt. Although slaying one wasn't difficult, the sheer speed at which they reproduced made extermination a relatively pointless venture. If I could use this to my advantage, and have this mouse network gather information from all across Maalt...

Everything in this town would be known to me.

To think I hadn't even noticed it happening—I now had a network of tiny informants and spies at my hands.

This would be useful. Very useful indeed...



“This... This is superb! Amazing! I have never seen such a well-preserved specimen!”

The person before me was none other than a certain Unbert Abeiyu, the healer Alize had mentioned before. Accompanying him was the herbalist, Norman Hanel.

Unbert was a lanky, middle-aged man, while Norman was considerably younger, a plump young man in his late twenties. Judging by their demeanor and friendly smiles, I understood they had friendly affiliations with the orphanage.

“Is that right...? Only high-ranked... Adventurers. Would explore the Swamp... Of Tarasque, after all. One would think they... Would at least know. How to harvest and preserve... A Dragon Blood Blossom.”

The skill of an adventurer did increase proportionately with their rank. Higher-ranked adventurers commonly had more in the way of strength and power, and they would also usually pick up some other skills along the way, such as dissection and herb-picking techniques. Of course, one was also required to learn business etiquette, and to acquire general knowledge of the ways of the world. Although they weren't expected to have the same amount of knowledge a professional would, adventurers were, at the very least, required to continue learning and polishing their core skills as they climbed through the ranks.

There were exceptions, of course. Individuals who only took on slaying requests would grow disproportionately in strength. Similarly, adventurers who managed to cheat or bluff their way through progressions tests would end up with somewhat stranger skillsets.

Taking all this into account, one would logically assume that any adventurer exploring the Swamp of Tarasque would at least be Silver-or Gold-class. Barring special cases like myself, they would be adequately skilled in all areas: combat, herb-harvesting, or otherwise.

“Not quite, not quite. Being the place it is, most adventurers are far too concerned about being poisoned to actually care about the flowers they are picking! In fact, most of them harvest the flowers carelessly, thinking all is well should they return with a sample. However, given the nature of the place...few

adventurers would dare venture in, so we can't exactly complain. In fact, locating an adventurer who is able to even venture inside is something to be thankful for!"

There was some truth in Norman's words. Few adventurers would be willing to stay in the swamp for longer than they had to. Most adventurers who had the capability to do so would much rather be somewhere else; even so, those who did enter were probably compensated well for their time. Volunteers like me were perhaps unheard of in this particular scenario.

An adventurer and their client were typically on equal footing, so sufficient compensation must be offered by the client to entice a capable adventurer into entering the swamp. Due to the complexities of the factors involved, the adventurer involved often had the upper hand in this discussion. In most cases, however, the opposite was true. While a balanced client-adventurer relationship was ideal, reality was quite different.

"I am glad... It turned out well, then."

"Of course it turned out well!" Norman's response was enthusiastic. "With this perfectly-preserved Dragon Blood Blossom, creating a cure for the Accumulative Miasma Disease would be a simple affair! Because of its perfect condition, I would have a much easier time processing it, as well. In fact, I could make many other medicines, as well. If only we had more Dragon Blood Blossoms..." Norman said, as if aware of the fact simply having one flower was a blessing in and of itself.

"How many... Do you need?"

"Eh...? Hmm. Let's see. Well, three or four more stalks would be perfect. I would be able to distribute the extract evenly, and make many other medicines to heal the sick!" Norman said, more to himself than anyone else.

It didn't seem like he was pleading with me to give him more flowers; I hadn't even informed them of the fact that I had harvested multiple flowers. Norman was probably thinking of a hypothetical scenario in which many kind-hearted adventurers each brought back a flower.

He did not seem like the type to lie—as if affirming my thoughts, Alize leaned in, whispering into my ear.

“Doctor Norman helps out many poor people, not just the orphanage! He pays for the medicines out of pocket, you know? He’s a rare, good-hearted doctor! Scarce in these times!” Alize was apparently full of praise for the good Doctor Norman. It would seem like the doctor had her approval.

There was no mistaking that the doctor provided important support to Alize and the orphanage, but herbalists in general required quite some capital to operate. Medicine wasn’t exactly free, as the adequate materials had to be gathered. This was just the nature of the job. As such, most herbalists had little choice but to sell their wares at somewhat higher prices, if only so they could continue operating.

Even so... To think the doctor paid out of his own pocket to help the sick. I couldn’t help but feel a sense of worry. If anything did happen to Doctor Norman, the orphanage would surely be negatively impacted.

At least, Alize would think that way. Realistically speaking, however, the doctor must have some way of his own to keep his business running. As to what these reasons were, I wasn’t entirely sure, but I supposed this small contribution wouldn’t hurt.

I reached into my magical pouch, deciding to contribute some more flowers from my stock. A few more stalks wasn’t exactly a terrible loss, and they were for a good cause.

“Here... Take these.”

I fished out four more Dragon Blood Blossoms, setting them on the table. Both Norman and Unbert’s eyes opened impossibly wide at the sight. I suppose they didn’t think a solo adventurer would have the capability to harvest this many flowers by his lonesome.

Dragon Blood Blossoms grew in large clusters to begin with, but these two gentlemen hardly knew that, just like how most non-adventurers didn’t know of the bottomless nature of magical pouches. I saved up for five years to purchase this pouch—a worthwhile investment. Even a Silver-class adventurer would have to save up for at least one year; not an easy feat, given that most adventurers were unapologetic spendthrifts. To make things worse, these magical tools weren’t readily available off the shelf; one had to first find them in

public auctions, or even the black market.

Due to my many social connections and informants, I was able to purchase a high-capacity bag, whereas most adventurers usually ended up with a bag half the size of mine. Smaller bags hardly had much space left over after the usual supplies, rations, and containers were dealt with.

Of course, one could form parties to transport more items as a result. This didn't work as well when exploring the Swamp of Tarasque, though, primarily due to anti-poison equipment typically taking up a fair amount of space. This was why most adventurers usually returned with only a single Dragon Blood Blossom.

In my case, I had rented a high-capacity bag from the guild, and I had a fair amount of space left over since I didn't need any protection against poisons.

I suppose this body of mine had its uses. A strange emotion floated up from the depths of my mind: while I wanted to one day return to being human, would I lose my resistance to poison if I did so? Perhaps it was greedy for me to have such thoughts, but then again, humans were greedy creatures by default. Once they obtained something, they would, without fail, desire more.

Interrupting my train of thoughts was Edel, perched silently on my shoulder. He apparently wished to announce that he had little in the way of greedy thoughts, but I suppose a mouse would feel that way. In response, Edel tightened his grip on my shoulder.

Yes, yes, mouse. I apologize.

In any case, I turned my attention back to the two medical professionals before me, both of whom were still frozen in place at the sight of the flowers on the table. Norman was the first to react.

"Is... Is it really? You would sell these flowers to us? But...if you have so many, Mister Rentt, would it not make more sense for you to sell it to a larger apothecary...?"

It would seem like Norman was unable to pay for these flowers. He didn't request this many to begin with, so maybe that was to be expected.

"No." I shook my head slowly. "I am... Giving. These flowers to you. For free ...

As a sign of appreciation. For your just... And noble intent. Do not... Worry. I have more in the... Bag.”

I didn’t want Norman to owe me any favors, for I simply felt like engaging in an act of occasional charity. I was simply appeasing myself—nothing more, nothing less.

I didn’t harvest these extra flowers in the hopes of selling them off at a high price; I simply wished to help any acquaintances who happened to be in need, so giving these flowers away wasn’t much of a problem. Doctor Norman, of all people, would be able to use these ingredients for a good cause. It was good to have connections with a skilled herbalist, and aiding Doctor Norman would be the start of a beneficial relationship.

While Lorraine herself was capable of synthesizing medicines and the like, she mainly specialized in magical potions and solutions, so curing diseases would be outside her expertise. Doctor Norman, on the other hand, worked with the sick.

I personally trained under a herbalist in my youth, and was more capable at the subject than the typical adventurer, but I couldn’t hope to come anywhere close to an actual professional. It would be most beneficial to have Doctor Norman on my side. Not the best thing to say, but no one loses out in this transaction.

Finally calming down after his initial surprise at my words, Doctor Norman composed himself before giving his response.

“My apologies. Yes, it would be a great help. Many, many lives can be saved with this... If there is anything, anything I can do at all, Mister Rentt, just say the word. At the very least, I have great confidence with regards to my knowledge of herbs and medicine—second to none in these lands, I’ll say!”

Such were the good doctor’s words of gratitude.



“With this, the request is complete...” Alize said, signing the document on the table after Norman and Unbert had left the premises.

Since the official client listed wasn’t the orphanage, but the orphans in it, Alize’s signature carried enough weight to declare the request completed and

closed.

With a flourish of the quill, the deed was done, and with this her request officially fulfilled. All that was left was to collect my reward from the guild.

It had been a far more challenging request than my usual tasks, and completing it left a deep and somewhat profound emotion in my heart.

But of course...my reward was only one bronze piece.

"...Yes. Thank you. Alize," I said, rolling up the signed document on the desk.

"No...it is I who should be saying that to you, Rentt. To tell the truth...putting the request up is one thing, but I had all but given up! Who would go pick a Dragon Blood Blossom for one bronze piece? But...you, Rentt. You accepted it, and you actually came back with it! I cannot thank you enough... Thank you, really... If there's anything, anything at all, Rentt, you tell us. The children and I will do everything we can to help you... Well, I suppose you wouldn't really be needing our help."

"Even I... Need help. Sometimes. When that time comes... I will depend... On you. As the situation demands. Also... There were a few others. Other than me, I mean... Who had thought. Of accepting the request. It was just... A little too difficult. For most."

Alize only said what she had because she had lost faith in most adventurers, and even so, I didn't feel like she said so with those thoughts in mind. If anything, Alize probably subconsciously thought of most adventurers as selfish and cold-blooded individuals.

It was a reasonable view. After all, few adventurers would wander into the swamp.

But kind-hearted adventurers did exist, as proven by those other adventurers who had thought of attempting the request before me. Ultimately, they had their discussions and realized this request was beyond them. A wise decision, as a dead adventurer wasn't of any use to anyone. Dying pointlessly in a swamp would be nothing more than folly, assuming one had an accurate understanding of their own abilities.

While I didn't want to lose faith in my adventurer brethren either, I could

easily understand Alize's perspective.

"Is that right?" Alize seemed surprised at my words. "I thought no one would be interested in fulfilling an orphanage's request from the get-go..."

If memory served, Alize was considerably withdrawn and formal when we had first met; I suppose her disillusionment with adventurers was the reason for this behavior. She probably assumed that a random, no-name Iron-class adventurer had come knocking, without much experience, capability, or thought into the request at hand.

Come to think of it, there was something else...

"You said you... Wanted. To become an adventurer...?"

"Yes... I did mention Lady Lillian's illness was a slow one, no? Then...even if it took a while, I would eventually be able to do it—to go into the swamp and pick a Dragon Blood Blossom, I mean. Also, if I did become an adventurer, I would be able to contribute toward the orphanage's operating costs... Or at least be able to help! I guess that was silly of me... But I couldn't think of anything else!"

It seemed like an impractical proposal, but the Accumulative Miasma Disease took quite a while to claim a sufferer's life, most commonly anywhere between five to ten years. If I hadn't shown up and Alize had become a capable adventurer a decade later, there was a chance that Sister Lillian could have held out.

At the very least, it wasn't impossible. Alize would have to undergo harsh training to reach that degree of strength, and given her latent reserves of mana, she might even be able to make it safely in and out of the swamp one day.

"It would seem like... You had a lot. On your mind. Although... In the end. It may seem like... You steeled yourself for... Nothing. What will you do... Now? Will you give up... On becoming an adventurer?" I asked, curious.

Alize shook her head rapidly in response. "No. After this event, I have decided now, more than ever, that I should become an adventurer. Well... There's no more need to go swamp exploring for Dragon Blood Blossoms, but I want to become an adventurer like you, Rentt. A kind, good-hearted adventurer who helps the people!"

Eh? Me...?

At least, that was the first thought that crossed my mind. But I didn't say that aloud.

"I do not think... I am as great. Of an adventurer... As you think I am."

"What are you even saying? Because of you, Lady Lillian's life is saved! She'll be well again! Also...the orphanage has become much cleaner thanks to you!"

Cleaner?

"What... Do you mean?"

"Eh?" Alize seemed a little confused by my response. "You didn't know? The underlings of that mouse you have on your shoulder have been running about everywhere, killing bugs and other pests in the building. Before, we would occasionally have cockroaches and other insects around, but suddenly we found them all piled up, dead! When I went to have a look at it, I found some of the Puchi Suri observing the mountain of dead cockroaches from a distance. I guess they had been weeding out all the bugs in this old place, then left their bodies in a heap for easy disposal. We're all really thankful!"

It would seem like Edel's underlings had been doing good work while we were away; a strange thought, given that they were spirit-and mana-enhanced mice. I suppose this was fine.

But I couldn't contain my curiosity, turning to look at Edel. He responded somewhat exasperatedly, stating that even his underlings liked to live in a clean environment, undisturbed by pests.

I suppose those mice weren't as selfless as I thought they were after all.

In any case, what they were doing benefited Alize and the orphans—a symbiotic relationship, if you will.

"I had no idea... This was happening. However... I cannot take credit. For what those mice... Did."

"But if you weren't there, nothing would have changed!"

Alize's views seemed resolute. Even I couldn't say much to refute her last statement.

“...All right, all right. Think of me as... You will. On another note... If you really. Still want to become an... Adventurer. You should start training... Yourself up. Soon. Although you can register... At the age. Of 15. If you do not learn the... Basics. Of adventuring... You will very quickly. Lose your life.”

It was a well-known fact there was no short supply of fools who immediately signed on as adventurers after leaving their villages. This was, for all intents and purposes, good advice.

Alize nodded. “But how will I train myself?”

A reasonable question.

“There are many... Ways. The guild has courses... Oriented toward. Beginners. If I have the time... I could teach, you, too.”

In spite of myself, I actually said it. I didn’t have any disciples, but I used to teach those very same beginner-oriented lessons at guild, on behalf of the guild’s staff. I was confident my lessons were useful, having imparted the basics of adventuring—techniques, knowledge, and all—to many new adventurers who had walked through those halls.

There was also one more thing...

“Since you have... Latent. Reserves of mana... You should learn Magecraft. While I cannot help... Much, in that regard... I know a friend. Who can. Are you... Interested?”

Said friend was none other than Lorraine. She was often busy with her research and other scholarly pursuits, but she could be extremely lazy should she feel like it. It probably wouldn’t hurt much for her to give some form of magical instruction to Alize as she lounged around on her sofa.

Alize, however, seemed a little overwhelmed by what I had to say.

“But... I don’t have any coin...”

But of course she wouldn’t. Alize was an orphan, and all she could offer up for my now completed dangerous request from her was a single bronze coin. There was no way she would be well-off.

To make things worse, most mages who taught the art tended to charge a

premium for their services. Lorraine, on the other hand, wouldn't demand any compensation, so money wasn't an issue.

"Don't... Worry. About it."

"That won't do."

"I thought... You would say that. In that case, I have... A suggestion."

"Eh?"

"I will loan you... The fees. Without interest. You can pay me back... After. You become an adventurer. How about... That?"

I suppose this was the best way to do it; even Alize would understand my intent with this gesture.

Of course, she had perhaps seen through it from the fact that I didn't require any interest for my loan.

As expected...

"You're sure...? Well, all right then. I'll gratefully accept. However...I'll definitely return that interest. After I become an adventurer...and after I start making good sums of coin, I'll definitely return it! Is that...okay?"

I already knew this was how she would respond, given her character.

I nodded slowly. "Well, then... We have a deal."

I put out my hand. Alize took it in hers, gripping it strongly.



"I do not really mind, Rentt. It is as you say, the boredom comes in waves. When I have some time, it almost seems like I have all the time in the world," Lorraine said, narrowing her eyes at me as she continued eating her dinner.

I was now seated at the table with Lorraine, having finally returned from my trip to the orphanage. The topic at hand was, of course, none other than Lorraine teaching Alize basic magic in her free time. I had brought up the suggestion while telling Lorraine of the events of the day, after affirming Lorraine was indeed in one of her lull periods. Unfortunately, I had also unwittingly described Lorraine's free time in an unintentionally negative light.

She was by no means a lazy individual. It was only after the fact I realized how I had made her sound. Thankfully, Lorraine had let it slide, leaving me with my shoulders slightly slumped as I contemplated how I had nearly failed to find Alize a magic teacher. Now more than ever, I felt greatly indebted to Lorraine's magnanimity.

"I... Apologize. I did not mean to say that... You were always. Free. Just that on occasion... Perhaps. You could spare... Some time."

Lorraine's expression softened upon hearing my excuses, her features now conveying more amusement than offense. With a few casual waves of the hand, Lorraine began laughing.

"I know, I know, Rentt. Could you not tell I was joking? Really, now. But I suppose there are women in this world who do not have a sense of humor. It would do you well to pay attention to such details, Rentt. You get along with everyone as an adventurer, while callously ignoring a young girl's feelings, eh?" Lorraine said, almost snorting with amusement as she did so.

It would seem like Lorraine was merely pulling my leg. I felt a genuine sense of relief.

Lorraine's observations and advice were right, I suppose. My goal was to become a Mythrill-class adventurer, and I'd dedicated my entire life to this goal, picking up as many skills as I could along the way. Unfortunately, the appropriate etiquette one would adopt to interact with young ladies was never much a subject of study.

While I hardly had enough skill to encounter clients of the noble persuasion in life, I did practice my social etiquette to a certain degree—namely, to the point where I would be able to communicate with noble ladies and the like should it be required. However, I didn't receive much instruction in the way of communicating with women in general. The social etiquette of women confused me. For one, I had difficulty understanding small talk. In fact, I have encountered more than one experience in which a friendly response has led to the other person revealing their true colors, and me saying something unnecessary. All in all a very complicated affair.

I would do well to be more careful about these matters from here on out.

“Thank you... For the warning. Lorraine. But with how I... Look. Young girls... Cute or otherwise. Would hardly be attracted. To me.”

I was referring to the fact that I was dressed in pitch-black robes, as well as a suspicious-looking, somewhat skeletal mask. Why would any young lady in these lands be attracted to one as strange-looking as myself? At the very least, I would think the average young lady would keep me at arm’s length, given my appearance.

For instance, a robed man walking along an alleyway encounters a young girl selling flowers... How would that interaction go?

“H-Hello...y-young lady...”

“Eeek! Help! Somebody help me!!!”

“W-Wait! It’s not what you think! I just wanted to t-talk to you!”

“Eeeek! That man! That strange man says he wants to buy my flowers!!!”

The robed man is promptly arrested for his behavior.

Of course, the meaning of “flower” in this case would be open to gross misinterpretation.

That...is not exactly a good turn of events. I should make a mental note to never speak to any young ladies on the streets of Maalt.

“Hey now, Rentt,” Lorraine interrupted my train of thought. “Here is a young lady before your very eyes! Up here.” Lorraine pointed at herself with a markedly raised thumb.

I shook my head, fixating my gaze on said thumb.

“Where...? I do not see her.”

“You...” Lorraine balled her fingers into a solid fist. “How long do you intend to abuse my kind and welcoming nature, Rentt? I will have you know, if you keep this up, I would very well snap and give you a good pounding. Is that what you would say to a young lady of 24? Hmm... Come to think of it, I did read up on the developments of particularly strong curses recently...”

With that, Lorraine sprang up from her seat, grabbing her staff in one hand as she held up a strange-looking grimoire in her other. Panicking, I held up my hands apologetically, desperately attempting to calm my enraged friend.

“Wait... Wait! Young! You’re... Young! Miss Lorraine... Is a young lady! With a gentle disposition, and pure white skin! With... Well-defined features... And a well-shaped body! The very... Manifestation! Of the God of beauty... Even the faeries of yore... Cannot possibly! Compare! A divine being that... Never ages! With a mind that... Rivals! That of the Gods of knowledge themselves! With a gentle... Disposition and... Knowledge in the arcane! Lady Lorraine is... The very image! Of a cute young lady!”

At times like these, it was best to shower Lorraine with praise. The very thought of not saying this much seemed to cause the footsteps of Death himself to echo ever so slightly louder in my ears. To avoid that, I would throw away my very definitions of shame, and turn all my efforts to praising Lorraine.

If I couldn’t do that, what would happen to me? In fact, would Lorraine even understand my poor attempts at praise?

I recall a time when I had shared a drink with an adventurer who was already married. He was famous for being able to avoid his wife’s wrath one way or another, and thankfully, he saw fit to share some secrets with me as we enjoyed our drinks. I wondered if he was doing well... Last I heard, he was planning to open up an inn somewhere in these lands.

While my mind was occupied with these thoughts, I happened to glance in Lorraine’s direction, only to pause as I realized she was staring at me with an expression I had never witnessed before.

Hm...? What is it?

“Where exactly,” Lorraine, finally out of her trance, began speaking, “did you learn that flirtatious way of speaking, Rentt...?”

Lorraine seemed more exasperated than she was enraged. If anything, I no longer sensed an implacable rage from the general direction of my friend. It was quite a relief.

“Where...? Not exactly... A single place. Walking around the streets... Of

Maalt. You hear... Things. Here and there. You see some of these, phrases... In plays. As well. At the very least... I just said what I thought.”

“What you thought, Rentt? Do you say this to every woman you come across?”

I shook my head at the sufficiently surprised Lorraine. “Well... This is not. A scene. You come across every day, is it?”

Saying it to an even-tempered individual like Lorraine was one thing, but even I would be hard-pressed to say those words to a young lady passing me by on the street. There was just no way I could say those words.

“Hmm...” Lorraine stopped, momentarily thinking about what I had just said. “I suppose that is the case. I do apologize, Rentt; it would seem like I have asked you quite the strange question...”

“If I were used to... Saying things like that to every... Woman. I met. I would no longer... Be an adventurer, but just... A shopkeeper in some village. Such a... Pointless. Way of life... Could be supported even by... A Bronze-class adventurer. If they worked hard.”

“As I thought, Rentt. It eases the mind.”

“Eases... The mind?” Confused, I tilted my head at Lorraine.

“Ah... That. I am merely relieved you are not a lecherous beast, if nothing else.”

Quite the terrible thing for Lorraine to say. I suppose I could expect that much; my choice of words was awkward at best.

Well-defined features and a well-shaped body... Those were lecherous words. Somehow, I felt like I should apologize to Lorraine for my poor attempt at praise.

“Well... I do. Apologize. I did not mean it... That way.”

“I understand that much, Rentt. Yes, you should be careful with interacting with other young women... In any case, would you like some more food, Rentt? Your bowl is empty.”

Lorraine gazed at the barren bowl in my hands. Mere moments ago, it was full

of the food Lorraine had prepared—with a drop of her blood in it, of course, for the taste and all. I had finished it quickly, as it was most delicious.

Lorraine had been adding droplets of her blood to her cooking recently, in addition to preparing food on a more regular basis. She did mention it was for the sake of observing my health status and bodily condition, so in other words, it was all in the name of research. Fitting for her.

“There is still some more.” Lorraine nodded. “Have more if you wish—where are you off to?” Lorraine called after me, as I headed off to the kitchen. “No, you wait here, Rentt. I’ll bring the food over. There are, after all, two separate cauldrons of it.”

Lorraine snatched the plate out of my hands, before walking off to the kitchen herself. It seemed like there was almost a bound in her step, but alas, I may have simply been imagining it.



Having reached the kitchen, bowl in hand, Lorraine looked up at a conveniently-located mirror, silently hanging from the wall. Reflected therein was her own reflection, with a relatively calm expression, at that.

Lorraine parted her hair, revealing a pair of perfectly-shaped ears.

“My cheeks are red... Very much so. Perhaps I had too much to drink...”

The two of them had shared some wine after a course of dinner. While the possibility Lorraine had suggested to herself couldn’t be denied, it was worth noting Lorraine had a historically high tolerance against alcohol, and never turned red from drink alone.

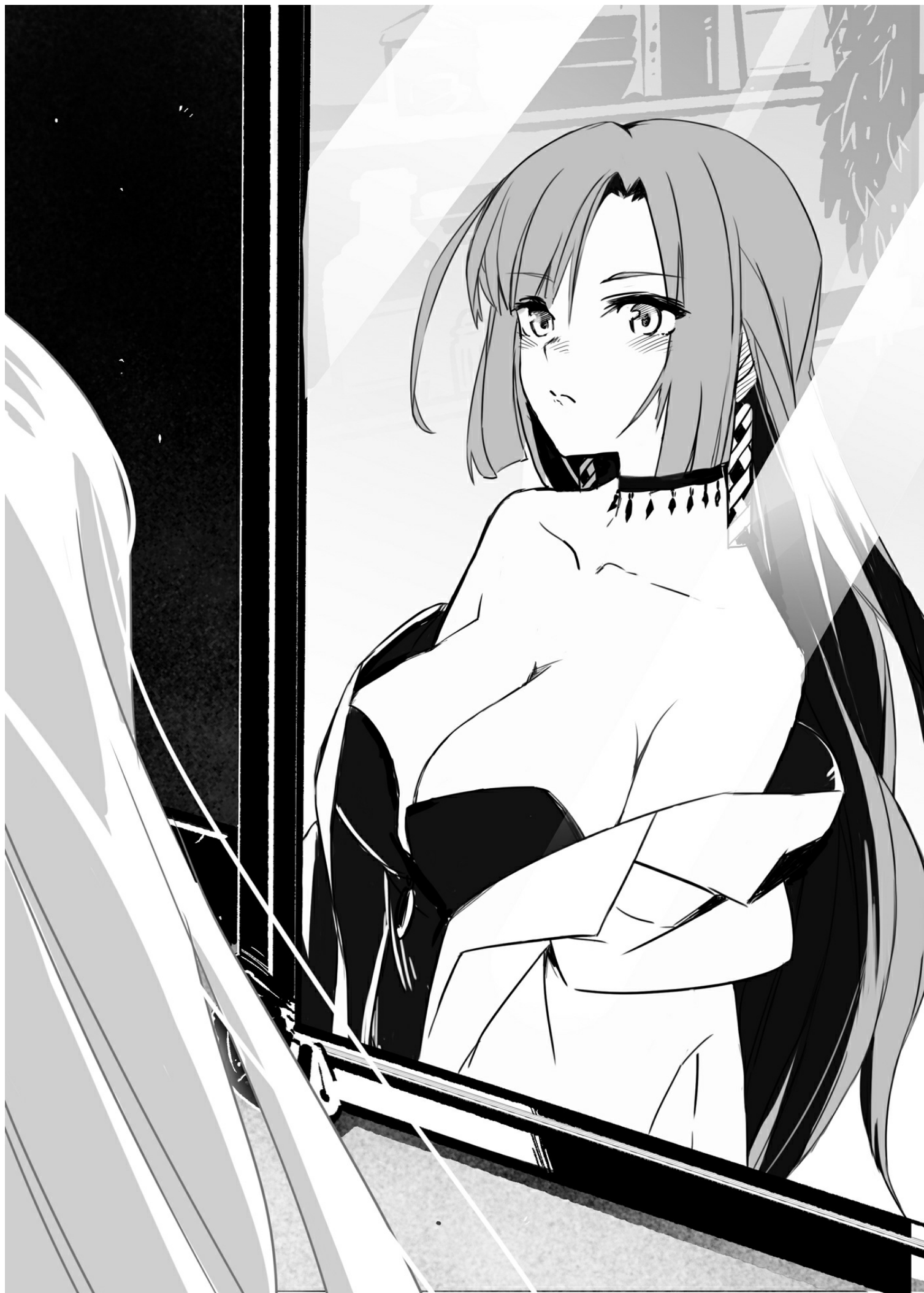
Her ears were red, too.

Logically, even Lorraine knew her complexion wasn’t caused by alcohol. Sensing that she was now along a somewhat dangerous line of thought, Lorraine swatted it away.

“I should not have too much to drink... Not too much to drink...”

Muttering to herself, Lorraine filled the bowl in her hands with a few deft gestures before returning to the dining table once more. While there was,

admittedly, quite the spring in her step, there were no observers to point that out to Lorraine, Rentt, or anyone else.



Chapter 2: And an Equally Peculiar Request

The very next day, the first sight that greeted me when I entered the guild was that of a panicked Sheila. Wasting no time, she quickly approached.

“R-Rentt... Rentt! Wait!”

Sheila seemed adequately unsettled. I was here to check up on the state of the carcass and to settle some other, more minor issues, but I had a feeling Sheila wasn't distraught about either of these issues.

“...What, is it?” I asked.

“W-We should talk about it...over here.”

Sheila led me to one of the rooms toward the back of the guild's general reception area. The room was built for consultations with clients and others, and these rooms were meant more for them, as opposed to the typical adventurer. In the event of a particularly large-scale, complicated, or sensitive request, these rooms provided clients with a much-needed sense of privacy.

Basically, unless the client was of significant social status or economic power, they usually wouldn't be granted the use of such rooms.

That wasn't all these rooms were used for, though. As far as my current situation with Sheila illustrated, it was plain to see these rooms were often used for private or secretive conversations, as well.

Why did Sheila drag me to such a place...?

Now adequately isolated, Sheila began speaking in a hushed whisper. In her hands was clutched a sheaf of papers, presumably requests from a client.

“Rentt... Rentt, do you... Were you an associate of...the Latuule Family?”

Her secretive manner and strange question caused me to tilt my head sideways. The name in question was unknown to me, and I didn't recall ever hearing it anywhere before.

I decided to answer Sheila truthfully. “...No. Why do you... Ask? Is it because

of that... Request?"

Sheila nodded fervently, holding up the papers as she did so. "Well, you see...this here specifically requests that you take on this task..."

Sheila handed over the documents slowly. Receiving them, I read through their contents quickly.

The task requested by the client was shown simply: to harvest Dragon Blood Blossoms from the Swamp of Tarasque at weekly intervals, and to deliver the flowers to a certain location. The reward for this task was an astronomical sum, numbers I couldn't have even imagined during my career of hunting Goblins and Slimes.

The client's name was also printed clearly on the document...

"Ah. I was wondering what... The fuss, was. I see Isaac has... Issued his request."

The client was none other than the man I had met in the swamp, Isaac Hart. Sheila seemed taken aback at my reaction.

"So you knew them after all!"

To be more accurate, Sheila seemed more stunned than surprised. I suppose this had something to do with that Latuule family she had mentioned prior. It would be logical to assume the client was Isaac's master... I could see where this was going.

"I... Suppose this... Latuule Family. Is the family Isaac... Serves?"

"Yes." Sheila nodded, affirming my theory. "The Latuule Family is one of Maalt's old families, deeply intertwined with the town's economic development. While I don't know much about the family barring its general history, it would seem they and the guild do have quite a bit of a shared history... One of the few organizations the guild would bend over backwards to appease, if I had to put it that way."

Judging from Sheila's description, I suppose the family in question had some sensitive information regarding the guild in its hands. In any case, it was plain to see this Latuule Family wielded considerable power in Maalt.

But Isaac didn't come across as an unpleasant or intimidating person. Curious, I questioned Sheila.

"Are they one of those... Powerful families. Who throw their weight around... And make, unreasonable demands?"

"No, no. They are nothing like that. In fact, they have not been very active at all recently, and their activities hardly affect Maalt's overall economy. Of course, their influence remains strong—in Maalt, at least. So they have to be shown the appropriate amount of respect..."

A vague explanation. To start...

"Are the Latuules... Nobles?"

Being a Kingdom, Yaaran had its princes and nobles. Specifically, the princes and marquises wielded the most power, followed by the peerages across the land. While some knights and squires were considered nobility as far as titles went, they didn't have as much influence—although some were quite fond of throwing their titles around.

To the common folk, nobles were nobles, no matter how weighty their titles.

Yaaran was a relatively small kingdom on the fringes of civilization. No one would bat an eye at a duke engaging in agricultural work, or an earl having his own storefront. Compared to most other kingdoms, the concept of nobility was somewhat more relaxed here; but I suppose that was a discussion for another time.

Sheila soon provided an answer to my question.

"No, they are not nobles, Rentt. They are simply an old, established family wielding considerable social clout due to the fact that they have been in Maalt for quite a long time. At least, that is what I hear, hence the need to show them a degree of respect. Of course, there were also rumors that Viscount Lottnel, who rules over Maalt and its surrounding areas, has deep connections with the Latuule family... Honestly speaking, the family is secretive, and even I and most of the guild staff do not know very much about them. Even so, every guild master I have seen in these halls shares the same view: that the guild should treat the Latuules with utmost respect. I am here discussing this with you for

the very same reason, as a reminder, Rentt... Take care you don't do anything to upset them."

"...Speak simply, Sheila... What do. You mean?"

"As I said, Rentt, a staff member of my rank cannot possibly give you the specifics. However, you would do well to treat them with respect. The Latuule family is an old one with economic clout in Maalt, as well as ties to noble families in the land. This much you understand, yes? In other words, Rentt...if you were to refuse this request, you would no longer be able to live in Maalt!" Sheila said, somewhat exasperated.

What a terrible development. I thought that I had simply run into an interesting individual in the bowels of the Swamp of Tarasque, but I hadn't the slightest clue about his identity.

But of course, I had no intentions of turning down this request. All factors considered, the monetary rewards were great, and the official client was Isaac, not his master. In fact, I had only agreed to look at the request, and I would in turn only accept it if the terms were acceptable to me.

The guild wouldn't want me to cancel under any circumstance, and that much I understood. Even so, it was good etiquette to at least meet with the client once and discuss the matter at hand before giving my answer. If I really had to turn it down, then that would be that.

This was a request just like any other; I didn't see any problems of note.

I was still very much interested in the specifics of the Latuule family, if only to better understand this powerful family that Isaac served. A personal curiosity, I suppose, not that Sheila could give me details anyway. I supposed I could just ask them in person, or ask some of my informants and adventurer comrades.

However, I had been adventuring in Maalt for ten whole years. Although I didn't have much in the way of combat skills, I considered myself well-informed when it came to Maalt.

Even so...I had never heard of the Latuule family before this day. The names of a few other powerful old families were known to me, but Latuule wasn't among them.

How is this possible?

In any case, Isaac would be able to tell me, should he choose to do so, that is.

Shelving my thoughts momentarily, I turned to Sheila. "I have... No intentions. Of turning down this... Request. I have spoken... With Isaac. In the depths of... The Swamp, of Tarasque. The reason why... He wanted to task me with this. Request. Was because he could... See that. I managed to venture deep into... The swamp. Without much effort. So I will be... Accepting. This request."

"Really...? Will you be all right? I mean...your constitution, Rentt..."

Sheila didn't finish her sentence, but I understood what she meant. I was still a monster, and the Latuule family was an old one with connections to the ruling nobles of the town. If I was somehow found out, I would surely be chased out of Maalt. In the worst-case scenario, even Maalt's denizens could turn on me, with the scenario eventually ending in my untimely death at the hands of my fellow adventurers.

Not a good thought.

I shook my head. "I doubt... They would easily. Find out... Given my appearance. In fact... Isaac, himself. Did not seem too bothered... By how I looked. When he met me."

While I couldn't be sure of this, it was true Isaac didn't comment much on my appearance, so I suppose that was a fair assumption. Even if I was instructed to take off my robe and mask before the master of the Latuule family as a sign of respect, I could simply say I had been terribly burnt by acid, and was a hideous specter of a man. Surely they would accept such an explanation?

If they didn't believe me, I would merely turn the request down then and there.

Isaac was a man of his word; at least, that was the impression he gave me. Of all things, it seemed highly unlikely he would fixate on my appearance.

Sheila nodded hesitantly. "If anything happens...tell me, okay? I do not know what I can do, but I will help you with everything I've got."

Nodding at Sheila's words, I patted her lightly on the shoulder with a gloved

hand, before exiting the room altogether.



I am...completely lost.

This was the singular thought that filled my mind as I continued my journey to the Latuule family's grounds.

I had intended to meet Isaac and discuss the details of the request. I was given appropriate instruction by the guild, of course. The location of the manor was clearly noted down on a map, and for all intents and purposes, was easy to understand. The manor sat in the outskirts of Maalt, and I had arrived at the specified location without getting lost. The problem, however, was in the geography of the area.

The Latuule family was adequately housed in a gigantic manor, and while that was my destination, I had to first pass through a large garden on its grounds before actually reaching the manor's doors. Not that rare of a sight, especially when it came to the fancy manors of powerful old families around these parts. The problem was hardly the manor—it was the garden in front of it.

If I had to guess, this garden was probably born from the whims of a great Latuule in the past. Instead of a typically straight path to the manor, this garden was more like a twisting maze. One only had to set foot in its depths to find the tall hedges blocking one's view. These hedges were crafted from a rose-like shrub of sorts, with the plants growing to impossibly tall heights. All I could see around me was a sea of green.

Advancing deeper down this path, I turned this way and that—and then the road before me forked. Beyond the fork was yet another fork, and this maze-like series of hedges continued indefinitely. Before long, I realized I was, for the lack of a better word, lost.

Frankly speaking, I had no issues keeping my bearings, at least for the first few twists and turns. This was no longer the case as I went deeper into the garden-maze, however.

I could only stop in this maze of hedges, thinking back to the details of my

request.

If memory served, I had asked all the questions I needed to ask. Reminiscing, I calmed myself, recalling the initial conversation I had with the guard at the gates, prior to setting foot into this unreasonably hedgy maze. While I remembered the details of the request well, I didn't recall the request instructing me to go maze-exploring.

Yes, I had shown my documents to the gate guard, who didn't have many qualms about me entering. His gaze almost seemed transfixed on a faraway horizon I couldn't see, and he seemed happy to be rid of me.

I did ask him some questions before I left, though.

"Are there... Any. Other entrances...?"

The gate guard momentarily turned to look at the rose maze, before turning back to me slowly, shaking his head.

"Not that I know of, sir... Perhaps these other entrances do exist, but I do not know of them." His expression was serious and sincere, and it seemed like he had given my question considerable thought before answering.

I could feel a wave of despair washing over me. I had no choice but to pass through this strange maze-garden if I was to even knock on the manor's doors.

"How long... Does it. Usually take?"

"To the manor, sir? Well...that largely depends on the individual... The maze changes its paths occasionally, you see. As such, giving an accurate estimate of time would be quite beyond me..." the guard said, an apologetic expression on his face.

A maze that changed its paths occasionally? One would be hard-pressed to call it any ordinary maze.

The guard, as if sensing my doubt, continued: "But of course, sir. The maze itself is a special sort of magical tool, you see. The generational heads of the Latuule family have all shared an interest in collecting magical tools, and this maze is a phenomenon created by one of those tools..."

I could hardly conceal my surprise. Could such a magical tool even exist? I suppose it was possible. Magical tools could be widely split into three categories: Divine Tools, Curiosities, and Cursed Artifacts. A tool from one of these categories could most likely give birth to such a maze.

While most magical tools had certain standardized functions, there were outliers that were completely different from their brethren. A good example would be that of a light tool, which was a simple magical tool that lit up dark places. It had a high usage frequency, and benefited from its simple construction. Since these tools could be made in large quantities, they were suitably cheap when sold on the market.

Special tools, on the other hand, were quite different, and were often one of a kind. An example would be my cursed mask, and my waterproof robe. Such tools often had special or strange effects, and their value was highly subjective. Some of these special magical tools even had very useful effects, while others were questionable if they did anything at all. Due to the high-varied nature of these tools, their value was often in flux as well.

Take my mask, for instance: a highly useful tool given my unique constitution and situation, but one that was picked up by Rina for three bronze coins. I suppose the merchant selling it felt it was nothing more than a piece of junk, and had set a suitably low price for it. It was, as it turned out, a cursed mask I have since been unable to remove, so the merchant's senses weren't too far off the mark. Given that my face looked the way it did, I could no longer tell if the curse of the mask was more of a blessing...

"...Having unique hobbies is... Fine. I suppose. But... To think I would have to... Overcome this. Hobby of theirs. To even get there..." I said, suitably irritated by the situation.

The guard simply smiled in response.

"I do empathize, sir. But why not take a shot at it? The maze is designed to even out into a straight path to the entrance after someone has spent a certain amount of time in it. As a matter of fact, I have heard that those who successfully make it out of the maze before then are occasionally presented with a magical tool as a gift of appreciation..."

It would seem like the guard was trying to indirectly tell me something... As if noticing this, the guard continued, his expression unchanging.

“I, too, have challenged the maze, quite some moons ago, sir. If there are no expected guests, this gate usually remains closed; but back then, it was open. I had seen a poster, you see, claiming that challengers who managed to conquer the maze would be presented with a magical tool as a gift. On it was a map to the manor, and that was how I found myself before these very gates, all that time ago.”

It would seem like the Latuules were capricious individuals, seemingly enjoying their games.

Given that they were an old family with financial clout, I suppose it wouldn't be too strange if they had simply decided to organize such events on a whim. Normally, most nobles settled for parties or other fancies, but those bored of otherwise plain social functions often explored more...unconventional options.

This was perhaps one such case.

“Of course,” the guard continued, “many other individuals saw the posters, as well. I was not the only one to arrive at these gates. Many others stood here at this very spot, all with the same goal. Although many entered, many ended up lost, and after a while found themselves back here. All of them had lost their way somewhere in the maze, and after a short while, found that the maze itself shifted, leading them onto a path that led back to the entrance. I was surprised when I had first heard of this, but I supposed such a feat was possible with magical tools of some sort. Even though I thought it a largely impossible affair, the fact that the maze guided lost challengers back to the entrance was reassuring, so I set foot into it once again...”

“And you reached... The goal.”

“Yes. It was a stroke of luck if anything. I would not be able to do it again, of that I knew very well. As promised, however, the then-head of the Latuule family saw it fit to present quite a few magical tools to me, allowing me to choose between them. They were all respectably useful artifacts, yes, but... Well, I was out of a job then, sir. As embarrassing as it is for me to recount...I refused to take any tool as a reward, and instead asked for a position at the

manor. And so...”

“They hired... You. I see...”

Given the sheer size of the manor and the amount of land the family owned, I suppose it made sense that they had quite the collection of powerful magical tools. All things considered, the position of gate guard was probably a comparatively relaxed one. To his credit, the guard was quite serious at his job, and was likely to keep it from here on out.

“On another... Note. I apologize if... This is insensitive. But why were you out... Of a job?”

“Ah, that, sir. I had gone against my superior’s orders, you see. And to think I was this close to a stable, lifetime employment! For shame. But as a result, I did get offered a position here, and I have ever since decided to live with both my feet on the ground—or so they say.”

“It is good... To live honestly. A good thing... Indeed.”

Even one such as myself could regain their humanity; well, if I tried hard, perhaps. In any case, my decision to continue living responsibly hadn’t changed in the slightest.

And yet...evolving into a stronger being after I was eaten wholesale by a mythical dragon wasn’t half-bad. I suppose life just had so many twists and turns.

I looked at the guard, feeling a strange sense of camaraderie.

“I have learned... A lot. From our little. Talk. I suppose I should try my hand at... The maze. As well. Any advice... For a newcomer like... Me?”

It was a question new adventurers often asked their seniors. As if understanding my joke, the guard smiled, somewhat deeply.

“Yes... Yes. Perhaps it would be wise not to depend on the sun for navigation, sir...”

I tilted my head at his words, but even so, the guard was a veteran of the maze. I put some trust into them.

Thanking the guard, I turned toward the maze’s entrance, taking one bold

step into its confines.



This really is...something else.

I held my head in despair as I continued inspecting my surroundings. I couldn't help it—no matter where I looked, I was surrounded by hedges. I could no longer see the path that led me here, nor could I see a path that would lead me out of this maze.

What, exactly, was a magical tool like this even developed for? While such a thought did cross my mind, it would be uncouth to say out loud. I suppose strange tools like this did exist. The tool itself could have been removed from its original abode, where it once had some special purpose.

Magical craftsmen, though seen as inventors and facilitators of convenience in our modern age, were once seen as con men and cheats. Magical tools were born from man's desire to replicate what he had found or seen in the labyrinths. With that thought in mind, one could assume the original tool in question was truly a mysterious object with a variety of uses, if going by the official account history hard to share.

Few magical tools were truly useless, however. One usually wouldn't find, say, a tool that only glowed dimly, or one that laughed in a high-pitched voice endlessly if tapped with a finger. Even if one did come across a seemingly pointless tool, it could be studied, dissected, and even have rare materials harvested from it. These materials would sell for a fair sum of coin—such were the myriad of uses of said tools.

Even I could see the tool that generated this rose-hedge maze probably had some unique purpose of its own in the past.

Even so, this garden was truly large. To maintain a maze of this scale, and an occasionally self-changing maze at that, required a significant amount of magical power. I suppose the Latuules didn't find that much of an issue, given their tendency to spend coin as if it were water. One could easily purchase many magical crystals with such finances—thus my worries about the maze suddenly giving out would be very much misplaced. Perhaps the original creator

of the device wanted to know how it felt like to be completely lost, and created this tool as a means to escape the confines of reality? Thoughts and assumptions aside, all this speculation did little to change my current situation.

I am truly lost.

Is there really nothing I can do?

My thoughts were interrupted by the scenery before me seemingly opening into another place.

“Where... What? Is this place...?”

I found myself surrounded by hedges once more, on a path that didn't seem too different from the ones I had followed thus far. The space before me, however, was bright, and rose blossoms bloomed on the once-barren hedges. Up until now, all the hedges I had passed were a dull shade of green. While there were occasionally some blooming roses, they were of various colors and uneven distribution, seemingly more of a natural phenomenon than a man-made one.

But this was different. Quite a few roses bloomed in this space; the roses were real, having reached out and touched some to confirm it for myself. The middle of this rose-filled chamber was different, too, or perhaps it better matched its surroundings? A table made from an opulent shell-like substance sat in the chamber, and an expensive tea set made of white porcelain sat atop it. Seated at the table on an equally iridescent shell-chair was a figure, holding up a teacup in an impossibly elegant fashion. Raising the cup to their lips, they drank deep from it, their every action exuding refinement.

Noticing my presence, the figure in question raised their head, staring straight in my direction.

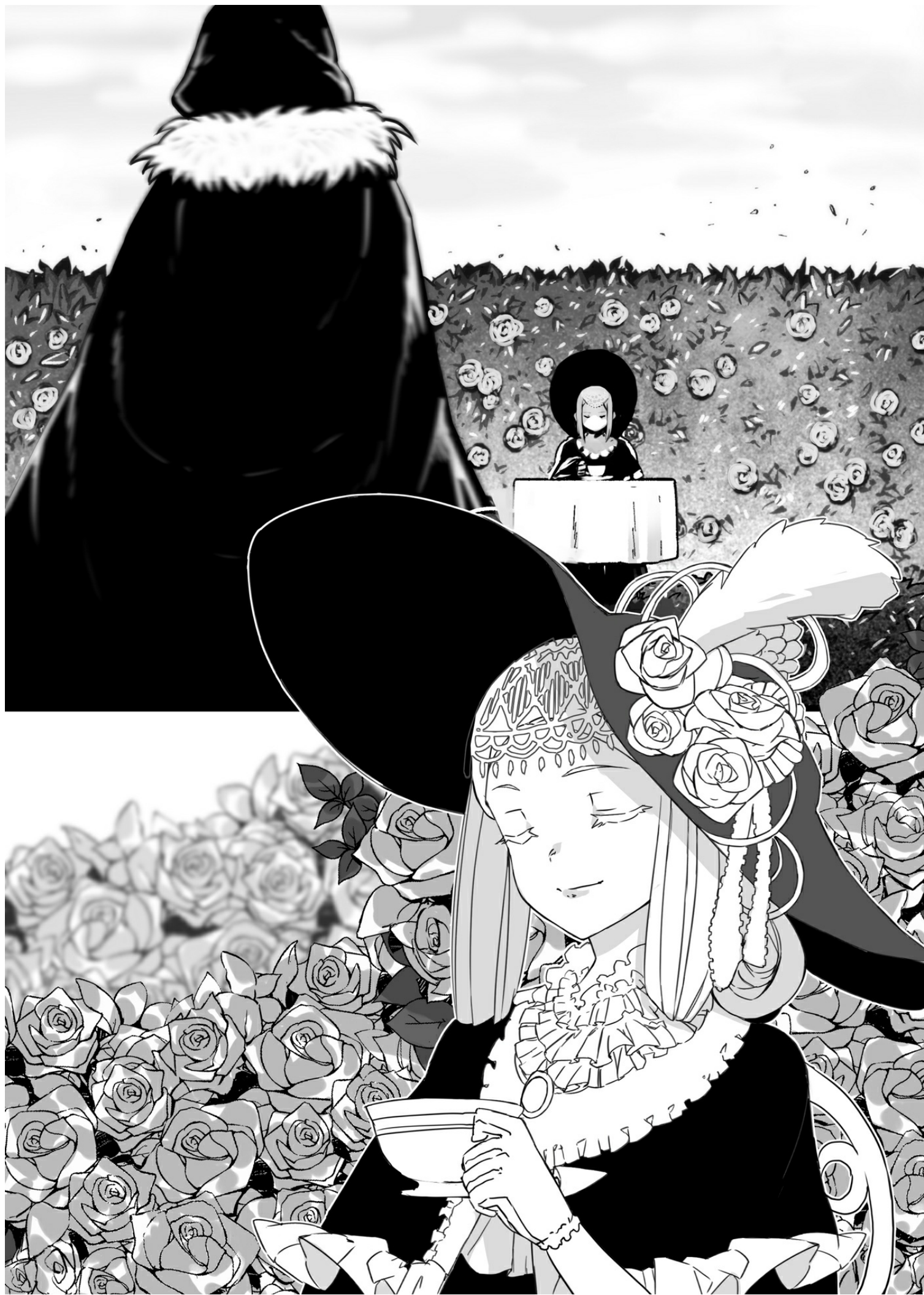
“Are you giving up...?”

I see. This must be a member of the Latuule household, offering me a means of exit upon seeing I was lost. The figure in question was a young girl, maybe of 12 or 13 years of age. It almost seemed like she was a being not of this world.

With a faraway gaze and a frilly black dress that didn't seem very functional, she sat, still looking my way. Her pure-white skin struck quite the contrast to

her blue eyes.

Really, she looked somewhat...unhealthy. An aura of frailty and decadence surrounded her; a result of noble breeding, perhaps?



“...No,” I answered her query without hesitation. “I was thinking of... Trying a little harder. May I have a bit... More time? No...?”

The young girl smiled in response. Compared to her expressionless demeanor earlier, her smile lit up her features, making her look more her age.

While this was nothing more than a personal observation, I felt this expression suited her better—but, as usual, that was a thought for another time.

“In that case, do head down that-a-way. The maze goes on for quite a while more. On another note... If you would like to catch your breath, how about having some tea with me? I have prepared several teas—perhaps one of them would suit your tastes.”

While I hesitated to accept this sudden show of kindness, I eventually found myself wandering over, pulling out a chair for myself.

“...I humbly accept.”

“Very well. Allow me...”

I had reached out to the teapot, intending to fill my own cup, but the girl across the table had somehow reached it first, and she was now filling my cup with freshly-brewed tea.

The pot seemed to already be filled with hot water. I suppose the pot was a magical tool in and of itself, having other abilities in addition to its self-brewing capability. While I didn’t feel anything too peculiar from the teacup, this little interaction alone was enough to illustrate that the Latuules loved collecting magical tools of all kinds.

There was a constant demand for magical tools that could brew tea on their own, but such tools were rare, even in the deepest depths of the most treacherous labyrinths. Should one appear in an auction, it would be immediately snapped up by eager buyers, and for prices that defied common understanding. Craftsmen who were capable of creating such tools often sold their creations as soon as they came out of the kiln. To make things worse, the creation of these tools was by no means simple, and few craftsmen could create magical teaware of acceptable quality.

Now, there were many collectors in the market. It was a highly competitive genre in magical tool collecting, if I could say so.

This wasn't purely a pursuit amongst nobles, for even common folk who loved tea had a stake in it. If one had the funds, one would be able to purchase at least one tea set; that was how the common wisdom went.

Magical teaware was quite highly-ranked, even in the genre of competitive magical tool collecting: the rarer and more complicated its abilities, the higher the cost. Past a certain point, one required a fair amount of coin to continue collecting.

"Please, have some tea. As you may have noticed, this pot is a magical tool. Once it is filled with tea leaves, one only has to infuse magic into the pot after a brew to replace the leaves with a new batch."

I could only imagine the bidding process for such an amazing piece of magical teaware...

I've been to several auctions in life as a mere spectator, but the few teapots I had seen could only keep their contents warm eternally, or possibly prevent the leaves within from ever entering one's drink. I also recalled a particularly sturdy, break-resistant pot.

Compared to this...

How much did the Latuules purchase this teapot for?

My hand, still holding a cup full of tea, began shaking as I imagined how much all this had cost the Latuules.

Although the cup itself wasn't enchanted or magical, it had a similar look and feel to the teapot in question. Its surface was illustrated with a beautiful mosaic of roses and vines, as if it were specifically prepared to match its surroundings. I suppose the Latuules had commissioned a craftsman to create cups that matched the pot.

I, myself, knew the basics of creating ceramics, but only true artisans could create such intricate, even illustrations on such a small object. Judging by its appearance, this teacup alone would fetch a handsome price, even if it wasn't magical by any means. In such a case, it would be sold as an art piece.

I couldn't even begin thinking about the consequences should I somehow shatter this cup...

The young girl just laughed in response, as if reading my mind. Was it the look of apprehension I had?

"Even if you do break it, it's quite all right. Of course, I would greatly prefer if you didn't stand up and hurl it unto the ground with all your might. But I assure you, I wouldn't be angered in the event of an accident. Please, relax, and slowly enjoy the brew."

Neither the girl's voice nor gaze betrayed any untoward intent. Was this what it meant to never pick fights with the rich? *How...very terrible*—and that was a sincere thought that had risen up from the very depths of my poverty-filled heart.



As she lifted the cup to her lips yet again, I couldn't help but notice that the young girl across the table was staring at me, her blue eyes transfixing on my masked face.

"What... Is it?" I asked.

"Ah... I beg your pardon. I was simply wondering how you would drink the brew, given how you are dressed."

"Ah... That."

It probably goes without saying that my mask couldn't be taken off, and doing so during meal times wasn't something I had even considered. I still had my mask on at this point in time, hence the curious stare from the girl across the table.

Yes, taking it off would make it easier for me to eat and drink. The technical aspects of it aside, there was a good reason why I could not: I was an Undead, a Thrall. While I couldn't speak for other Thralls, I assumed I couldn't just take my mask off and show my face in public.

With that being said, however, my mask did arrange itself to show the lower half of my face during certain instances, like when I dined with Lorraine. The

situation was somewhat different for Lorraine, and adults in general, since they would be able to tolerate the sight of my wrinkled skin, assuming I had been the victim of burns or other injuries. But the girl across the table from me was a young child about 12 to 13 years of age. The lower half of my face would be far too grotesque a sight for a young girl of that age.

If I had to point out the most rotted, disgusting part of my Thrall body at this point in time, it would be the lower half of my face. I had no lips and my gums and teeth were visible, like white monuments protruding from wrinkled skin. At a glance, someone would merely assume the lower half of my face was skeletal in nature.

No...perhaps it was even more fearsome than just some dried old bones.

Due to the halfheartedly human state my body was in, certain muscles were visible, attached to the jawbone and other parts of my chin. Their movements, too, could be clearly seen. Surely this would have a more disturbing impact than regular, clean, white bones.

All in all, showing my face to the girl would be a bad idea. In which case...exactly what sort of excuse should I weave?

“Is that a magical tool of some sort...?” A question from the girl herself, in response to something she had seen, probably.

If I had to guess...my mask had changed its shape once more. But instead of revealing the entire bottom half of my face, the mask had seen fit to open up a small slit where my mouth was—just the right shape for me to drink tea from.

Under normal circumstances, this shape couldn’t be maintained for more than a few seconds, as it would return to its previous shape after. In my experience, though, this was more than enough time for me to drink tea.

Raising the cup to the opening in my mask, I drank, responding to the girl in between sips.

“Not so much a... Magical tool. More of a... Cursed. Artifact. An acquaintance of... mine. Bought it from a Maaltesian... roadside merchant.”

At my word, the girl’s eyes opened wide, almost sparkling as she responded excitedly. “Maalt plays host to such interesting objects...? Do excuse my

impertinence, but...is there any way I could take that mask off your hands?"

The Latuule family supposedly had a habit of collecting magical tools of all kinds. From the girl's behavior, it would seem there was indeed some truth to that rumor.

Although I didn't know the girl's exact social standing in the Latuule family, I could be sure of one thing: unlike Isaac, who served the family, this girl was unmistakably one of the few who were served by individuals like him.

I suppose she meant to pay me to "take it off my hands," and as expected, the conversation veered in that direction.

"But of course," the girl continued, "I will ensure you are adequately compensated and satisfied with the exchange... So, how about it?" Her voice was eager.

Honestly speaking, I would have loved to hand my mask over to her. Unfortunately, it wasn't something I could do at this point in time. Cursed object though it may be, the mask had also become an indispensable tool in my daily life.

In addition, the mask was also cursed to be adequately immovable, and that was what I would tell her. At the very least, I would need a face I could show to other human beings before considering its removal.

For all intents and purposes it still remained resolutely stuck to my face despite my personal preferences, and that was that. Even if I earnestly attempted to remove it, it would still surely still be an impossible feat.

A vision of myself drowning in a small mountain of gold coins passed rapidly before my eyes. The temptation seemed to slowly draw me away from reality, but I resolutely shook my head, suppressing my worldly desires.

"...My apologies. It is not about... The money. I am simply... Unable..."

I suppose it was quite a pathetic, or at least sorrowful tone of voice, as the girl's previously excited expression was now one of pity.

"Ah, no. That is fine. It would appear I have dredged forth some...unpleasant memories, and have crudely offered you coin in exchange. I do apologize..."

Unpleasant memories...? No, no, nothing of the sort. No special thoughts or memories of any kind resided in this mask. Really, it was much more like a nightmare, one that had suddenly stuck itself to my face and never let go. Even now, despite my best efforts, my mask remained very much attached.

If I had to put it into words, the despair I was feeling now wasn't the sadness of losing an old friend or a valuable tool for money, but instead the prospect of losing out on a potential mountain of earnings because I couldn't take this accursed mask off.

Judging by the girl's reaction, I suppose it was smarter for me to hold my peace, for fear of earning her disdain... Though money was certainly important.

"No... I do not. Mind. One cannot possibly... Tell. Such things just by... Looking. At an object. If anything I... Am grateful. That you... Showed me such. Consideration."

As I said, from the outside, no one could possibly discern my intense material attachment to coin. Which was fine, for I looked more respectable this way.

Alas, what a terrible adult I have become...

Looking at the girl's pure, innocent eyes...

"I would be most grateful if you do indeed feel that way, yes. On another note, is the tea to your liking?"

An unexpected and skillful change of subject.

At her prompting, I turned my attention to the teacup in my hands. For some reason, it tasted...delicious. Incredibly delicious. The fragrance, as well, was in a class of its own. This may very well be the best cup of tea I had tasted my entire life.

"This is the... Most delicious. Tea I have had in... My life," I responded to the girl's question honestly. "Is this also thanks to... The magical aspects. Of the teapot?"

"I would suppose so, yes. However, it is less the teapot's magic, and more of the skill and hard work the farming families have put into raising the plants used. As I have mentioned before, this pot has the magical ability to infinitely

recreate any tea leaves that have been placed into it. In other words...someone had put these leaves in years, perhaps even decades ago. Among all the different blends I have tasted from the archives within this pot...I find this one to be the most delicious, so to speak.”

As she said, the tea was quite good. Many factors influenced the quality of tea leaves, including terrain and weather, to name a few. Due to this, tea leaves often varied greatly in terms of quality. One wouldn’t also realistically expect to enjoy similar-tasting tea all year round.

This pot was the exception, allowing its wielder to enjoy a variety of blends from various parts of the lands at any time of the year. Illogical, yet terribly impressive, this teapot must have surely cost quite a fortune.

I had originally assumed the pot could only recreate the most recent leaves that had been brewed in it, but it would seem like I was mistaken. To recreate any and all blends that have ever been brewed in its porcelain body... This teapot was on another level altogether.

It was possibly the ultimate teapot.

Though some individuals preferred to enjoy a steady stream of changing flavors as the years passed, and to reminisce of previous blends in their memories. It was quite reasonable to assume, however, that most people would readily see the value in such a pot, and desire it.

“Where, exactly... Did you manage to procure. Such an item?”

“If I do recall, it was discovered in a faraway labyrinth almost two centuries ago. A sum of coin was offered to the adventurer who had found it, and it made its way into our possession. As for the sum...I do believe it was, say, about 300 platinum coins.”

“Platinum... Coins...”

As long as one wasn’t reckless with their money, a single platinum coin was more than enough for a person to live a merry life. To think 300 of these coins were paid...

It was far from a reasonable price for a single pot. To a family like the Latuules, however, it probably wasn’t that great of a sum at all. After all, they

had paid such a colossal sum to this unnamed adventurer, yet still managed to live in such finery for the next two centuries. Plus, they continued maintaining their sphere of influence in Maalt.

I finally understood that the Latuules were a far more dangerous family than the few small-time nobles currently ruling over Maalt.

After some subsequent topics of conversation, I eventually stood up, taking care not to drop or knock anything over.

“Oh, are you already going?” the girl asked.

“Yes... I am indeed. It was... Most enjoyable. This is just... A guess. But I feel like we will soon... Meet again, no?”

“Oh?” The girl smiled vaguely in response to my question. “Have you already found out?”

With that, it was clear she was indeed a member of the Latuule family. As to her social position within it... I still didn’t have enough information on my hands.

“...Yes. In some way or... Another. I shall ask for your... Name. When we meet again.”

“Well, then, do be careful... The end of the maze is not far now, but perhaps I shall grant unto you a hint. It would be best for you to not look at the sun.”

“I have actually... Already heard that. From the guard at the gate.”

“Oh? Perhaps it was unnecessary, then. Do give those words some thought, however.”

“I understand.”

With that, I took a step out of the clearing—and almost immediately, a wall of vines and leaves sprouted from where I stood moments ago, sealing off the girl and her tea table from my view.

Taking a good look at my surroundings, I realized all the paths before me continued on deep into the maze. No matter how I looked at it, I would surely be lost regardless of whichever path I took.

“...Not long until the... End. She said. Is that really... True?” I muttered under my breath as I began venturing through the maze once more.

I just wanted to reach the end of the maze as quickly as possible.



Come to think of it... Yes, come to think of it, the very fact I was lost was strange, if only because I was an adventurer who had been in the business for years. I personally felt I had a better sense of direction than most, and I'd been mentally mapping this garden-maze of the Latuules as I traversed its snaking paths.

Despite this...I had become lost. How was this possible? I couldn't understand it...

The problem at hand defied understanding. Then there was the issue of the sun, and the advice both the girl and guard had given me. When I first heard it from the guard, I had simply assumed one couldn't use the sun to accurately determine one's geographical position and bearings. So I had followed their advice—and ended up becoming very lost.

Perhaps a change of pace was due, so I turned upward, looking at the sun.

“...It seems like. How it has always... Been.”

There was nothing particularly odd about the position of the sun in the sky...or so I thought.

That must be the case, then... Did their advice have nothing to do with the sun at all...?

I turned a corner—

The sun's position...shifted before my very eyes.

Adequately surprised and assuming it was just a figment of my imagination, I took a single step back into the previous walkway. As I did, the sun's position shifted once more. I suppose the advice of not using the sun as a directional marker was indeed true.

In which case...how was it possible I was still so lost?

No. No, there must be something more to all this.

The strangely flipping sun was probably only one part of a larger mechanic. One couldn't depend on the sun to find one's way; that much I understood. There had to be a bigger mechanism at work here, one I wasn't yet aware of.

If the guard had indeed been misled by the sun during his attempt at the maze, that was all fair and good, hence his advice to me. But my case was slightly...different.

If the advice was meant to mislead, I would have to start questioning the girl's intentions. Should that truly be her intent, she would be quite the character... She had given me the same advice even after understanding her guard had done the same, going so far as to tell me to give her words some thought. There had to be some other means of deception at play.

Essentially, the guard's advice was the truth—but the girl's advice was meant to trick and mislead me... I could assume so, anyway.

She had quite a mysterious aura about her, and I just couldn't get a good read on her character at all. I suppose it was fair to assume she wasn't an individual who would so readily give me a hint on how to conquer the maze, would she.

I continued exploring, but it didn't take long for me to feel that something was off. After walking in a straight line for some distance, I felt like the path had mysteriously curved to one side. Although it was a small, almost insignificant sensation, I certainly felt it, so this was no trick of the mind.

I glanced around, affirming my surroundings. Little had changed, but a cursory look at the sun revealed it had sunk a little lower than when I had last looked at it. The sun's position had changed, but this knowledge was of little use to me.

What should I do...?

I stopped in my tracks, thinking about the problem at hand. It was at this moment I saw, from the corner of my eye, a rock at my feet. It was a considerably-sized rock—the size of a fist, perhaps. Picking it up, I hurled the rock at the strange, seemingly twisted space before me. The rock then promptly disappeared in the middle of its arc, without a single trace or sound.

"...Impossible. Is this... Teleportation?"

Teleportation—to be precise, it was a special type of spatial magic yet to be recreated by the hands of man. However...if this was truly an artifact that hadn't been crafted by men, then there was a possibility.

Only a magical tool with a significant amount of magical power could cause a rose maze like this one to appear. I wouldn't be surprised if teleporting objects and people was one of its functions. But could an individual even own, much less contain such a powerful artifact...?

I suppose such a line of questioning didn't help matters. For now, I had to focus on the actions I could potentially take. If I didn't do as such, I would never conquer this maze, and I would surely be lost forever.

I picked up yet another rock, tossing it into the strange space before me. It didn't seem like much had changed at all, but this little experiment was more than enough to illustrate that a change had taken place, for the rock was nowhere to be seen. There was only one explanation: the rock in question had landed in that invisible space.

I threw yet another rock into the strange spot and, again, it vanished. As I thought, the rocks had passed through this invisible point in space, and landed somewhere on the other side.

Upon closer observation, this part of the labyrinth was very much like any other part of it. If I hadn't been paying attention, I wouldn't have given that dissonant feeling much thought. I suppose this was why I had been stuck in this maze; the map in my mind was drawn under the assumption all the paths were physically connected. In reality, this maze was made of many passages connected by pockets of spatial distortions.

If my assumptions were correct...then I no longer knew where I had stepped, or even set foot in. It didn't seem like I would reach the goal any time soon.

However, from this point on, it would be different. I would mark this location as the starting point, and redraw my mental map.

Honestly speaking, I had thought of using the Map of Akasha in this silly maze. But the map only displayed a single line as I unfurled it.

Unable to display current location.

Although I had asked the map aloud what it meant, it offered back no response. And that was that, I suppose—this maze was clearly nothing more than a plaything for the rich. There were even prizes in it for me if I won, and I wouldn't die should I fail in my task.

But having come this far, I was determined to press on, and maybe even tell that girl with the terrible personality I hadn't fallen victim to her tricks...

Even though I had already fallen for it multiple times, and ended up becoming very, very lost...



“...I finally. Made it...”

Leaving the maze of rose hedges behind, I stepped out into an open space. Before me was an elegant, yet beautiful manor, complete with an elaborate water fountain. Next to that fountain, on yet another ornate table, sat the girl in question, elegantly sipping away at a teacup. Next to her, as expected, was none other than Isaac.

Upon noticing me, the girl got up, advancing in my direction. Isaac followed silently after the girl, who, before long, was standing before me.

“Congratulations. To be completely honest, I didn't think you were capable of conquering the maze.”

Although her expression was that of a 12-or 13-year-old girl, I knew of the darker personality behind it. There was nothing I could do, of course.

To be honest, the girl may be mischievous, but she was by no means malicious. I suppose this was a prank as good as any, given that at no point in time was my life in danger. However, the fact that I had spent all this time wandering about just because of a little girl's whim was truly upsetting.

When I arrived at the Latuule manor, the sun was high in the sky. That very same sun was now setting, tinting the world with a fading shade of crimson.

Just how long did I spend in that maze...?

“I had thought... I would have. Conquered the maze much... Faster. At least... Until I understood. The meaning of your words...”

“I see, so you did notice. Perhaps my acting was not quite up to par?”

“...No. It was fine. In fact... If it were... My old self. I would have certainly... Fallen for it.”

I couldn't exactly tell her I had become a Thrall. The only reason why I'd noticed that pocket of distorted space was due to my heightened senses, those being of spatial awareness, a better sense of smell, and more acute vision. Therefore, I couldn't exactly say my past life's experience caused me to notice the spatial fault, though I couldn't entirely discredit it, either.

The girl shook her head slowly at my words. “Your old self, you say?”

“No...” I shook my head in the same way in response. “Just. Some circumstances of mine. On another note... I had heard. From the guard that... Those who conquer. The maze... Can claim a reward. Do I... Get one, too?”

On one hand, I had put in a fair amount of work to get to this point. On the other, the reward was a bit of an afterthought, merely information I had chanced upon when speaking with the guard at the gate. Even if the Latuules decided there would be no reward in it for me on this occasion, I suppose I had some degree of justification to ask for one.

Such thoughts didn't seem necessary, however, as the girl soon answered me, that same smile on her face.

“Oh, yes, of course. I had intended to gift upon you one magical tool the Latuule family has owned.”

As I had expected. Maybe now it was my turn to be mischievous.

“Well... Then. How about the magical... Tool. That was used to make... This rose hedge maze?” I asked bluntly.

The girl's eyes immediately opened wide. “I do apologize... I cannot possibly gift that magical tool to you. If you would be so kind as to understand...”

“It was a... joke,” I immediately responded to her statement. “Just like how you... Played a trick on me. In the maze... I thought I would. Return the favor.”

The girl looked exasperated at my declaration. “You are a bad, bad man...” she said, the ghost of a wry smile flitting across her face.



I couldn't just spout out what manner of magical tool I would like. The Latuule family, given its history of collecting such tools over the ages, would surely only take the cream of the crop. Regardless of my choice, the tool I would choose would surely sell for a great sum of coin. I'd probably take any tool I was offered... But if given a choice to select a specific object—

“...In any. Case. Perhaps I might look at... Your offerings?”

The girl seemed prepared for such a question.

“Oh, but of course. This way, if you would,” she said, walking toward the manor's doors.

Isaac, for his part, followed silently after her. Given his continued silence thus far, I had no doubt he was this mischievous girl's servant.

Isaac's master... Mistress, possibly?

“Oh, yes. I have all but forgotten to introduce myself. I am the current head of the Latuule family, Laura Latuule. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

And so the mystery was solved—this girl wasn't a Latuule family member's daughter or anything of the sort, she was the head of the family herself.

Although her age surprised me to a certain extent, there were no age restrictions when it came to inheriting family titles, unlike that of adventurer registration. There were quite a few instances where the family's fate was thrust into the hands of a capable young heir, be the circumstances extenuating or otherwise.

In the case of noble families, it was common for a child not yet of age to inherit such a title, especially after particularly bloody family feuds. The Latuule family, while not noble in origin, had significant financial power. I could believe there were ferocious battles for the title of family head—money and power were quite terrifying things.

I turned to Laura, introducing myself. “I, too... Did not. Introduce myself. My name is Rentt... Vivie. A Bronze-class... Adventurer.”

At those words, a brief expression of surprise crossed Laura's features. Isaac,

on the other hand, remained predictably stoic. Like master, like servant, I suppose.

In other words, they didn't exactly think less of me even after learning of my relatively low adventurer rank. Admirable as far as attitudes went, but a rare one, if I had to say.

I was the individual they were about to task with the job, and most people would feel reassured by the presence of a higher-ranked adventurer.

Of course, there would be no problems if the request in question was suited to the skills of a Bronze-class adventurer. In the case of nobility, merchant families, or immensely powerful families like the Latuules, the guild would most likely dispatch a high-ranked adventurer to ensure their satisfaction. At the very least, a Bronze-class adventurer wouldn't show up, and the requester would expect a Silver-class individual.

To summarize, I was only here because Isaac had asked for me by name. Under normal circumstances, individuals such as him or Laura would never entrust a low-ranked adventurer like myself with any requests. Laura didn't even seem too bothered after hearing about my rank. Did Isaac tell her about what he had seen at the swamp?

That didn't quite look like it was the case...

Laura shot a sideways glance at Isaac. Her expression seemed to convey understanding. If I had to guess, Isaac had probably given her a somewhat vague description of me, as opposed to going deep into the specifics.

While I had assumed Isaac would simply explain any and everything to his mistress, I suppose this wasn't the case. What exactly was their relationship like...? A cursory examination showed that Isaac generally obeyed Laura's every whim—unlike that Puchi Suri familiar of mine.

On another note, Edel was conspicuously missing from his usual perch on my shoulder. He apparently had a meeting with his underlings in the orphanage's basement, and had wandered off to deal with some matters of his own. Personally, I didn't want to explain to the Latuules why there was a monster perched on my shoulder, so this was probably for the best.

He was a clean mouse, having been purified by my divinity on a few occasions, but I didn't doubt that some individuals would only see him as a dirty beast. An individual's perception of things tended to change depending on their upbringing, so it probably wouldn't be strange for some nobles to recoil before a supposedly impure mouse.

Almost immediately, I felt a mental kick from Edel, seemingly declaring he was, indeed, very much pure and clean. I thought back at him, informing my familiar this was more about appearances than reality. Seemingly satisfied, Edel went back to his affairs.

Sometimes I couldn't help but feel Edel was a much more logical being than I ever could be.

"A Bronze-class adventurer taking on the Swamp of Tarasque... Not a very pleasant place, no doubt, but also not one Bronze-class adventurers would frequent, at least from what I have heard. May I ask what exactly it was you were doing there...?" Laura asked, apparently confused.

Did she not hear of my circumstances from Isaac, then? But of course, Isaac didn't have any reason to inform his mistress of my personal motivations.

"There was a... request," I answered plainly, "from the orphanage. Asking if I could pick... Just one Dragon Blood Blossom. For a... Single. Bronze coin."

My brief description of the situation was probably more than enough for most adventurers to understand the circumstances. But Laura didn't seem to share this understanding.

Tilting her head to one side, she continued on. "A trip to the Swamp of Tarasque for one bronze piece...? I find that somewhat..."

I suppose a more detailed explanation was in order.

"It was a request... From one of the. Orphanages in Maalt. That is just... How it is. Most adventurers... Would expect. Nothing more than a bronze... Piece. In return."

As I may have mentioned before, orphanages weren't swimming in pools of coin. Unable to offer an adequate reward, a token sum of one bronze coin was offered instead. It made perfect sense.

There was more to this reward, however, namely that the adventurer in question was content with taking volunteer work.

Since the adventurer's guild was, for all intents and purposes, a profit-driven organization, such requests would normally never be officially fulfilled. But as history has proven, kind-hearted adventurers did show up across the ages, and they occasionally offered their assistance at the guilds they frequented. These acts of goodwill silently continued on today, and was a system of sorts in its own right.

Just as how there were problems that could only be solved by adventurers, or those with martial force in any given era, there would surely be individuals who couldn't pay for their services. The adventurer's guild, in turn, would decide to help out ever so slightly with these affairs, and these well-intentioned adventurers began accepting a token payment of one bronze piece for the sake of adequate record-keeping. One bronze coin was the lowest possible monetary reward a client could offer for services rendered by the guild's adventurers, and it was a minimal reward that could at most only purchase two pieces of bread. But there was no rule in place stating that providing the absolute minimum was prohibited.

As long as one bronze coin was provided to the guild, the request would be posted onto the boards, thus exposing it to adventurers. After the guild had first and foremost met the client, it was then up to the individual adventurer to decide if they would take on the request, considering the potential gains and understanding the described situation on the request sheet. Should the services of an adventurer be required, the request would be approved. This made it so that, while the overall reward of the request was low, well-intentioned adventurers could volunteer to take on the case, eventually solving it should everything work out.

There were certainly some malicious or stingy parties who sought to abuse this system of goodwill, but the guild was well-versed in weeding out false requests. Such requests would be evaluated to see if the client was truly in dire need of help. Should this not have been the case, the request would simply be discarded.

The system, by and large, functioned quite well.

Having finally concluded my explanation, Laura's expression softened considerably, as if moved by the tale.

"I did not know such gentle-hearted adventurers existed in these lands."

I could hardly fault her for the assumption, seeing as adventurers didn't exactly have the best of reputations. Even I was a suspicious, skull-masked man in black robes. Few would look at me and go, "Oh, there be a gentle and kind adventurer!"

This was hardly about gentleness or kindness; I merely... Yes, I merely did what I could.

Adventurers, by nature of their career, often had close brushes with tragedy or death. Amidst all that, one would occasionally want the affirmation that they had done at least one good thing, so that was when such requests were accepted and voluntarily fulfilled—all for the price of one bronze piece.

Perhaps I wasn't too different, with how I was clinging onto what remained of my humanity.



With everything being said...this manor was really quite large. From its external appearance alone, I felt it was more of a castle as opposed to a manor of any kind, so maybe that much wasn't exactly strange.

What was strange was how most of the mansion was relatively deserted. Although we passed by a servant or two, few people walked the halls of this grand manor. More accurately, the amount of people I passed by hardly seemed sufficient to maintain the general cleanliness of a mansion of this scale.

Curious, I raised the question to Laura, only to be told that each and every one of her servants were highly skilled and capable. While Isaac certainly seemed capable of the more worldly senses, skill alone couldn't possibly maintain a mansion of this size. *It would be physically impossible*, I thought.

Observing my surroundings, I found that none of the hallways, walls, or even the hanging chandeliers seemed to have a single speck of dust on them. I looked around some more, and was forced to come to the conclusion that the Latuule manor hardly seemed understaffed.

“This way, if you would...”

Laura placed her hand on a heavy, metallic door, giving it a good push. The door opened effortlessly, revealing a winding passageway of downward-leading stone steps. I felt like I was walking into the depths of the underworld itself.

“Your... Basement, I suppose.”

“Yes. There are quite a few magical tools stored here, you see, with some infused with mana, spirit, and the like. There are, however, quite a few older artifacts among them, and we do take care to store our tools appropriately. As such, the temperature and humidity of our basement is regulated to provide an optimal environment for storage.”

When it came to magical tools with somewhat complex inner mechanisms, most craftsmen simply had them infused with mana, hence reinforcing said tools. Most magical tools were made to be sturdy in the first place.

Just like how adventurers strengthened their bodies with mana and spirit for greater strength and endurance, the same could be done to a magical tool. This meant magical tools typically outlasted their more mundane counterparts, often for significant periods of time.

Due to their sturdier nature, certain magical tools that were treated as national treasures and handed down over the ages still looked somewhat new to the average observer. If one was careless or rough with a magical tool, however, it could very well break, much like any other mundane tool would.

Putting one foot before the other, I continued down the spiraling stone steps, following closely after Laura. Isaac followed after me, with the passageway being too narrow for two people.

There were no windows lining the walls, but I could faintly feel the air moving as we continued downward. Unseen lights methodically lit themselves as Laura continued on silently, flickering to life with the occasional puff. Magical tools as well, no doubt.

Light-bearing tools were easy to make and could be mass-produced for a relatively low price, but the sheer amount of them present in this passageway surprised me. Since these lights lit up when in proximity of a person, I could

fairly assume they cost more than the typical light tool did.

Looking at the Latuule family’s architectural choices alone, I wondered where exactly they had obtained such riches from—perhaps that was a question I could bring up later.

Our seemingly endless descent continued, only ending when Laura came to a stop before a single door.

Upon closer inspection, there appeared to be a board of some sort stuck to the door, made of a material I didn’t recognize. Laura held up her right hand, placing it onto the board without a word. Without warning, the entire door was enveloped by a bright glow before emitting a dull, clanking sound of something being unlocked.

“Well, then, let us enter,” Laura said, giving the handle of the door a push. It opened slowly, without much resistance. As I had thought, Laura’s previous motions had unlocked some sort of unseen mechanism.

Beyond this door was a gaping, pitch-black maw, of which I could hardly see anything within its depths. Laura didn’t seem very afraid of this darkness at all, stepping through the door without a word.

Hesitating momentarily, I quickly followed after Laura, plunging into the deep unknown.



Laura continued walking straight ahead, not stopping or showing any signs of reservation at the darkness around us.

Suddenly, she stopped once more—

“Let there be light.”

At those words, I found myself blinded; we were surrounded, enveloped in an unreasonably bright light. My eyes took but a moment to adjust to my newly illuminated surroundings.

“This... This is. Amazing.”

I was surrounded by what appeared to be small hills of magical tools,

somewhat haphazardly stacked on top of each other. Taking a closer look, I discovered they were, in fact, organized; their differing sizes and overwhelming numbers suggested to the viewer that the tools were stored in a messy heap.

Laura, as if reading my mind, offered a quick explanation.

“Do keep in mind we have arranged our tools, yes. It was much...messier before, due to the fact they had just been thrown in here in the order of their acquisition. Now, however, most of the tools have been sorted by usage, era of production, craftsmen, or labyrinth of origin—all relevant variables. Given the sheer amount of them, and the presence of quite a few articles with an as of yet unknown purpose, it would take some time to finish sorting them all.”

Laura had a point—so filled was the room with tools that sorting through them would be time-consuming. Sorting magical tools wasn’t exactly like arranging one’s attic or storeroom, after all.

Among the tools was a particularly large object, at least three times as big as the average person. What did the tool do, and how did one move it, I wondered? Given Laura’s stature, having her move it would be impossible. Maybe Isaac assisted her with its transport?

The servants of the Latuule family seem to have their work cut out for them...

“You may choose one magical tool of your liking from within this room,” Laura continued. “All of these tools are first-rate—at least, I would like to say that, but I cannot really be sure. Hopefully you have an eye for magical tools, Rentt.”

“What... Do you mean?” I asked Laura for an explanation.

“Perhaps you may already know of this, Rentt, but objects of true value are often mixed in with mere curiosities. In any case, magical tools that have caught my fancy are gathered in this room. It is difficult to say if the tools in question have any innate value, or if they are simply junk. While I do not mind if you choose something of your liking and take it with you, I can only assume an adventurer would want a somewhat useful magical tool, hence my initial warning.”

“I see...”

There were, in fact, some magical tools that merely specialized in floating or

jumping in place. It would be a bad choice on my part if I had obtained a tool of no meaningful function even after my deliberate choice.

However, for me to discern between the supposed values of magical tools was somewhat difficult. I could recognize the more common types of tools used in daily life, but many of the tools at my feet were foreign in appearance. If I had to guess, the greater half of these tools were purchased at auctions, and were probably one of a kind; in which case, just looking at the tools wouldn't be of much help.

Thinking about the matter for a while, I soon decided to ask Laura for some assistance.

"If there is something that catches your attention, all you have to do is ask. I will explain what I know of its functions to you. Of course, in some cases even I would not know what the tool does...therefore, you would have to be the one who makes the final choice."

"I am... Grateful. For your hospitality. I do wonder, however... Why did. You gather... Tools like these?" Logically speaking, if one didn't know what a magical tool did, it would be little more than a piece of scrap.

Laura promptly responded with laughter at my question.

"I simply like to gather things, of course! If I can have it, I'll take it! That's all there is to it," she responded, amused.

I suppose I could understand Laura's motivations; in some ways, it was a sort of universal truth, especially among the nobility and the rich merchant families. With so much disposable wealth at their fingertips, many of these individuals naturally turned to collecting items. They could collect just about anything—locks and the magical crystals of Goblins, and even Goblins themselves. One hears of these eccentric individuals and their habits from time to time.

Such collections were interesting in their own right, but the common observer would find it strange instead. As long as the collector in question enjoyed their venture, then all was well, so I suppose asking for a justification was simply part of the human condition.

In cases like these, however, there were sometimes no real answers; the

collector wanted to collect, and that was that.

It was easy to understand the Latuule family's magical tool collection habit—and if I could somehow profit by selecting a rare tool, I wouldn't be one to complain.



“What is... This?”

Walking around the room, a certain object caught my attention. It was disc-like—or perhaps it was more of a cylinder—and lying on its side. Curious, I pointed at it, and Laura promptly nodded, offering a swift explanation.

“That would be more a model of some sort, as opposed to a magical tool. A model of a craft that carries its master across the lands: an airship. It moves in much the same way as a real one would, too—if you just do this...”

Laura picked up a magic crystal which had been next to the little flying model in question before inserting it into the object. After infusing the assembled item with some mana, Laura seemed momentarily lost in thought, holding some unseen object in her hands. With that, the steam spouted forth from the little model, launching it into the air.

“In reality,” Laura continued, “airships that fly across these lands nowadays are powered not by mana, but by steam. Technically speaking, it is not really a model, but perhaps a toy of some sort that was meant to imitate the functions of an airship.”

Even I had heard of airships at some point in my adventuring career—not that I had ever ridden on one. As Laura had said, these airships flew across the lands, but they hardly had a reason to dock in a rural border kingdom like Yaaran. I did hear of airships turning up during festivals in the capital on occasion, but that was the extent of it.

In addition, the fares and freight charges for transporting goods on an airship were adequately high, so those on board were mainly individuals with significant financial power. As a Bronze-Class adventurer, it goes without saying that I had never encountered any clients of that social class, so I had a relative unfamiliarity with airships.

Looking up at the little flying model airship darting this way and that, however, I could feel that traveling on a real airship could be quite the experience.

The object that Laura held in her hands seemed to be a decorative stone carving of sorts, and if I had to guess, that would be the device with which one controlled the little flying airship.

“Would you like to try moving it?” Laura said, holding out the item. I nodded eagerly.

It was quite a simple device. All one had to do was hold the carving and think of the direction and altitude one wished the little airship to travel at. It didn’t take long for me to appreciate its addictive nature. Only mages who had mastered special kinds of magecraft were able to fly through the air like this little model airship did. Maybe it would be more accurate to say that humanity itself idolized flight in some capacity.

While one could easily travel through the clouds on the deck of an airship, I hardly had the financial capability to do so. As such, having the ability to move this model airship through the skies was quite the delight.

“Enjoying yourself, I presume?” Laura asked, her eyes following the airship as it darted this way and that.

I promptly nodded. “...Yes. Almost makes me... Want to take it home.”

“I see. Would you settle for this model airship then?”

“...No, perhaps not.”

While I wanted so much to take it home, bringing a toy with no other notable function back with me was somewhat... Well, while the youth inside me would have gladly settled for such a thing, the adult vehemently disagreed, claiming I should choose a tool that would assist me in my daily life.

But of course, the adult was right.

Yes, perhaps you are right, inner adult. But is work and common sense all there is to life? Is that true fun? the youth defiantly asked.

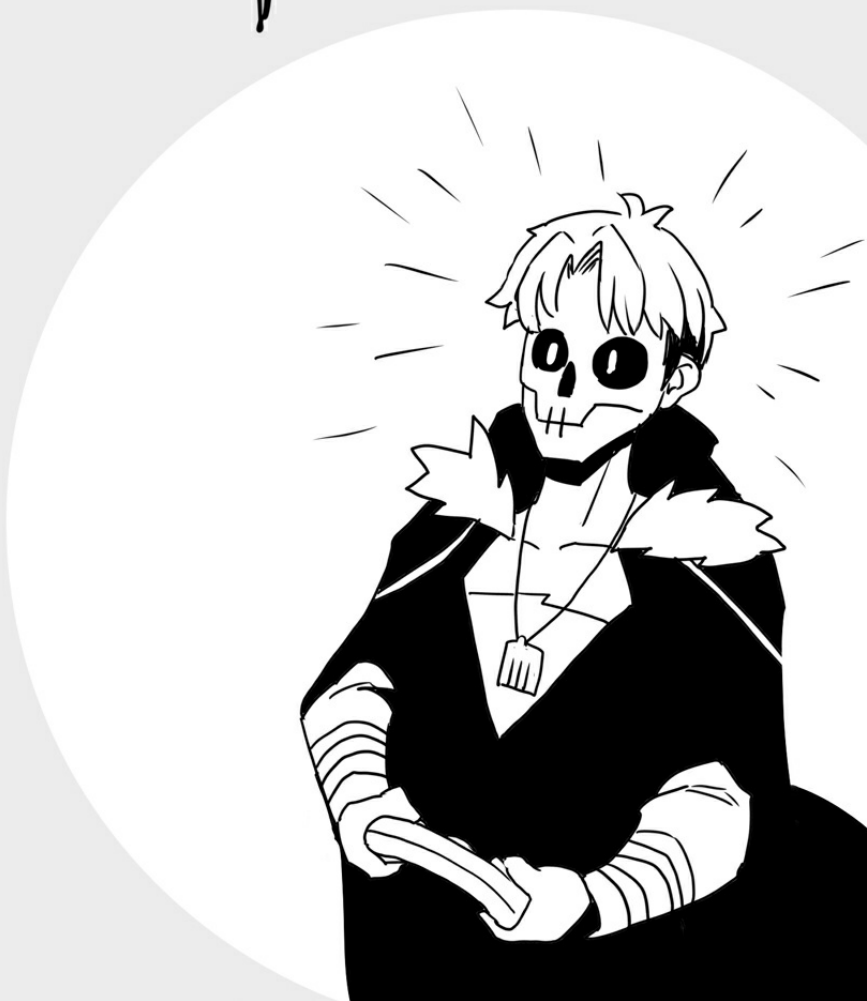
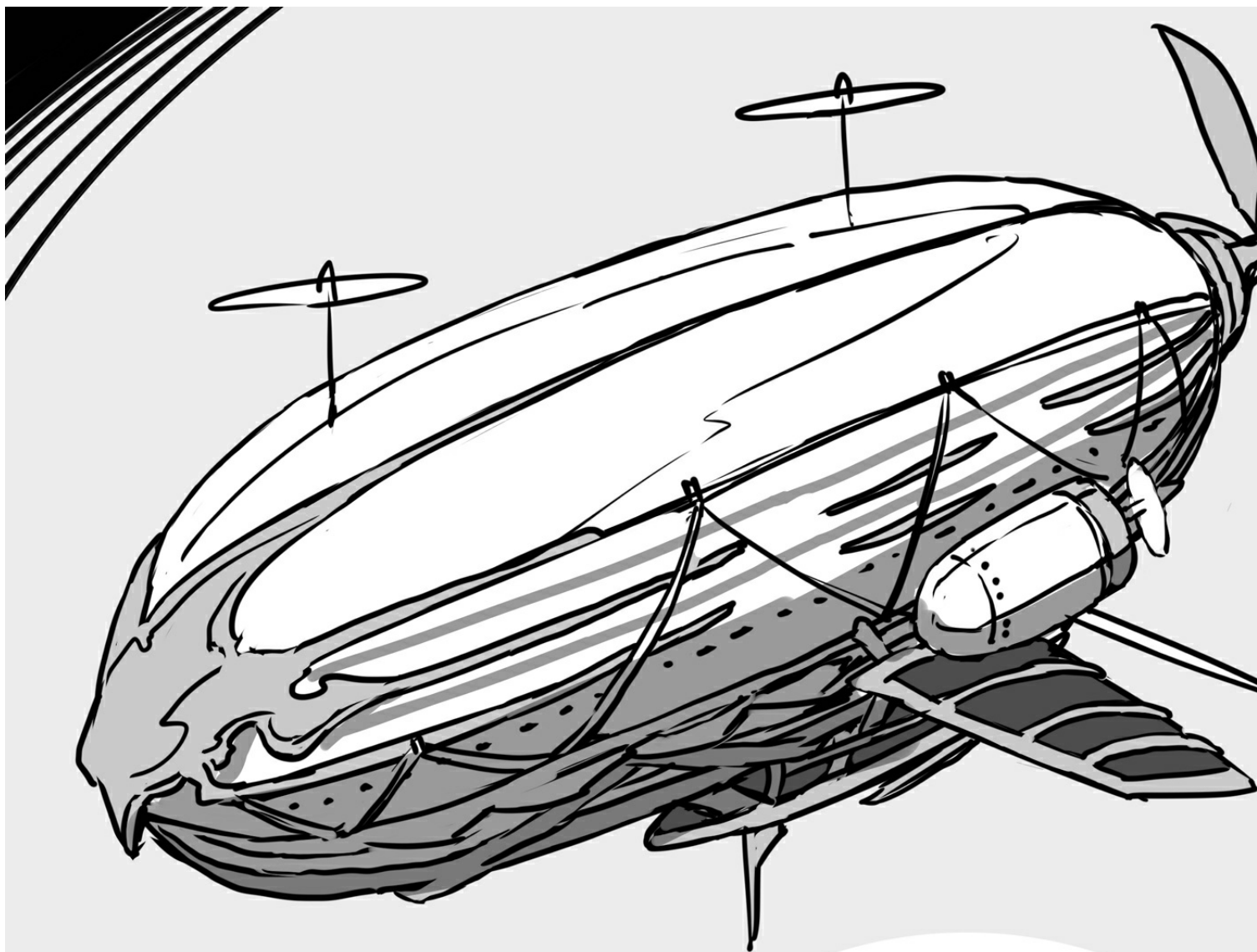
Well... Hm. Yes, there was that, too. In any case, I should really refrain, as

much as it pained me to do so...

Just as I had made up my mind, Laura interrupted me, apparently having more to say about the little airship.

“Since you are having such fun, why not try using its other functions? Try focusing your thoughts on the airship itself.”

I followed Laura’s instructions obediently. Without warning, the scene before my eyes promptly disappeared, being replaced with quite the strange sight—I seemed to be looking downward from the airship itself. From this vantage point, I could see a robed, masked man and a beautiful young girl next to him.



“What... What. Is this?”

My momentary panic broke my concentration, and before I knew it, my vision had returned to normal. Before me stood Laura, who continued her explanation of the airship's functions.

“That little airship does more than just fly; it is capable of temporarily hosting its controller's consciousness. Although I called it a model, that was not quite accurate. In truth, the airships across the land were made in the image of this little one here. This one is the original, so to speak. It was born from the depths of a labyrinth, after all.”

In other words, the grand airships that sailed across the great kingdoms and countries of the lands were nothing more than an imitation of this little toy-like craft floating in this room.

With that said, most magical tools in the lands were made in a similar fashion, being inspired by labyrinth finds. Even so, contemporary airships were powered by steam, not magic, so I suppose completely copying the intricate mechanisms of this little device was beyond the current capabilities of man.

Magical tools found in the depths of a labyrinth were notoriously difficult to understand, even after detailed analysis and dissection. Most of the time, though, it was within the means of mankind to create an object that was somewhat similar in function. But the ability to host one's consciousness was quite remarkable in itself.

I focused my mind on the craft once more, and almost immediately, I was treated to a bird's-eye view of the room we were in. This was no longer just some toy. If anything, it was a terribly useful tool. With this, I would be able to observe faraway locations from the air. It would be an invaluable implement for scouting.

Yes, this was no longer just some toy. Laura seemed to agree with my thoughts.

“Well, yes, I suppose it could be used in such a fashion. Do take note, though... Since it is powered by mana, it would be difficult for it to travel great distances. One would be wise to choose when to use it; for instance, when

scouting the path ahead, or for a short survey of the area from the air. It is capable of that much.”

Laura had a point. While she had infused the magic crystal with a fair amount of mana just now, I could feel there wasn’t much fuel left in the device. I suppose it could fly for about five minutes at best, as it seemed difficult for the little airship to stay in the air for any longer than that.

If it couldn’t travel long distances, its consciousness-shifting function wouldn’t be all that useful after all. Maybe if one had deep reserves of mana it would be usable in some capacity. Considering Laura had used quite a large crystal to begin with, I surmised that all my mana would only be able to power this tool for ten minutes, at most.

“...I think it. Is... A pretty good. Tool.”

“Well, then, I suppose this one does not quite fit your tastes?” Laura asked, somewhat patiently.

I stopped to think before giving my answer.

“...No, but I would... Not. Rule it out just yet. I might end up... Taking this one. In the end.”

Although I wouldn’t be able to get much out of it now, it was possible I would be able to in the future, when my mana reserves grew in capacity.

Above all else...it was fun to watch the little airship fly about. Not the main reason for my choice, of course, but I couldn’t deny that I wanted to play with it and have it zip through the air.

In any case, I suppose I should direct my attention to the other items present. Accompanied by Laura and Isaac, I continued walking through the spacious basement.



“...It seems like. There is nothing but... Junk parts in this. Area of the room,” I muttered to myself, as I continued wandering about the Latuule family’s basement.

Stopping at a corner, I reached out to touch some scattered objects, curious

about their purpose. Laura immediately panicked, attempting to stop me.

“Ah! No, you mustn’t touch that!”

Her words were unfortunately a second too late. My hand had already touched the foot of what appeared to be a gigantic pile of scrap parts. Before I knew it, the previously gray parts suddenly took on a chromatic gleam.

Upon closer inspection, I had touched a magic crystal of sorts. Its mana had previously been completely drained, and it had lost its sheen. With a single brush of the hand, however, the crystal had apparently regained enough power, and it was now glowing dimly.

I couldn’t see why this was cause for any alarm, for occurrences like this were very common when it came to magical tools. But Laura didn’t seem to share my sentiment.

“Mister Vivie...do try your best to hold out for a little while. I will search for the kill switch immediately. It has to be somewhere around here! Quickly!”

She darted this way and that, frantically searching for something. Confused, I attempted to approach Laura, only to walk headfirst into some sort of obstruction. I stopped in my tracks.

“This is...”

I squinted, inspecting the space before me. While it was transparent, it also gave off a faint, magical glow—an invisible wall, born of magecraft and mana. Mages commonly used such spells to protect themselves, much like the Shield spell I was fond of using. This kind of spell had many names, often depending on the scale and shape of the wall in question.

Withdrawing a small rock from my magical pouch, I gave it a good toss, only to have it bounce merrily in the air, deflected by the shield. By its trajectory, the shield was probably seven or eight meters wide, and was shaped like a dome. It would seem like I had been trapped within it.

But that in and of itself wasn’t exactly a huge problem. If this shield appeared because of me previously touching the crystal, then it would disappear as soon as the mana in the device ran out. Judging by Laura’s panicked expression, though, I could tell this was much more serious than just some silly accident. In

fact...

“...Hey. What... What is that?!”

The crystal I carelessly touched moments ago had now gathered a collection of objects around it; objects that were moving and pulsating, as if they had a life of their own. The objects rearranged themselves this way and that, soon giving birth to a larger, more coherent form. Looking at its overall silhouette, I understood the resultant item was...sizable, to say the least.

“...A... Golem?!”

Golems were magical puppets of sorts, born from magical techniques or alchemy. They were powered by mana and were capable of independent action even when separated from their creators. Due to these characteristics, Golems could be fielded in a variety of ways, and could perform a variety of tasks. Unfortunately, the parts required to make Golems were costly in general, and few alchemists were capable of creating Golems customized to specific tasks. Even so, Golems could be seen in some parts of the lands, and they sometimes appeared as enemies in certain labyrinths. They were a familiar sight to most adventurers.

In those circumstances, however, the Golems would be made of earth or rock, given life by primal magics. These primal Golems made up more than half of the Golems encountered by adventurers in labyrinths. Golems made of intricate parts didn't appear in less challenging labyrinths. Golems made of iron or steel did exist, and in some rare cases, eyewitness accounts reported similar beings, albeit made with gold or mithril. One would make a small fortune if one successfully defeated such a Golem, discounting the fact that it was a fearsome foe.

I was in no position to defeat such a Golem. What, then, could I make of the being that now stood before me?

A high-leveled disaster of a Golem, no doubt, judging from its parts and overall appearance. While I had previously assumed it was made up of scrap parts, I was very much mistaken. The parts comprising its body were none other than the various magical tools Laura had collected. A strange type of rock and sand filled in the gaps in its being—that was what I thought.

But this wasn't the case, given this was a dedicated storage room for magical tools. As such, this mysterious substance was neither rock nor sand, but some special material, enchanted by some unknown magic.

I had to be adequately cautious with this Golem, for a single mistake could be fatal.

With a final, solid clank, the room fell silent. It seemed like the Golem had finished preparing itself. It was now hardly a gathering of scrap items, but a large, humanoid weapon, armed to the teeth with magical tools of all shapes and sizes. Its arm had several magical cannons attached to it—Canon Douramage, as they were called. Its face, if one could call it a face, was similarly constructed, albeit with several thinner magical rifles, commonly known as Fuyuj Douramage. Both implements were capable of firing magic-enchanted bullets, Bal, from their barrels. These bullets allowed for the instant casting of magic. While ancient and contemporary versions of these tools existed, the ones in the Golem were decidedly modern.

To top it all off, its hands were armed with all sorts of swords and daggers—makeshift claws, perhaps. It was truly armed to the teeth. To make things worse, none of these weapons were mundane in any way. They were all enchanted magical tools in their own right.

If there was ever a personification of violence, there would surely be limits, but this Golem paid said limits no heed.

I suppose this was why Laura was panicked earlier; if I had the option, I would immediately run. The shield, however, prevented me from doing anything of the sort. All I could do was run around and distract the monster as Laura looked for its kill switch. As I was now, there was nothing else I could possibly do.

“GRRRAAAAAAGHHH!!!”

It was even armed with a mechanism to perfectly replicate a large monster's roar, possibly for intimidating its foes.

I wasn't exactly intimidated in any way, but I had no idea what I should do next. The Golem didn't seem to care that I was overwhelmed by the situation at hand; with a few thunderous steps, the Golem moved, and our eyes promptly met.

It seemed like the Golem's large size hardly slowed it down, and before I knew it, a fist was soon violently thrown toward me in a sweeping arc. I quickly jumped to the side, barely dodging the blow. The Golem's fist impacted with where I had just stood moments ago, crushing the tiles beneath the weight of its blow.

"If I get hit... With that. Even I..."

While I was hoping for my undead nature to be of use in this engagement, I didn't ever recall hearing of an Undead coming back to life after it had been minced to bits. Vampires were capable of such techniques, but they were unfortunately unknown to me at this point in time. Either way, I wasn't keen on relying on a still unknown technique.

"Mister Vivie! I should be able to find it in the next three minutes or so! Please hold on! Isaac! Do you remember where it is?"

"Unfortunately not. It should be somewhere in this area..."

Voices could pass through this shield, and from what Isaac and Laura were saying, it sounded like the all-important device was still eluding their grasp. In that time, I would have to continue avoiding the Golem's attacks.

I had a lot more to be concerned about in addition to its fists and large body. If I was careless, I could easily be stomped on, as well. To make things worse, it was now firing its magical guns and cannons, slinging all sorts of spells in my general direction.

Fortunately, those tools didn't seem to be of a very good make, as they either had painfully low accuracy or power. Even so, if any of those spells were to hit a human-sized target such as myself, it would surely be fatal. I couldn't let my guard down.

"...Damn. It. Is there... Any way..."

I could continue dodging and escaping as long as I had the stamina, but my focus would eventually slip.

Can I do anything to slow it down? Damage it in some way, maybe...? Come to think of it...

Lorraine happened to be somewhat of a specialist when it came to Golems, being an alchemist and all that. If I recalled correctly, Lorraine said something along the lines of...

“Listen here, Rentt. All Golems have a certain engraving on their forehead, some mystic letters symbolizing the ‘truth.’ Interestingly, the engraving is but one stroke away from another word, that being ‘death.’ If you fill in the appropriate stroke, the Golem will promptly self-destruct. As such, if you ever do come across such a Golem, Rentt, look carefully at its forehead.”

Yes, Lorraine did say something to that effect... As expected of a scholar, she offered truly useful information.

I looked up at the Golem’s forehead.

“...Hey. There’s... Nothing written. There!”

In response to my pitiful monologue, the Golem swung at me once more, its large fist flying in my general direction. I had intended to dodge once more, but something caught my eye. In place of a joint, what appeared to be a visible kind of immaterial magic connected the Golem’s arm to its body. I instead instinctively did the exact opposite of dodging and leaped upward, thrusting my sword into the flickering sigils. With that simple stroke, the Golem’s left arm promptly fell off its main body, falling lifelessly to the ground.

Yes, quite a stroke of luck.

Golems felt no pain, and wouldn’t change their movement patterns to reflect any damage taken. Now that it was an arm short, however, its attacks became easy to predict.

If it only had one arm, I’d be able to dodge its attacks indefinitely...

Relieved, I relaxed ever so slightly, and it was at this moment yet another of Lorraine’s teachings crossed my mind.

“Well, you may think it is simple, Rentt, but such a mechanism would only work on a basic Golem. To begin with, this function was originally designed by the craftsmen to stop a rampaging Golem—an emergency kill switch, if you would. Recent Golems, however, often have an external device paired with it which does the same thing but is commonly found in a separate chassis. This is

why you should not be looking only at a Golem's forehead, Rentt. Instead, you should be searching for where its kill switch may potentially be located. Failing that, you could always defeat it with brute force..."

Yes... Yes, of course. Laura was searching for that very device right now...

Ack! This means there really IS nothing I can do!

In any case, I had deprived it of an arm. I suppose I could go for its other...or I thought so, at least.

The Golem, as if reading my thoughts, stared daggers at me. I suppose I should give that idea a rest. For now, escape was the best option.

I didn't know how much time passed between then and now...

"...Haha. So you have... Finally. Cornered me."

Thanks to the Golem's relentless rampage, its surroundings were reduced to debris and rubble, and standing in the middle of this heap of broken tiles and dust was none other than myself.

The Golem slowly raised its fist.

Have I exhausted every single option?

No. I still had one more ace up my sleeve.

Steeling myself, I infused my weapon with mana. I didn't want to use this technique in front of Isaac and Laura, but I hardly had a choice.

Slowly, the Golem's fist descended upon me. I raised my sword, ready for the worst.

"STOP!"

As Laura's voice rang out across the basement, the Golem froze, as if fossilizing in place. In the very next moment, it had stopped moving. At the same time, the magical shield around me faded, and the Golem, now no longer able to maintain its form, crumbled into an odd collection of items, dust, and rock.

It seemed like we made it in time.

Almost immediately, Laura and Isaac approached me, and Laura herself stood

before me.

“I do apologize... We took quite a while to find the mechanism in question... If only we had found it sooner.”

Laura lowered her head in apparent remorse, but none of this was exactly her fault.

“...No. I was the one who... Touched the strange object. In the first place. What exactly... was that?”

I should have asked Laura what the object was before touching it, so no matter how one looked at it, the blame fell squarely on myself.

With that, her previously hardened expression softened, a warm smile returning to her face.

“Ah, yes. That is a Golem, as you can see... Unlike its more normal relatives, all it would need is a tiny bit of magical power. Once it has that, it will continue absorbing mana from its surroundings, taking in materials of a higher grade than itself. It would eventually become stronger as a result. The shield that encased the both of you was absorbed by the Golem, who had used it to entrap you. I do offer my most humble of apologies...”

What a terrifying weapon... As long as it had an opponent, its surroundings were engulfed in chaos.

“It is... My fault, Laura. Don’t... Worry. About it. However... Can something like. That. Be easily made...?”

“Well... No. It was born from a labyrinth, and it cost quite a sum of coin. I suppose there is no other tool like it.”

A one-of-a-kind magical tool from the depths of the labyrinths.

I suppose most items would simply reappear over time. This specific Golem, however, had only appeared once. It would be reasonable to assume that Laura would simply purchase any other copy that surfaced. If I had to guess, it was through this research that she declared it unique.

“On another... Note. Are there any other magical... Tools. Like that, in this basement...?”

“About that...” Laura averted her gaze at my question.

I suppose that was a yes.

Now, more than ever, did I realize carelessly touching these tools brought about their own brand of danger.

What a dangerous basement...

Laura, as if understanding my concerns, quickly reassured me. “Rest assured, I will be sure to inform you when we are ever next to such an object again. Please do not worry...”

“...Yes. That would be... Much. Appreciated.”

Although that was a sincere response on my part, I couldn’t shake the fact that none of this would have happened if I was a little more careful. I should really reign in that carefree attitude of mine...

I promptly decided to change the subject.

“Even so... A Golem that absorbs other. Magical tools and... Uses them. Is a truly fearsome... Creature.”

“The alchemy of the time probably made assembling such a Golem possible, but it is indeed difficult for something to integrate and use so many objects at once. The ability to absorb magic from its surroundings is not an ability that most common Golems possess. To make matters worse, this basement is full of magical tools that are infused with mana in some way or another, which is why it began moving so quickly... I should really reconsider storing that thing in another facility,” Laura said, nodding.

“Back to the subject at hand, Mister Vivie. You do not seem injured, so would you like to continue selecting a magical tool? If you are tired, I do not mind seeing you on another day...”

As Laura said, I wasn’t hurt or battered in any way. In fact, it was good exercise. Seeing as to how I still drew breath and was relatively well, I supposed I should continue with the selection process.

“No... I am. Fine. If you are... All right with it, Laura. I would like to continue.”

Honestly speaking, part of the basement seemed ready to cave in at any

moment, having sustained significant damage from the battle. But Laura dismissed my worries with a few claps of her hands. Out of nowhere, a small team of servants appeared, and they soon began clearing away the rubble. What surprised me more wasn't the immediate arrival of said servants, but the fact that they were all using magical tools.

"There are no problems on my end, no." Laura turned to me, smiling. "Well, then, shall we continue...?"

We began walking once more, venturing deeper into the basement.



And so it came to be that I was able to inspect many magical tools.

The sheer variety of the Latuule family's collection impressed me; other than the model airship, there was the shielding device which had trapped me earlier, as well as a tool that granted one buoyancy. There were also tools for the nullification of all types of poisons, a weapon that crystallized mana into a physical blade, a suit of armor that fought by its master's side as long as it was fed with mana...and even a blowpipe of sorts that launched fireballs at its unfortunate target. To think such tools could even exist!

To me, two tools caught my fancy: the little airship, and a magical tool that was capable of altering its wielder's voice. The airship was...enjoyable; truly, in many aspects. But the latter was a tool that could do my raspy voice some favors. The problem was that I would one day outgrow such a tool.

"Have you made up your mind?" Laura asked, her gracious demeanor hardly dented in the face of my hesitation and prolonged thoughts.

I was grateful for her hospitality, but I really was taking a little too long. Unfortunate as it was, and as remorseful as I was, this was an important choice.

I had no choice but to accept the circumstances, and hope Laura's patience held true. But Laura didn't really seem fazed by my endless deliberation.

"In truth... I am. Quite troubled, thinking about... These choices. Hm...?"

Rubbing my chin with a free hand idly, my eyes came to rest on quite a few...unusual objects in the basement. I didn't bother hiding my curiosity,

posing the question to Laura almost immediately.

“What. Is that?”

“Ahhh... Yes. Well, as you can see, Mister Vivie. That is a monster material. While not magical tools, I am somewhat taken by their intricacies, and I have a small collection of them as a result.”

I gazed at the objects in question. The amount was by no means “small,” but perhaps the Latuules simply had a different sense of scale. The scales of a dragon, a unicorn’s horn, the bones of giants... Valuable materials were stacked on top of each other, or stashed into little nooks and crannies here and there. They were all worth a good sum of coin.

Truly impressive.

I continued inspecting the pile, only to stop at a certain object. Following my line of vision, Laura preempted me with a question of her own.

“Perhaps that one over there is to your liking?”

“Yes... Perhaps.”

Laura retrieved the item as I nodded, holding it out before me. It was a long, slim, crystalline container with a dark, crimson liquid sealed within its confines.

“This is a vial of Vampire’s blood,” Laura continued. “A material commonly used in the crafting of magical medicines, as an alchemical catalyst, or for the crafting of weapons, equipment, and the like...”



“While I can offer no assurance as to if the fluid within is truly the blood of a Vampire, that matters little to me as I was more interested in the vessel itself. It is a magical tool that preserves its contents for a long period of time, which was why I picked it up at one auction or another.”

“You... Do not. Care about the fluid within?”

Laura’s statement was understandable in light of the Latuule family’s tendencies where magical tools came first, and magical materials second. Even so, a Vampire’s blood wasn’t a mundane item.

Gathering blood from a Vampire that had freshly reappeared in a labyrinth was possible, but in most cases didn't happen. If they were left to their own devices, Vampires had a tendency to form large and complicated webs of relations, connecting familiars and slaves alike with the power of blood. If a Lesser Vampire was to evolve any further, the chances of it being easily captured quickly became slim. Matured Vampires in particular were difficult to discern from normal human beings, and they lived very long lives. Some Vampires even wielded positions of immense social power across the lands, and were difficult to deal with.

In other words, one couldn't extract the blood of a Vampire just because one desired to do so. As such, I couldn't help but be surprised at Laura's dismissive statement, but alas, considering her love and interest for magical tools, this much was to be expected. To me, however, the vial in her hands was worth its weight in gold—possibly a little more.

Despite her lack of interest, Laura soon provided a more detailed explanation of the vial's contents.

"Well, Mister Vivie. Rumor has it the blood of a Vampire grants one eternal life if consumed, turning the person in question into another Vampire, so to speak. Silly nobles who desire eternal life often purchase such items—and of course, it can be sold to individuals of that nature for a good sum."

"A... Rumor?"

Even I had heard of such rumors: if a human being was bitten by a Vampire and injected with some of its blood, said human would become a Vampire in their own right. Edel was a good example, for he had consumed my blood and had become an existence that was somewhat close to mine. Even familiars were Vampires, but I suppose there was some distinction in the classifications that I wasn't aware of.

In any case...

"But the veracity of these claims is debatable. Records of individuals who have imbibed Vampire blood do indeed exist, but said records also mention them losing their minds, and in some cases even dying. In other cases, they merely became invalids for the rest of their lives. Even if, hypothetically, there

were individuals who succeeded at the venture, no records detailing such events were left behind. After all, Vampires are immortals; who else would openly declare they were Vampires to the civilized world at large?”

A situation I could relate to very well on a personal level, no doubt, seeing as I didn't have a habit of announcing my undead constitution to the general public. Some people particularly close to me were aware of my secret, but even I wouldn't leave records chronicling my evolutionary prospects for posterity.

“I suppose.”

“Therefore, it is simply a rumor—no more, no less. Even so, when faced with the possibilities of immortal life or becoming an invalid, people seemed willing to take such gambles. At the very least, these individuals seem to exist no matter the era, which is why this little vial would command quite a respectable price...”

Laura's tone of voice was visibly scornful, not that I could blame her for such a view. For one reason or another, Laura seemed to think those who sought eternal life so recklessly were nothing more than fools; at least, that was what her demeanor suggested. Was that really true?

While I didn't think eternal life was necessarily a bad thing, my more mortal associates would eventually grow old and pass on, leaving me to witness their passing time and time again. Would my heart eventually rot and give out at the loss of all those I held dear? I couldn't deny such a possibility. Even if I lived forever, those around me would still be claimed by death. I suppose I would be sad, but the impact would be small. Small, yes, but repeated twice? Thrice? Hundreds, thousands of times...?

I felt a little disillusioned at the prospect of eternal life. If I couldn't return to my previously human self, would such a day eventually come to pass? Would I see Lorraine and Sheila grow old and pass on, their dying moments reflected in these very eyes?

It seemed...lonely, and painful. On the other hand, it wasn't something I could realistically imagine at this point in time. Was having eternal life a blessing or a curse? Until I live for a long enough time, I suppose I would never be able to tell.

I shifted my attention back to the vial of Vampire blood Laura had in her hands. For some reason, I was filled with a strong...desire. This was the same feeling that overcame me when I had taken a bite out of Lorraine's shoulder...right before my evolution into a Thrall.

I could chalk up my reaction to a simple desire for blood as sustenance, but I couldn't discount the possibility in my mind. Namely, the possibility that the vial in her hands was exactly what I needed for my next Existential Evolution.

In retrospect, I had defeated quite a few monsters in the Swamp of Tarasque, and for all intents and purposes, they were strong beasts. But despite the sheer amount of monsters I had slain, and the amount of life force I had absorbed, I was still nothing more than a Thrall. There was the slight possibility I had simply not slain my fair share, but I had a feeling I wasn't meeting certain conditions that, if met, would herald my continued evolution.

Before I had come to this place, I hardly could have imagined what this missing ingredient was. But now, in her hands...

A vial of Vampire blood...

If I consumed that, I would surely evolve, possibly transcending my current state of existence.

Was this my instinct at work...? The instinct that was pushing me toward this vial was significantly weaker than when I was possessed into taking a bite out of Lorraine. This was perhaps due to my heightened sense of self, in addition to my logical faculties being largely intact. If anything, I wasn't about to be possessed and snatch the vial out of Laura's hands.

In any case, I was now sure of what I wanted.

I was a creature that sustained itself with blood. Maybe I was just being gluttonous, and that fancy vial made its contents look all the more delicious; I couldn't overlook that possibility. It was also entirely possible that nothing would happen even if I drank the blood, but I suppose that was how possibilities worked.

If I let this opportunity slip through my fingers, I would have to capture a Vampire in my own time, which wasn't an easy feat. I had little choice in the

matter, and thus made up my mind.

“...I would like. This.”

“This vial of Vampire’s blood? You never cease to amaze me with your interesting choices, Mister Vivie...”

Laura’s eyes opened wide in surprise. It seemed like Laura had assumed I would choose something else—the little airship, I suppose, given how much fun I was having with it. There were also many other magical tools that would have assisted me one way or another, like assorted weapons, tools of convenience, and others. Even if Vampire blood could be made into medicines or elixirs, I suppose few would ask for and consume it just to see what would happen.

I could sell it, of course, but there were many other magical tools in this basement, some of which would fetch a lot more coin. In light of my personal circumstances, however, this was undoubtedly the most sensible choice.

“A personal interest of yours, perhaps? Or is there a deeper reason to your choice?”

“...An associate, of mine. Conducts research into the... Biological. Aspects of monsters. I suppose she would... Appreciate. A specimen like this.”

This was, without question, a lie. I was referring to Lorraine, and taking her work into consideration, there was some truth in my statement, actually. But there was no way I could tell Laura the truth of the matter, hence my purposefully ambiguous phrasing.

Laura seemed to understand there was a deeper meaning to my words. Furrowing her brows momentarily, she stared straight at me for a while, before finally relenting, a smile lighting up her face.

“Is that right...? In that case, Mister Vivie, I shall grant unto you this gift. You will receive the vessel with it, too. Two birds with one stone, if you think about it.”



It goes without saying, but I wasn’t about to open the vessel and empty its contents before Laura and Isaac.

Drinking Vampire blood like it was a potion in front of nobles! The nerve!

Still, I couldn't deny I had considered doing it, but the medicine in my hands was something that could turn a normal, functional human being into an invalid should anything go wrong. No normal human would drink it so eagerly, and perhaps not in a single gulp. At the very least, I would like to believe such a human being couldn't possibly exist. I was already strange and somewhat suspicious in terms of appearance, so I had no desire to exacerbate that problem and leave a strange impression upon my hosts.

"Well, then... Shall we return to the surface? We have what we came for."

I nodded in response.

We were soon backtracking, climbing up the spiraling stone steps. While I felt pangs of regret at the little airship I left behind, I had already made my choice. As much as it pained me, I could only give up on the tool, following Laura out of the chamber.

If what Laura said was true, the little airship was born from the depths of a labyrinth, so with any luck, I might come across a similar item in my travels, as well. I would be hard-pressed to say there would be absolutely no possibility of coming across another one.

Endure it, Rentt. Endure it with your heart and soul...

I dragged my heavy feet reluctantly upward, step after step, as Laura led me further and further away from the little airship that had so captivated my mind.



Upon returning to the surface, I was guided to what appeared to be a reception parlor of sorts. As expected, every piece of furniture and décor in this room was first-rate, those being uniquely-crafted items made by famous craftspeople and ateliers in the capital that even I had heard of.

I even recalled seeing some of these items in famous auctions I had attended before. They were hardly items someone like me could be purchasing, but I had felt that some of these items would look impressive on my mantelpiece. Such a day never did come, and I eventually gave up on the prospect, only to find these very same items in a manor I just so happened to visit. Life was strange in its

own amusing way.

“Well, then, I suppose we should move on to the actual topic at hand. You are, after all, not here to play around, are you, Mister Vivie?” Laura said, seemingly apologizing for having led me on a wild goose chase around the rose-hedge maze.

I was only here because Isaac asked for me by name, and I didn’t sign up to be locked up in some maze and have my efforts observed. Even so, such practices weren’t uncommon among nobles, who were fond of testing those they invited to their homes.

Even if a close associate claimed a certain adventurer had skill, I suppose it was always more preferable to witness it for oneself. In most cases, the client would request the adventurer or hired hand in question fight a champion of their choice, or to fetch some special item before they were given the actual task. This was by no means an admirable practice. But most of these noble clients had ridiculous amounts of wealth and clout, with the rewards being enough to make even the most seasoned adventurer stand still and gape.

To some, there was little to be lost in accepting such a challenge, so such practices were silently, and sometimes grudgingly accepted. I had even received a gift from Laura for my troubles, though many nobles tested individuals they hired without reward, with some even haughtily declaring the act of being tested itself an honor. While these clients would no longer have many adventurers to do their bidding for them after the fact, such cases were still heard of from time to time.

An adventurer and their client should be on equal standing, as was the view of the guild at large.

“I would not... Mind. If you played with me in. Such a fashion, again. In fact... How about. I give that labyrinth one more... Run. Would I receive... Another gift. For my trouble?”

“Aha!” Laura laughed merrily at my cheeky suggestion. “You never cease to amuse me, Mister Vivie. Do you like that little airship so much? There are many other tools that would serve you better, you know.”

She saw through my silly charade almost instantly.

But she wasn't wrong. If Laura really permitted it, I would gladly take on that rose-hedge maze again, even if it took the entire day, and the next morning. That was how much I wanted the little airship.

"It is not... About if. It is useful. I just... Desire it, greatly. I really... Want it. That is all. After all... Is that not. What collecting is... About?"

Laura nodded sagely at my statement. "Yes, verily so. To think I would meet a comrade with similar interests in these very halls... Ah, but unfortunately, Mister Vivie, the maze is usually a one-off affair for most, and so..."

An ancient tradition of the Latuule family, perhaps, or maybe just one of Laura's whims. I didn't know the exact reasons behind it, but I could only assume that an individual conquering the maze multiple times and claiming multiple tools as gifts would eventually empty the vault...so to speak.

If that was the case...

No! The little airship would be forever out of my grasp!

The shock to my psyche was immense; it even rivaled the shock I had felt when I realized I would probably forever be a Bronze-class adventurer. Such was the magnitude of my disappointment. I felt a deep sense of loss...

It was something I usually didn't think of, something that didn't cross my mind. But... Ah. The sheer impact of this reality upon my soul... I felt a deep, bittersweet sorrow within my heart.

No, Rentt. You must set your mind upon other things, and work toward your goals. Greater, more long-term goals.

Or at least, I tried. I promptly failed...

I was, and still am, in absolute shock. I suppose I looked extremely pitiful to Laura, who was looking in my direction with a mix of compassion and amusement.

"The little airship is part of the Latuule family's collection...and I do have some personal attachment to it. However, if you desire it so much, there may be certain...ways..." Laura said, now seemingly disturbed by my apparent obsession.

At her words, I slowly raised my head, staring straight at her as I stopped wriggling my fingers.

“Returning to the subject at hand, Mister Vivie,” Laura continued. “You are here today because you have been asked for by name to perform a certain task, that being the regular retrieval of Dragon Blood Blossoms. I suppose you understand that much?”

“Yes. However, the client...”

“Ah, yes. The client would be Isaac. But surely, you would have already deduced the truth of the matter after meeting me.”

“...Yes. I understand the true... Client. Is you, Laura.”

If it really was a request issued by Isaac, all he had to do was meet me in person. He could tell Laura the adventurer was here, and there would be no real need for his mistress to speak to me. Isaac could have explained the terms of the agreement.

Upon meeting with Laura, however, I immediately understood the nature of the affair. It was just an assumption, for I didn’t presume to know the truth by any means, but it seemed like I was largely correct.

Laura went on. “I consume those Dragon Blood Blossoms—well, their extract, if I may say so—at regular intervals. This was why Isaac had been picking them for me in the Swamp of Tarasque. However, poor Isaac seems to be a little overworked as of late, and as his mistress, I suppose I would like to give him some time off.”

Laura had a point; to maintain a mansion of this size and regularly brave the Swamp of Tarasque was no small feat. I could only imagine the burden it exacted upon Isaac and the other servants of the Latuule family.

Though, I suppose that wasn’t entirely correct. Isaac was the only one who ventured into the swamp, so the burden perhaps rested solely on his shoulders.

The manor’s maintenance is a herculean task in its own right... And on top of that, he had to regularly brave the swamp?

If I were to make some educated guesses about how the servants did their

cleaning, I couldn't even begin to imagine the exact details of such a process.

"If I... Take this request. Would Isaac... Be able to rest. A little easier?"

"Why, yes. Well, Isaac himself is of such an opinion. While he does have quite a lot of work to do here at the manor, I should make it known that Isaac is one of my most capable servants. If you could save him the trouble of exploring the swamp so often, I am sure he would have more time to rest. That is all there is to it, really."

Isaac, for his part, remained silent, merely turning to the both of us and nodding at opportune times.

Hmm. I suppose that's fine...

I hadn't come all this way wanting to be deeply embroiled in the personal circumstances of the Latuule family, nor should I read too deeply into it. Isaac having a little more time to himself was a good thing, yet completely unrelated to my interests.

What was truly important to me, Rentt Faina, was that little model airship.

"I... See. If I do this... Task. For you. Then, the little airship..."

I had meant to ask what Laura's views on the matter were, but she seemed to have already made up her mind.

"If you accept the task, then yes, Mister Vivie. You may have the little airship. Ah, of course, this has no impact on the original sum of coin we have agreed upon in the contract. Rest assured, your reward is intact, so to speak."



"R-Really?!" I was unable to believe what I had just heard.

"Yes..." Laura said. "Well, to begin with, the Swamp of Tarasque is quite a challenge even for the most seasoned of adventurers, is it not? If it would motivate you to give it your all, Mister Vivie...then something like that would be a small price to pay."

"Something like that"? Why, "that" airship would command a small fortune if sold, such was its worth! To dismiss it as if it were nothing but small change... How bold, how audacious!

I could feel nothing but a deep sense of gratitude toward Laura. It permeated my body and soul. At this moment, I, Rentt Faina, was willing to pledge my eternal and unwavering loyalty to this young lady.

But of course, that was unnecessary...

"I suppose... If one. Bothers asking... One can find. Good deals," I said, attempting to obfuscate the fact that I was over the moon at this arrangement.

I wonder if Laura saw through my charade... While she looked young, the sheer ferocity of logic that dwelled in her eyes painted her as a sensible adult. The wisdom in her gaze almost suggested a bloody history of battles waged against various heads of powerful merchant families and nobles who owned entire continents. I wondered how many challenges one had to overcome to reach such a point in life, and what experiences were needed for such a feat. I could hardly imagine it.

Taking all that into consideration, I didn't have a single doubt in my mind Laura had already read my mind through and through. She was an upstanding lady in her own right, only suggesting to gift me with the little airship after watching me fidget and gripe endlessly. In fact, I did a poor job at hiding my joy—ah, I could soon hold it in my hands once more! Even so, Laura calmly watched on, not saying a word...

This wasn't childish behavior. Or, I didn't think it was. Adventurers were the sorts of individuals to use whatever means possible to grasp what they sought, even if those means were a series of childish conducts aimed at having their host take pity upon them and grant them the object of their desires.

You truly are a pathetic individual, Rentt Faina...

But no, I couldn't refuse. I had to have it.

Oh, little airship. You are mine, and mine only. I would never give you to anyone...

Well, jokes aside... But was that truly a joke?

Perhaps... But truly, jokes aside, I turned to Laura, continuing our conversation. Laura seemed a little troubled as the conversation went on.

“Although any Silver-class adventurer worth their salt would not have trouble retrieving the flowers, the journey there poses certain...issues, as I am sure you are aware. Certain clothing and equipment would not survive the trip, in addition to the ever-present threat of poison. With some poisons being slow-acting, it can be difficult to predict and prepare for such occurrences. And then there are the Tarasques... Yes, they can be generally avoided if one carries holy water with them, but there are also cases where individual monsters become incredibly aggressive due to turf wars among their kind. Considering all this, I really wanted to hire a Gold-class adventurer, but alas, one would have to make a trip to the capital for such an appointment...”

Each and every one of Laura’s points made perfect sense. Although adventurers who were capable of all the above existed, they wouldn’t be found in a rural town like Maalt, no matter how wealthy or powerful the client. I, in turn, would be quite a rare find to the Latuules, for it just so happened my abilities matched what they were looking for, and hiring me would be mutually beneficial.

A convincing line of reasoning. But there was something that caught my attention.

“...I understand. Your points. I am not against... Accepting the request. However... The fact that. You need to consume... Dragon Blood Blossom extract. On a regular basis... Perhaps, Laura. You suffer from... Accumulative Miasma Disease?”

Laura seemed taken aback, surprised at my question.

“You know of the name of this disease, Mister Vivie...? Then, the reason you ventured into the swamp in the first place...”

I wanted to answer Laura’s question, but I had an obligation to keep my client’s private information secret. I could tell her I had taken on a request of a similar nature, though I couldn’t divulge any more details than that. And yet, Laura had reached quite the deduction with what little information she had of me—another demonstration of the Latuules’ influence over Maalt. Should they ever desire any kind of information, it would surely make its way to them via one channel or another.

Be that as it might, I would still stand by my principles.

“That. Is all... I can say.”

Laura seemed to understand the meaning behind my words. “I do apologize, it would seem like I have overstepped my bounds. With this, however, I am sure you understand my circumstances, Mister Vivie. While the Accumulative Miasma Disease can be treated permanently in its early stages with the extract of Dragon Blood Blossoms, the disease can no longer be cured once it reaches a terminal stage. I would not suddenly die of it, but in exchange, I do require fresh Dragon-Flower Blood on a regular basis. Hence my request.”

I nodded at Laura’s words. Should I ask her to say any more, I would be the one overstepping her boundaries.

I didn’t know all that much about the Accumulative Miasma Disease—to think it would become permanent at a later stage... Sister Lillian of the orphanage was lucky to have been cured this early.

A single trip to pick some of the blossoms was one thing, but regular trips for a constant supply was another matter altogether. I suppose I may have really done it this time, taking on a request of such magnitude.

In any case, I now understood Laura’s circumstances, and had a good grasp of the request at hand, in addition to the proposed rewards. Accepting this request didn’t seem out of the question, and, yes, the rewards were quite charming.

I turned to Laura, my mind made up.

“I will accept. This request... But I would like. The documentation to be altered to... Reflect. The updated terms that we have... Agreed on. Just now. If that is... All right. With you, Laura. Or perhaps... I should say. Honored client.”

I stuck out my hand, and Laura promptly took it in her own, smiling.

“Most obliged. You would be doing us a great favor. I look forward to working with you from now on, Mister Vivie. Ah, yes, and you may continue to call me Laura.”

I had intended to treat Laura with an additional layer of formality after the

contract was mutually agreed upon, but it seemed like that wasn't necessary.

"I... Understand, Laura. Is this fine?"

At my words, Laura's smile widened ever so slightly, and she nodded, seemingly satisfied.



"...Was that really. All right?" I asked of Isaac as he walked next to me, slowly escorting me toward the manor's gates.

"Yes, she does not quite mind. It is something to be given away eventually, and it made little difference as to when it left her hands. At least, that was what Lady Laura had to say."

Isaac's eyes focused on the same thing as mine, that of a small airship flying through the air. Due to the strength of my mana only keeping it airborne for ten minutes or so, Laura infused the magic crystal within it with some magic of her own, enough to keep it flying for an hour, and maybe a little more. Honestly speaking, the crystal itself was quite the prize, and was more than adequate as a reward. To the Latuules, however, both the airship and the crystal seemed like pocket change.

As for Laura herself, she was now resting in the manor.

Isaac was the only one accompanying me to the gates. Of course, I was no child, and the youth within me wanted to protest, or at least to say that I required no escort. Alas, the rose-hedge maze stood between myself and Maalt; I would only get lost in it again. Now that I knew the secrets of the maze, I could use the method I had previously discovered, though it would still take me quite a bit of time. I would be done by the next sunrise, maybe...

But I had Isaac with me. As he approached, the very walls of the rose-hedge maze seemed to come alive, arranging themselves this way and that to form a clear path for us. It was almost like the maze itself chose to avoid Isaac...and by extension, me.

"What... Trick. Is there to this strange... Mechanism?"

As if responding to my query, Isaac held out his hand, slowly unfurling his

fingers. Resting in his palm was what appeared to be a round rock of some sort. It had a familiar appearance... Come to think of it, it looked somewhat similar to the remote device that was paired with my model airship.

Isaac soon offered an explanation.

“If one holds this and focuses adequately, one is able to reshape the garden to their liking—to a small degree, at least. It would be impossible to perform any...major changes.”

“Major... Changes? How would one. Go about doing something... Like that?”

“Only Lady Laura knows how it is done. I am not privy to the specifics, so to speak.”

I couldn't possibly know if Isaac was telling the truth, but, for now, that mattered little. It was wise to keep it a secret, lest individuals with ill intent attempt to use the maze for their own ends. I wasn't about to tell everyone at the tavern the Latuule family secrets, as rumors wouldn't spread if one remained adequately discreet. Isaac's decision was sound.

“It would seem like we have reached our destination,” Isaac said as we stopped before the manor's gates.

Having the little airship land on the ground, I gave its side a small tap. As if responding to my gesture, it minimized itself, contracting in size. With this, I could hold it comfortably in the palm of my hand. This was one of the many functions Laura had so kindly told me about, and while it had many other hidden functions, I wasn't sure if I would ever have the chance to try them all out.

It being able to enter a more compact form was convenient, at the very least. I didn't exactly want the airship hovering about me in Maalt, nor did I want to carry its fully deployed form while on my errands.

“...The gate guard. Is no longer here.”

“Yes. He stands guard from dawn to dusk. At night, the gates are locked, and the maze becomes extremely complex to ensure no one enters the premises,” Isaac responded.

Personally, it was already a difficult maze, so if it became any more complex than it already was, any unfortunate individual who wandered in would surely be trapped well into the next day.

A truly frightening prospect...

“I have... A question. What should I do... On future visits?”

If possible, I really wanted to steer clear of that maze, especially since I wouldn't be able to pick a second gift.

Isaac seemed a little surprised, as if he meant to tell me before but had apparently forgotten during the course of our short conversation.

“Ah, yes. If the guard is present at the time of your visit, he will contact the manor, upon which I will personally make my way here to escort you in. Rest assured, Mister Vivie.”

A reassuring response. With that, I gave Isaac a polite wave, walking down the path and leaving the manor's gates behind. The next time I visited these grounds, I would arrive with Dragon Blood Blossoms.

It was a melancholic feeling, having to enter the swamp again. If anything, I was now equipped with the high-quality holy water that Isaac had gifted to me.

It can only get easier from here on out...



“Is this it...?”

“Yes.”

That was all we said as we sat, arms folded, in Lorraine's living room. On the table was a singular object: a crystalline vial, housing what appeared to be a crimson-black fluid. Our eyes were fixated on it, and, for a while, neither of us broke the silence.

The vial was none other than the Vampire's blood I had received from Laura the day before. Although I had given Lorraine a summary of what had transpired at the Latuule manor that day, she was somewhat tired and sleepy, which resulted in us postponing the discussion to today.

When I had asked after her out of concern this very morning, Lorraine informed me she had gone a little overboard with her research and studies. Curious, I asked what these topics that kept her awake were, only to learn she had been doing research and writing textbooks in preparation for Alize's eventual magic lessons. She could have easily purchased a commercial textbook of sorts, but Lorraine was known for being overly enthusiastic when it came to certain matters. She apparently insisted on making her own teaching materials—and that was that.

Although she spent quite a while on the text, it would seem like Lorraine had finished what she set out to do. One would assume creating something as specialized as a magic textbook would take a long time, but it turned out Lorraine was only noting down the basics of magic and magecraft, and as such it didn't take all that long. According to Lorraine's ambitions, the series was to eventually comprise of ten volumes, each detailing various theses on the applications of magic.

"If you read them all, you, too, would become a magical scholar, Rentt!" was apparently the inspiration behind the sheer length of her work.

One wonders how a simple conversation on why Lorraine had decided to teach a local orphan the ways of magic spiraled into this; but of course, I had no answers myself.

Alize had mentioned she wanted to become an adventurer... But what would happen if she followed Lorraine's teachings and became a scholar instead? I suppose that wouldn't be a bad thing, for if she did become a good, renowned scholar, she, too, could afford to laze about like Lorraine did, if only because of the amount of coin she would be earning on a regular basis.

At the very least, the hypothetical scholar Alize would be much more well-off than me, a Bronze-class adventurer. Not a bad career choice at all.

If Alize did eventually move on to study at an academy or school, she might even win a national scholarship. Even if Lorraine was just an oddball scholar living in a rural town on the fringe of Yaaran's borders, a recommendation from Lorraine could go a long way.

But Alize wanted to become an adventurer. I reminded Lorraine of that fact,

and of how she was my very first disciple, which, predictably, led to a silly argument between us. In the end, we both settled on the fact Alize was the one who would ultimately make the decision. But for some reason, I felt Lorraine would entice her onto the path of scholar-hood should I ever leave her unattended.

I decided to impart unto Alize all the joys, hopes, and dreams of adventuring, all in good time. Even if mistakes were to be made along the way, there was always the arguably inspirational tale of the man who had spent ten years stuck as a Bronze-class adventurer to tell...

In any case...I turned my attention back to the vial of Vampire blood on the table. One might ask why I chose this, of all things; but, of course, it was done for the sake of my Existential Evolution. For some reason, I felt like a great change would come over me if I absorbed this into myself... Or at least, it felt that way.

“So you are telling me it is something like instinct, Rentt...?” Lorraine asked, casting a sideways glance at me.

I thought for a little bit before giving my answer.

“I don’t... Really. Know. For example... A child wants to play. With an interesting object... Because it looks interesting. One sleeps because one is... Sleepy. It was such a feeling.”

It wasn’t entirely identical, as far as feelings and hunches went; to be precise, it was something akin to an urge. An urge I didn’t feel when I was still human. But I couldn’t express it in any other way, hence my choice of words.

“Well...I cannot say much to that, Rentt. After all, there is no arguing against instinct. However...you have considered the risks, yes? As that Laura Latuule associate of yours said, Vampire blood is known to be a risky treatment for...anything, really. I have read many records of those who attempted such a thing—all of said attempts ended in tragedy, mind you. It is not something you should put to your lips without the appropriate mental preparation.”

Lorraine had a point; I hadn’t exactly conducted much research on Vampires. To begin with, Vampires were quite highly ranked as far as monsters went, and

wielded formidable strength. I didn't come across such creatures easily, nor had I ever stood in front of one. While I had some basic knowledge of Vampires in that regard, having a good grasp of what would happen to people who drank Vampire blood was something that was out of my general expertise. Lorraine, however, seemed to have some knowledge on the matter, as expected of a scholar.

With Lorraine warning me about the dangers involved, I felt my resolve wavering ever so slightly.

"...Maybe I should give. Up on that for now and... Just. Play with this instead..."

Saying so, I withdrew an ornamental, disc-like rock from my pouch, placing its control device in my hands. The model airship, which had been placed gingerly in the middle of the table as if it were a priceless treasure, was soon floating and zipping around in the air.

"You really did take home quite a lot of rare artifacts, no? Even I have not heard of this Latuule family, Rentt. Just by looking at the magical tools they own, however, I can say with confidence they are by no means a normal family." Lorraine's eyes transfixed on the little model airship.

Shifting my consciousness to the airship, I stared down at Lorraine, who had an amusing expression on her face. If I had to say, it was a mix of admiration and exasperation.

It would seem like I had moved the airship a little too close to Lorraine. Come to think of it, I had never been this physically close to her before. In fact...upon closer inspection, Lorraine was wearing somewhat looser clothing today.

This is a bad angle, little airship. I'm almost able to see certain things I shouldn't be seeing...

I recalled my consciousness from the little flying craft, taking a deep breath as I did so. I hadn't yet informed Lorraine of the airship's functions, so she probably shouldn't have noticed anything untoward happening.

However...

"Hm...?" Lorraine tilted her head to one side, as if confused.

“...What, is it?”

“No, it is nothing... Perhaps it was just my imagination. No, no, nothing at all...” Lorraine said, giving a strangely vague answer to my seemingly innocent question.

As if changing the subject, Lorraine continued.

“Even so, have you decided what you would do once you have stopped escaping from reality, Rentt? You said it was necessary for your evolution, no? In that case, you would eventually end up drinking it either way.”

“...I suppose. You are right, but I cannot... Help but feel. A little scared, at the... Thought. Do you not... Have any thoughts, about me just... Drinking this, Lorraine?”

“Of course, if you do not intend to drink it, then that would be that,” Lorraine answered seriously, without any hint of hesitation. “I do not mind if you remain undead forever, Rentt. You could continue staying here, fulfill whatever requests that catch your fancy, and keep living in Maalt—not exactly a bad prospect.

“But,” Lorraine continued after taking a deep breath, “you dislike that, Rentt. That is not what you want—even I know that. I know all about your dreams. No matter what, even if you had no talent, and even if it took years upon years, you would keep aspiring to become a Mithril-class adventurer, yes? Even if you had to grab the metaphorical tiger by the tail and pull off some death-defying stunts, you would walk that path without hesitation all the way to the end. In fact, is this hesitation that you show me not just an act of concern? That is the kind of man you are, Rentt Faina. Am I wrong? If so, then I will support you however I can. Hah! If it comes down to it, I’ll pick up your bones, bury them in a proper grave, and I would even visit every day... Until the day I die, I’ll make sure your silly grave is not forgotten. I would cry as loudly as I could at your funeral—but alas, that is about the extent of what I can do for you, Rentt...”

As expected of Lorraine—she truly understood me.

It was true: although I seemed to hesitate a little, it was all but an act. I had already made up my mind a long time ago. If drinking this would turn me into an invalid, or somehow kill me a second time, then that would be that. If I didn’t

drink it, I would never be able to take that step forward, and my life would just be a parody of living—a dead man walking, so to speak.

Figuratively, of course...

The fact that I was literally a dead man walking didn't escape my attention, but, for now, I chose to let that thought lie. But even so...should such an incident come to pass, it would surely be a handful for Lorraine to deal with.

"...I apologize. If I drink this and... End up doing anything. Strange. You should conjure up your... Spells. And burn me to a crisp."

"I pray it does not come to that..." Lorraine muttered, her response almost sounding like a prayer.

I nodded at Lorraine, finally taking up the crystal vial in my hands. For a while, I stared into Lorraine's eyes, which even now seemed to be filled with unease, and maybe a slight hint of fear.

I twisted the vial's knob off, raised it to my lips, and tipped its contents into my throat.

Chapter 3: A New Existential Evolution

A searing pain radiated across my being the very moment a single drop of blood touched my tongue. For a moment, I thought it would be best to stop drinking this fluid, whatever it was; my instincts, however, didn't feel that way. It was as if I was spurred on by a strange, invisible voice. It was probably just my imagination.

In the case of Existential Evolution, however, I suppose I had no choice but to trust my gut instincts. One could ask for a logical explanation or justification, but I had none.

I tipped the bottle upward, emptying its contents.

Clank.

The empty vial slowly rolled across the top of the table. The vial in question was a valuable magical tool in its own right. I had wanted to put it on the table properly, so it wouldn't roll about or end up cracked in some accident. But I didn't have much of a choice—

A sea of crimson flooded my eyes. Waves of pain and immaterial suffering pounded my entire body.

This is bad... was the very first thing that came to my mind.

But, I didn't feel like I was dying. If anything, I felt like someone, something, was forcibly changing the insides of my body as it saw fit. I felt it, deep in my body, in places or pockets that had once been hollow. It was like all my strength had been robbed from me, and strange things were being packed one by one into my being.

If I had to guess, these strange things were none other than living organs, for I didn't have much in the way of those at all. What felt like a large amount of ants crawling across my body's surface at an astounding speed was probably

none other than the rapid formation of skin.

The entire process was very much like a hangover, or perhaps like when one was sickeningly drunk, except a hundred times worse. My vision continued to twist and turn, and the objects before me seemed to be constantly afflicted by an invisible earthquake only I could feel. I tried my utmost best to calm down, only to discover it was a fruitless endeavor. All around and inside me were complaints; my body's endless tirade of warnings that something wasn't quite right, that something was different. While I understood the process, the feeling didn't stop.

How long will this go on...? Will it even end?

Will it even end?

These thoughts flooded my mind, and with no sense of abating, the torrent soon overwhelmed me.

I see... Did all the people before me who drank Vampire blood feel this way? A truly unsettling, unpleasant taste... Not to mention its effects. I now understood why some died in the process, unable to withstand the strain, while others had just gone mad.

I, however, seemed to be able to maintain my sanity.

Is it because of my strength...?

No, that wasn't quite right—

It was because I was undead.

Ever since becoming undead, I noticed my mental state had taken quite a departure from the time when I still drew breath. While I tried to act like a human as much as I could, and for the most part was seen as human-like by most, something had changed within me. My emotions were still, silent, perhaps even weak compared to when I was still alive.

Through my time as a Skeleton, Ghoul, and eventually a Thrall, I had always somehow managed to keep myself calm, and relatively sane...if only because I actually did feel calm. For some unknown reason, I no longer felt emotions as intensely as I used to.

Even so, certain things still caused hints of emotion to stir within my heart. For example, my dream of becoming a Mithril-class adventurer provoked a reaction from deep within. Maybe that was a given, due to the fact that I had dreamed about it all my life. This was why I remained captivated by that dream, and I felt even more captivated than I ever had been, more so than when I still drew breath.

And yet, my dedication toward this goal could be easily forgotten, like a disappearing thought after one had awoken from a period of slumber. I had to hold onto it tightly, so as to never forget.

This was why I couldn't give up and let go, even with this pain whipping across my body. If I had experienced the same thing while I was still human, I would have most likely lost my mind after a few seconds into the process.

“Ah! Ahhh!!!”

I could hear a voice somewhere far, far away. In my twisting, swirling vision was Lorraine's face. The sight of her put me at ease, if only because I no longer felt a desire for her flesh and blood, unlike when I had evolved into a Thrall.

There was, however, another feeling...

I could feel my consciousness slipping away.

What would happen if I let go...?

Nothing bad, it seemed... Given how I felt, I would simply pass out, as it was difficult to remain conscious in this state for long. Maybe it'd feel much better to just sit back and let go.

While I was concerned about the overall progress of my Existential Evolution, I felt I had safely overcome the most difficult of challenges, namely keeping sane in spite of the pain and not dying mentally to the seemingly endless suffering.

In other ways, I was already sort of dead from the start. So I suppose there would be no problems at all...

I decided to finally let go.

A veil of darkness soon clouded my vision. I felt like I was floating, falling in slow motion as my head slowly approached the ground. Before the impact, I could feel myself being cradled by something—then I blacked out.



Everything seems to be in order, as expected.

That was the first thought that crossed my mind as I slowly regained my senses.

My body felt...conflicted. It seemed to creak in many places.

How would I describe this... It was akin to the feeling when one had a splint put on after breaking a bone. A strange feeling of tightness in the limbs.

What was this...?

It just felt strange, and wasn't too uncomfortable. As I opened my eyes, however, I was shocked by the sheer heaviness of my eyelids.

Come to think of it, I may have never even blinked during my time as a Thrall. I recalled feeling like I had closed my eyes, but I didn't recall seeing eyelids of any kind, not even when I had the mask rearrange itself for a closer inspection.

This feeling I felt now...

A faint light came into focus before my eyes as I slowly opened them. It was the flame of a candle, gently wavering in the darkness.

This abode was equipped with light-emitting magical tools, but I suppose Lorraine dimmed the lights before going to bed. Lorraine had most likely left a dim candle near me to provide light should I awaken.

It appeared I was lying down horizontally—on a bed, to be exact. The first thing I saw upon fully opening my eyes was...the ceiling. The ceiling, and a shadow cast upon it by the flickering, dim candlelight.

A shadow of someone... Someone I knew.

But of course. I turned to my side slowly, glancing over the side of the bed.

There, sitting quietly with a heavy book in her lap, was none other than Lorraine, gently flipping the book's pages.

I stared at her for a while as she continued to read. Her eyes soon darted to the upper left of a new page, in turn noticing my gaze.

"So, you are awake, Rentt."

It seemed like Lorraine had been watching over me all this time. I suppose she had thought I would get up after a while, but ended up reading a book after realizing I would be unconscious for a longer period.

It was already dark out, so considering I had collapsed sometime in the morning, I had slept for most of the day. It was the first time in a long while I had experienced a deep sleep, though it appeared to have ended before I had even enjoyed much of it.

"Ah... What are you reading?"

At my question, Lorraine closed her book with a thump, offering an answer as she ran her fingers across the cover.

"A book that describes the ecology of Vampires—a bit of an encyclopedia, really. The entries detail various types of Vampires, but I suppose even you know of the common differences between them. Thralls, Lesser Vampires, Greater Vampires, and Grand Vampires... Details on them all. Of course, as they increase in strength, some Vampire types begin to defy attempts at classification. The classifications above are not exhaustive in the least—for example, Vampires who had lived for an exceptionally long time were known as Ancient Vampires, and we have the classic Vampire Princesses who appear in folktales and the like. As you can see, you would not be applying the above classifications to these two previous examples."

"I haven't heard of anyone who's met either of those Vampires. Maybe they're nothing more than folktales, then. Even if we took the capabilities of a Grand Vampire into account, its familiars and members of its blood family would only make up a village, at most. It would pose issues if they had somehow infiltrated a town and set up their own Vampire society within it, of course. On another note, this was just a rumor I heard but...a legend in a certain distant country speaks of a Twilight Vampire, who had somehow managed to

usurp the entire kingdom for itself. That, I would say, is a true legend, and nothing more.”

“Do keep in mind legends may still have a grain of truth to them. After all, Rentt, did you not meet a legendary dragon, and was then eaten whole? Perhaps Twilight Vampires do exist—and I could even say that of the Church of the Eastern Sky that they worship in the Eastern lands. Am I wrong?”

Lorraine had pointed out a fatal flaw in my argument. After all, I had personally experienced an encounter with a legend in person. I should, at least, be the last person to say legends were nothing more than folktales.

If I sat down and thought about it, I had already experienced something which exceeded the typical legends I had heard about, that of being eaten by a dragon and summarily turned into a monster. Although one could also become a monster through some strange rituals, or drinking Vampire blood, the chances of success were relatively small.

I had no choice but to nod.

“Well...I suppose so. So...why is it you’re reading that book, again?”

“Why, it’s very simple, Rentt.” Lorraine pointed her finger at me in response to my question. “What I mean to say is...”

“Is...?”

Ah... To congratulate me for my Existential Evolution, I suppose.

A faint smile rested on her lips as she spoke those words.



Existential Evolution? Why would she bring that up...?

I wasn’t really in the business of playing dumb, I had simply not noticed it until Lorraine brought it up—upon which I was asked if even my brains had rotted out during my time as a member of the walking dead. I couldn’t come up with a good retort in return, for Lorraine had a point.

Honestly speaking, however, I felt quite a significant change across my body.

Since I was still very much groggy from my recent awakening, I couldn't grasp the reality of the situation. But...it truly had been a while, to feel groggy, or be able to sleep. Up until this morning, such impulses had been shoved deep into the recesses of my mind.

I possessed a sort of deadly calm during my time as a Thrall. It was almost as if my emotions remained consistently flat, barring when I had undergone my recent evolution. I would force myself to laugh if everyone else around me was laughing, a social cue to remind me that the spectacle before me was hilarious. For some reason, all my past experiences now felt that way.

Painfully hollow, yes...but I suppose that was what it was.

In any case, compared to how I was before, I now felt emotion in a considerably more robust manner. I was still a far cry from how I used to be when I lived, but I felt less...empty than I used to be, if nothing else. The emptiness and calm I felt was less of an Undead attribute, as opposed to, say, the literal emptiness in the cavities of my body. My heart, too, felt figuratively empty.

I could feel my innards now, though. My previously empty body was now appropriately stuffed. I supposed I could tear into my stomach and look...though that didn't sound like a very good idea at all.

In any case, I still had no idea how I looked; if only I had a mirror at hand...

As if reading my mind, Lorraine carried a somewhat large mirror over to where I stood. The mirror had apparently been leaning against the wall all this time—Lorraine had probably prepared it in advance. She didn't have a large mirror before, so maybe this was a recent purchase.

All things considered, it was quite a large mirror, and I felt a little apologetic for having Lorraine haul such a thing around.

"I don't...really see the difference," I said, staring into the mirror, only to be reprimanded by an exasperated Lorraine.

"Take off your robe and mask, you fool! Of course you would look the same if you remained dressed that way, Rentt. Are you so thickheaded?"

I obediently followed her instructions, but...how did Lorraine know I had

evolved, then...?

Lorraine, ever observant, offered an explanation before I could even ask for one.

“I simply removed one of your gloves, Rentt. Surely even you would notice from that alone.”

I see... As expected of Lorraine. Looking up, I saw my gloves neatly placed on a small table in the room.

Looking down at my hands, I was surprised, to say the least. My hands were now smooth and somewhat normal, a sharp contrast to how they looked in the morning. Anyone who had looked at them previously would wonder if they were made of wooden sticks, with dried human flesh clumsily stuck onto them. Ah, yes, my hands were suitably grotesque.

Though my hands were now smooth and somewhat human, they were very pale, as if little, if any, blood ran through them at all. At the very least, they no longer appeared undead or monstrous, and no one would run up to me to say, “Ah, an Undead, yes? May I please have your signature?” But of course, I hadn’t been asked for a signature at any point in time, regardless of if I was a Skeleton, Ghoul, or Thrall...merely because I hadn’t been found out. Even if I were found out, terrible scenarios would no longer happen.

Hmm... An example of a terrible scenario would be, say, a bunch of muscular old men with swords approaching me, saying something along the lines of, “Hey, you’re an Undead, aren’t’cha? That request the guild has goin’ pays well, see... Mind if we take yer head?!” Ugh...

I didn’t want to think about this anymore. But with that said...

“Am I a little more human now?” I muttered.

“Some progress has been made, I would say. To begin with, there are doubts as to if you can ever become fully human again in the first place. For now, it is hard to say. At a glance you seem human-like, sure. In any case, Rentt, off with your mask and robe—I cannot make a value judgment without seeing it for myself.”

Lorraine’s response seemed a little troubled at best, but she was right. As

always, it was foolish to expect one's hopes to become reality; being able to distinguish between the two was important at times like these.

It was as Lorraine said: no one knew if I would ever be able to return to being human. But the shock of this revelation didn't seem to impact me as severely as I thought it would. Maybe it was due to Lorraine's declaration that she didn't mind if I stayed undead eternally. At the very least, I didn't have to spend my entire life alone, living as some sort of outcast monster.

"All right, all right..." I said, removing my robes.

I had some clothing under my robes, but they were cheap garments at best. More accurately, I was only wearing undershirts and pants. I had done this on purpose, primarily due my body being full of holes at one point. If I had worn little in the way of clothing, I feared my flesh would fall out if it had the chance.

Realistically speaking, I could easily fix any afflicted areas with healing magic or divinity. If something did unfortunately fall out, it wouldn't pose too much of a problem. It was a matter of personal preference, really. Even if it made little visual difference, I was diligent with the upkeep of my body, much like how certain young ladies were terribly passionate about moisturizing their skin. As a result of this obsession of theirs, Slime fluid now commanded a hefty price—but who am I to tell passionate young ladies to stop doing what they were doing. If I really did say something like that in public, there was no telling when or how I would get mobbed in a dark alleyway. In many cases, it was better to hold one's tongue—such were the state of affairs in the world.

"Hmm..." Lorraine nodded slowly as she stared at my now-exposed body.

"Do you see any visible differences...?"

"Well...no, not really, at least not from the front. It has been a while since I got a good look, though... You are built, as expected. But of course, with all the training you have been doing, that much was to be expected... I do not see many changes. Why not see for yourself, and tell me if you feel any different?" said Lorraine, after giving me a look-over.

Hmm... Are there any differences?

I stared at my reflection in the mirror. Unfortunately, there were no marked

changes at all. Up until now, my body had been relatively dry and sadly full of holes. I could hardly remember much of how I had looked in life, but maybe this was close to it.

The main difference was that I was exceedingly pale. I was even mildly blue in some parts, probably from a lack of blood. But a stranger who would see my body as it was now wouldn't immediately jump to the conclusion that I was an Undead. Personally, that seemed enough for me at this point.

I now had skin, and no longer had holes in my body... That was a most magnificent thing indeed.

The feelings I had experienced when I awoke were probably the tautness of my newly-formed skin. It hardly had any wrinkles, a sharp contrast to how I had been before. It was like I had just been born.

“Cold...”

A chill on my back—a little alarming, no doubt, but it was only Lorraine's hand, gently stroking the skin on my back.

“... Skin that most young ladies would be envious of, yes.” She nodded, seemingly satisfied. “This is no longer regeneration...more of a new birth, a new creation of skin—hence the smoothness. You are a man, of course, and above that an adventurer who has lived a considerably difficult life, plumbing the labyrinths and all that. Your skin was rough before, but now...”

In the past, Lorraine looked after me when I had gotten injured, and looked upon my naked upper-body plainly, in addition to touching it to treat my injuries. I suppose my skin was much smoother now than how she remembered it to be.

“Not a single wound or scar, either...” Lorraine continued. “You had an old wound up here before, no? That one big slash across your back... Left quite the mark, that one. It is all gone now, though.”

As Lorraine said, all the scars I had from my previous life were now completely gone. I suppose my body literally reconstructed itself after I had become an Undead, explaining their disappearance. Either way, I couldn't be absolutely sure, but it wasn't like I really cared about my scars.

Lorraine interrupted me before I could express my opinions on the matter.

“None of your old scars remain...not even this one here. Adventurers like to have scars of this nature, no...? Well, nothing can be done now that they are gone...” she said, as if mourning the loss of a great artifact.

She seemed more depressed at the revelation than I ever could be. Maybe it was like how children felt when the stitches on a well-loved soft toy disappeared.

“Well, not too many changes here and there, really, other than these small wings on your back...” Lorraine continued, in a most casual fashion. “Nothing much else of note, no.”

She delivered the supposedly surprising revelation with a deadpan tone of voice.



“Wings?”

I tilted my head to one side, somewhat theatrically from the shock. Lorraine did the same in response.

“Did you really not notice, Rentt?” she asked plainly.

It probably wasn’t Lorraine’s intent to keep silent on the matter. If I were to guess, she had simply assumed I knew about the supposed wings on my back. Even so...

“Why would I just turn and look at my back? I can’t really be expected to notice, no?” I said to Lorraine, feeling a little incredulous about the entire situation.

“Well, they were moving—or, twitching—ever so slightly before, Rentt. I had just assumed you were consciously moving them. My apologies. So, they move subconsciously, on their own accord? Like eyelids, perhaps...? Ah, yes. Another mirror. I should fetch one...It is probably difficult to turn around and stare at your back. I have just the thing... Hold on.”

Saying so, Lorraine dug around a few of the shelves in her room before pausing and fishing out a mirror.

Even though I was temporarily living here, this was Lorraine's home. In addition, I hardly had many worldly possessions of my own, and most of what remained in this room's shelves and storage chests were Lorraine's possessions.

Holding up the mirror she'd found, Lorraine stood behind me, reflecting an image of my back into the mirror I was facing. With this, I could see my back, and reflected in the mirror were none other than...

"Wings, I suppose..."

"Yes, Rentt. Wings. Flight membranes is also an acceptable term to use—whatever you wish to call them, really. Exactly as I told you, no?"

Wings... The protrusions on my back were unmistakable. Sprouting somewhere down my shoulder blades from the middle of my back were two symmetrical wings, with one on the right and the other on the left. They weren't feathered, not like those of a bird. They were more like the leathery, thin wings of a bat, membranes and all. Although they were folded up into a somewhat compact shape, I discovered I could move them a little if I put my mind to it.



Witnessing this, Lorraine seemed satisfied at the spectacle.

“Ah, so you can move them on your own. What was that all about just now, then...?”

Lorraine placed her hands on my newly-sprouted appendages, apparently inspecting their membranes and gently stretching them out. It was ticklish, but Lorraine knew best; she was a respectable scholar in the field of monster research, after all.

Allowing Lorraine to thoroughly inspect my body contributed to my own knowledge of my capabilities. I had little choice but to accept her inquisitive behaviors for the time being...

“Hey now, Rentt. You should not really be trying to escape...” Lorraine said, somewhat flatly.

“Escape? I don’t recall making any attempts to do so.”

“Ah, but you are doing exactly that, Rentt. Not your body, perhaps, but your wings certainly are. Or, should I call them flight membranes instead? Either way, I do not have strong convictions about what terms I should be using to describe your flight mechanisms, so I suppose either term is fine. With that being said, keep your wings still. They are escaping from my hands, fluttering this way and that.”

Willing myself to keep them still, I stood in relative silence.

“Good. Not fidgeting around this time, I see,” Lorraine said in a satisfactory tone of voice.

Yet Lorraine still seemed puzzled by what she had seen a short while ago. Turning her head all over, she mumbled, largely to herself.

“Why did it...just now. Hmm. I see. Maybe it is...”

Lorraine began touching my wings in a questionable manner, almost as if she had intended to tickle me. Glancing up at the mirror, I caught a glimpse of Lorraine’s expression—of course she had a slight smile on her face.

It appeared that Lorraine was purposefully tickling my wings.

Be that as it may, I wasn't one to give in. Steeling myself, I willed my wings not to move, and, for a while, that was all I thought about. Even if it was ticklish, I could tolerate this. If there was a will, there was a way, even if she had kept it up for hours on end.

Yes, hours...on hours...on end. *No... No problem... Ugh! It's too much!*

With that, my struggle for independence from involuntary wing twitching ended. And at that very moment...

"Oh! There it is. Did you move your wings consciously just now, Rentt?"

"No. It was ticklish, but I held out as long as I could... Well, that was what I wanted to do."

I could no longer tolerate Lorraine's devilish hand movements toward the end of my short-lived resistance, but it was true I hadn't consciously moved my wings at any point in time.

"It is as I expected, then." Lorraine nodded upon hearing my response. "You are able to move them of your own accord... But they also move involuntarily from time to time. Your wings kept fluttering here and there as I tried to tickle them, as if they had a will of their own... At times, it almost seemed like two separate entities were fighting for control over these wings. You gave up at the end, yes?"

"Yes. It was a little too much for me to handle."

"At that point in time, the subconscious mind wrested back control of your wings from your conscious self. That was why your wings were fluttering away from me on their own accord...like the tail of an animal, if you will."

It seemed Lorraine had arrived at quite the strange conclusion. Did she mean to say she could read my current state of mind and emotions just by glancing at the movements of these wings? Even if Lorraine's observations didn't go that far, the fact that my wings moved on their own accord at times presented several problems of their own, one being that I'd no longer be able to hide my thoughts very well. On another note, it would be impossible to walk around the streets of Maalt with a pair of wings sticking out of my back.

Hm...?

Yes, there was something else to this... Another problem, perhaps.

“Wouldn’t it be somewhat terrifying for my wings to just stick out of my back, or move on their own underneath my clothes?”

“We shall see.”

Lorraine fetched what appeared to be some cheap clothing, apparently made of linen. Putting the clothes on, I turned, allowing Lorraine to inspect my back.

“Well?”

“Hmm... Well, yes, this is quite terrifying indeed. It appears that something on your back is bulging out and fidgeting about. Most uncomfortable to look at.”

I couldn’t see it myself, but I could imagine the horror it would instill in the average Maaltesian. After all, there were some monsters that had a nasty habit of laying their eggs inside humans, and I myself had seen such gruesome spectacles in my long adventuring career. The surface of their skin would move and undulate, as if a thousand earthworms were tunneling through them. Truly a revolting and horrifying sight. Lastly...they would breach the skin, bursting through the host in an unfortunately explosive spectacle.

One of the most grotesque memories I could recall from my previous life. In fact, it was probably one of the top three.

The other two grotesque memories were the rotting pieces of my body I had seen during my tenure as a Ghoul and a Thrall. To be able to see one’s organs—one’s dried organs, at that—was gruesome. There was simply no way around that.

I have, for better or worse, gotten used to the sight of them as of late... But now, an equally grotesque thing was on my back? No. This wouldn’t do at all...

No. This is terrible!

Lorraine, who had been observing me the entire time, eventually offered a suggestion.

“Come to think of it, Rentt... Could you not simply fold those wings? Most monsters are able to do so, retracting their wings back into their bodies or what have you.”

“I suppose you’re right. Some monsters are capable of such... But how would I go about doing it?”

“As if I would know the answer! Start by imaging it in your mind, Rentt. Perhaps they will move with a strong thought or two...?”

For a brief moment, our eyes met, and I could discern from Lorraine’s gaze we were both of the same opinion. Yes, this *was* a silly conversation, but one we unfortunately had to have. Realistically speaking, there was no real way around this, given that I was the only one in the vicinity who was in such strange circumstances. It wasn’t like I could simply look at someone else for inspiration on what to do.

In any case, it would be wise to follow Lorraine’s directions for now.

I closed my eyes and thought about folding my wings back into my body—and with a sudden force, I felt something push me lightly on the back.

“Oooh!” Lorraine, who had been watching all this time, let out a little cheer. She sounded considerably impressed as she patted my back. “You did it, Rentt! They’re folded up neatly now.”

Rolling up the linen shirt I was wearing, Lorraine stared at my back, apparently not yet finished with her inspection.

“Hm... Yes. I can no longer see them, Rentt. Hmm... I was just beginning to have some fun with them, too. I suppose these behaviors are within acceptable parameters...” Lorraine nodded, mostly to herself. “Does it hurt anywhere, Rentt?”

“There is a feeling of pressure,” I responded truthfully, “as if my organs are being pressed into me. Even so, I suppose my wings wouldn’t just pop—”

“BOO!!!” Lorraine shouted, suddenly and loudly.

I was, of course, surprised. How unlike her! I had a good mind to demand an answer from Lorraine; however, I was greeted by an exasperated look when I turned around. Lorraine didn’t seem very amused.

And all I wanted was to assure Lorraine that my wings wouldn’t fly out on their own accord...

“No good with surprises, I see...”

Lorraine raised the mirror she held, and reflected within were my unfurled, outstretched wings. To make things worse, they weren't relaxed and somewhat folded, like they were before, but were wide open. I could only imagine what would happen if something startled me on the street. Would wings suddenly burst out from my back, followed by high-pitched screams from the townsfolk about the devil, or something similar?

It was a good thing we discovered this early... Yes, quite a good thing...



“Well. I suppose there was nothing we could do about this... Try your best to not get surprised often, Rentt,” Lorraine said, in a somewhat casual tone of voice.

How terrible.

Although I attempted to find a solution with Lorraine, the problem at hand seemed inherently unsolvable; that was the impression I got from our conversation. But with that said, being mentally resilient against surprises wasn't a skill I could gain overnight... The most I could do was fold my wings up immediately after I'd be surprised, and maybe being conscious about keeping my wings folded throughout the day. These seemed to be the two most realistic solutions to the problem.

“It'd be better if I could do something about it by sheer willpower alone...”

“Well, Rentt, you would have to pay more attention in Maalt, at the very least. It would be a little easier in the labyrinths as you explore alone, with no other adventurers to stare at your back. Now, even if someone did see, you could simply claim it was an original magic trick of yours, or some other creative excuse you could come up with.”

Not much of an explanation or excuse, really, but I suppose I wouldn't have much of a choice in such a situation.

Thinking about it calmly, even if my wings pierced the clothes I was wearing, they would most probably not breach my robes. After all, my robes were strong enough to even defend against attacks by monsters. No matter how

enthusiastic or violent my wings decided to get, a simple unfurling wouldn't measure up to an intentional strike. Taking that into account, my robes would most likely remain intact.

"On another note, Rentt. Those wings of yours... Do you think you are now capable of flight?" Lorraine was still staring at my back.

While I had been worried about the strange appendages that suddenly sprouted from my back, it was entirely possible they had beneficial functions of their own. Honestly speaking, even I was curious about what these wings could do.

For starters, wings were for flying, and most of what I had seen in my life suggested as much. Of course, there were some flightless birds in these lands. While they had wings of their own, they were ignored in some capacity, hence the flightlessness of these creatures.

"I suppose I should try it out..."

I removed my shirt and spread out my wings. They weren't large by any means, not even when spread out; a simple glance was enough to inform me these wings were physically incapable of flight.

But being able to fly through the air was a sort of romance in and of itself. As I was unable to use flight magic of any kind, an airship or these wings were the only possible ways I could soar up in the skies. So I flapped my wings as hard as I could, eager to see if I could fulfill my dreams of flight.

And yet...

"I see. Perhaps we should verify some other aspects of your new appendages," Lorraine said, without the slightest hint of mercy as she observed my futile flapping.

It was plain to see what she meant: I was physically incapable of flight. Try as I might, my feet hardly lifted off the ground. All I could do was whip up a slight gust, sending waves of air through the room.

"No... Not yet. I just have to put more power into it! There has to be some hidden powers in these wings!"

I intensified my movements, refusing to give up.

Lorraine nodded sagely. "Useful in the summer, no doubt. Whips up a good breeze, you see."

A cold statement.

Confound it!

Was this all I could do? Was that all these wings were capable of?

No. That can't possibly be true! I should be capable of flight. I should be able to soar through the open skies!

Was there something missing? Was that why I couldn't fly at this point in time? What was this mysterious...something?

Hmm. I recalled that some dragons weren't capable of flight just because they had wings... Wings alone couldn't hope to lift up such a heavy body...or something along those lines? If so, wouldn't I be in a similar situation?

I turned to Lorraine for answers.

"Well... Jokes aside, it is often said monsters with huge body masses often take flight with the aid of mana or spirit reserves. I do not know the specifics and exact details, of course, but it would be worth trying, if nothing else."

Lorraine had just been fooling around prior, so she now had a legitimate suggestion for me.

I suppose that was to be expected, since Lorraine was the type to think of all possible solutions to a problem. Given her character, it wouldn't be strange if she had already arrived at this conclusion before I even thought about it.

Nodding at Lorraine, I began infusing mana into my wings.

"Ah... As I expected..." Lorraine said, a hint of awe in her voice as she continued staring in my general direction.

As evident from her reaction, I had lifted off the ground and was now floating in mid-air. It seemed like the experiment was a success, and infusing mana into my wings was the right approach.

However...

“Can you not go any higher, Rentt?”

As per Lorraine’s question, the height I was flying at was somewhat low—at most, one could fit about two thick books between my feet and the ground. Maybe it would be more appropriate to say I was floating, as opposed to actually flying.

It wasn’t difficult to understand why Lorraine said what she did, for even I felt the same way. To me, flight was about soaring freely through the open skies, and maybe even making a few dramatic turns. There was no way I could be satisfied with this meager degree of elevation.

I tried many things to increase my elevation, from strengthening my mana flow to clenching and flexing various parts of my body. Alas, nothing I did seemed to affect the height at which I could fly.

“I guess this is it...”

Lorraine gave my back a few solid slaps as I slouched my shoulders in disappointment.

“There, there. At the very least, you can avoid traps on the ground with this. Not too bad, no? After all, pitfalls are the king of traps—the simplest, yet the deadliest, when it comes to taking adventurers’ lives.”

Lorraine was obviously consoling me. Even so, she did have a point. While labyrinths were often chock full of traps, the deadliest of all these complicated contraptions was none other than the simple pitfall trap. They often showed up in large numbers, and their simple construction made them difficult to detect.

Traps that activated when they were stepped on were all too commonplace; perhaps a spear would fly out from a hole in the ground, or an arrow from the crevices in a wall. Maybe a more ingenious mechanism was in place, and some unseen hazard would attack the adventurer should they lift their foot. Despite these, one could get used to these sorts of traps, and eventually see through their treachery.

A pitfall trap, however... It could exist anywhere, and it was difficult to detect. Even I had almost fallen prey to them on numerous occasions...and a few times, had actually fallen into said pits. I had fortunately been able to recover

somewhat before completely falling in, such as swinging a grappling hook on a rope I had luckily brought with me. Of course, a single mistake in such a situation would undoubtedly lead to death. Not exactly the most cheerful thing to recall, but, now that I had these wings, I could at least avoid these terribly simple death traps.

“Be that as it may...if possible, I’d still like to fly at greater heights... To soar through the skies...”

In my sorrow, I reached for the remote of the little airship. As expected, it took off quickly and elegantly—I was a far cry from its refined motions of flight.

The little airship flew freely through the air.

Ah...yes. This is what I want to achieve...

I bowed my head slightly, suddenly overcome by a deep sense of loss. Lorraine quickly reassured me, a hint of worry in her voice.

“Wait, wait. There has to be more to it, Rentt. You still have not tried some things! How about spirit or divinity, and not magic, the next time?”

Lorraine had a point: it was worth trying.

There was still hope. I wasn’t yet locked out of the open skies.

Solemnly, I had the little airship land before putting the remote away. Returning to the center of the room, I unfurled my wings once more. With Lorraine’s nod, I infused all my spirit into my wings.

Yes. This has to be it!

A strange sound filled my ears; a whine? Before I could properly identify this sound, I realized my head had been violently thrust into the wall.

“R-Rentt! Are you all right?! Rentt!”

Lorraine’s alarmed voice echoed into my ears as my head remained half-buried in the wall of her abode.



There was no damage...to my head.

Again: no damage whatsoever.

“What was that...?” I said as I slowly pulled my head out of the wall.

The structure crumbled slightly in response, with bits of the wall tearing down and falling onto my face. Maybe it was the sheer speed at which I flew into it, but bits of the wall had been reduced to powder, covering my mask with a thin, white film.

“Those are my words, Rentt... Are you really all right? You went headfirst into the wall at quite the velocity.”

Lorraine wore an expression of something between shock and astonishment across her face. If I were her, I would have worn a similar expression, as well. We were in the middle of a harmless flight experiment, after all; one doesn't hurtle across enclosed spaces faster than the eye can see on a daily basis. To make things worse, I had half-buried my head in the wall of her abode.

“Hmm... Yes, actually. Maybe it's because of the Existential Evolution, but I don't really feel any pain at all. I seem largely uninjured,” I said, inspecting my body as I responded to Lorraine's concerned query.

“I can see that, Rentt. You are indeed uninjured—not that I can say the same for my house, however. I should get about to fixing that now...”

Lorraine stood in place, weaving a spell under her breath. In a few seconds, the damaged wall slowly covered its gaping wound, and before long it was whole once more.

It was a simple wall, made of bricks and the like, so it didn't require complicated magical repairs. But spells used to mend holes and other damages weren't as simple as attack magic. They were highly complicated and technical spells, requiring a fair amount of knowledge from the caster. Lorraine seemed to specialize in spells of this nature, and was able to repair the damage without even lifting a finger.

Most individuals who were well-versed in spells of this nature were mages belonging to one architectural guild or another, and they often sold their services to nobles and other rich clients in the capital. Needless to say, such mages were a relatively rare sight.

It was by no means easy to learn the spells in question, and even if one did

grasp the basics, actual application of such magics was difficult at best.

But Lorraine, on the other hand... She didn't seem to have too many issues on her part. Even if she stopped being a scholar one day, there was no doubt she could easily make a living in other, more varied fields.

My future, in comparison, was slightly more dull. What would I do if I ever stopped adventuring? Become a staff member of the adventurer's guild, perhaps? If memory served, Sheila had said something of the sort. But I didn't have any intentions of returning, of course.

"And that is that, as far as the wall goes. Now, if I had to guess...that was you infusing spirit into your wings, yes?"

Lorraine turned to me as she finished up the last bits of her repairs. I nodded in response.

"That's right. I infused a large amount of mana into my wings, but could only float at a low altitude. I assumed it would be safe to infuse an equally large amount of spirit at once, as well..."

"Sometimes, I am not quite sure if you think too much, or if you do not think at all, Rentt... Experimenting slowly would not exactly kill you. Why the rush?"

Lorraine was reprimanding me with that exasperated expression of hers, one I had become familiar with over the years.

But it was as she said: I should have infused a small amount into my wings as a precaution. I had been consumed by my lust for flight, and my haste eventually caused a minor accident. I couldn't refute Lorraine's points.

"I'll be more careful next time."

"Will you now, Rentt? I sure hope you do remember. How about slowly infusing spirit into your wings this time?"

I nodded obediently at Lorraine's suggestion. It would be a problem if I flew off randomly in some strange direction again.

I positioned myself in the center of the room. Maybe it would have been wise to face my back toward the unfortunate wall, for I had no way of knowing where I would fly to next. Either way, it was safe to assume I wouldn't be

creating any more holes in Lorraine's home as long as I didn't infuse an unreasonable amount of spirit into my wings all at once.

Surprisingly, a small amount was enough to generate a notable amount of forward thrust with my wings—as Lorraine said, I had drastically overdone it previously.

My thrust velocity increased with the intensity of my spirit infusion—somewhat straightforward. I soon reached a safety threshold, however. Any more and I would be carrying out unauthorized renovations.

It seemed difficult to conduct any more tests indoors. Lorraine, who was observing my movements, had yet another suggestion to give.

“Hmm. So, spirit generates thrust, and mana allows you to float freely... Could you not move with an infusion of mana alone? Or is that not possible?”

“I wouldn't say that... Maybe a little.”

To demonstrate, I let the spirit in my wings fade, then infused them with mana once more. I floated a little to the left and right, though they were considerably slow movements. But I was still moving. If I had to say, I was floating from side to side at a walking pace.

“Would you not be able to fly if you floated with mana, and then pushed yourself forward with spirit, Rentt?”

“I haven't tried that. I suppose I should...here.”

Utilizing both forces would be somewhat difficult from a technical perspective, but I was able to do something similar with my mana-spirit Fusion Arts. Of course, one who had trained their skills in a more orthodox fashion would probably regard my methodologies as strange. Personally, however, I was used to my haphazard applications, so it was completely possible for me to infuse my wings with both spirit and mana at the same time.

I had my concerns, like suddenly flying off in a random direction again. The effects of mana-spirit Fusion Arts were also concerning, to say the least, especially given such an attack with my blade caused the internal organs of my target to violently implode... In that vein, I would very much prefer my wings didn't do the same.

I should be very careful...

And so it came to be that I began infusing small amounts of spirit and mana into my wings, in a somewhat fearful and apprehensive manner. Surprisingly, I didn't explode, nor did any part of me implode. In fact, I had moved forward a considerable distance, and was now able to alter my speed by changing the amount of spirit in my wings. This was pretty good.

No, very good! I'm flying!

At least, I felt like I was flying. In reality, I was still floating a short distance off the ground. Nonetheless, the excitement I felt was genuine.

With a strong burst of spirit, I could fly to significant heights, then slowly glide down from such altitudes. Strictly speaking, I was gliding more than I was flying. Then, a sudden understanding dawned over me.

I've evolved! Existential Evolution has caused me to evolve into a flying squirrel!!!

Wait...

That wasn't quite what I wanted to say. Not even close.

Why did I evolve from a Thrall into a flying squirrel? That made no sense. And why hadn't I imploded yet...? I concentrated, and I soon discovered the answer in the flow of energies coursing through my wings.

To be precise, they were separate streams of energy unlike the volatile mix I had used in my mana-spirit Fusion Art attacks. My bat-like wings were comprised of soft flight membranes and a more rigid supporting structure. According to Lorraine's scientific observations, the membranes were flight membranes, and the stiff parts were phalanx bones. Regardless, mana coursed through these membranes, and spirit through my bones—in separate streams, of course.

Curious, I attempted infusing spirit into the membranes and vice versa, but it didn't seem physically possible. I suppose the two shouldn't really be mixed on a daily basis, primarily because they would explode otherwise. Were my wings designed with these considerations in mind? Not that I knew much of monster physiology.

I explained my thoughts to Lorraine.

“Hoh, most interesting, Rentt... But yes, of course, considering the implications of Fusion-Arts in physiology... Logically sound, yes. I cannot offer any concrete statements until after I have performed a thorough examination. But with this, it seems like you can fly with those wings of yours. You see, Rentt? Not so useless after all. All’s well that ends well.”

A soft smile illuminated her features. She continued.

“The last experiment would be divinity...”

Having infused my wings with both mana and spirit, I suppose this was the logical thing to check off the proverbial list.

Divinity was, in many ways, a special ability. It was potent, but the nature of one’s divinity also varied, depending on the entity that had conferred the blessing to begin with. In my case, I was blessed by some spirits that had inhabited a broken-down shrine I was compelled to fix. From what I had seen, they were plant spirits of some kind—well, if Clope’s observations were anything to go by. To channel such divinity through my monstrous wings, however... There were far too many variables in place for me to think of any plausible precedents or possibilities as to what may happen.

Regardless, I still had to try it. It would be crucial knowledge to have, especially in life-or-death situations. Knowing one’s tools were just as important as knowing when and where to use them—one of the many basic tenets of adventuring, and one most veteran adventurers were familiar with.

With a deep breath, I calmed my mind, mentally preparing myself for what may pass. Slowly but surely, I felt the divinity flow into my wings. And then...

“Beautiful... Truly...”

Strange words, especially from Lorraine’s lips.

“Eh?”

“Well...you see, Rentt. Your wings are...glowing.”

It goes without saying that even I was surprised at those words.



What does Lorraine mean? My wings are literally glowing?

That was the first thing that crossed my mind as I processed Lorraine's words. I turned around regardless, if only to affirm what she said, then promptly stared at my reflection in the mirror.

It was exactly as she said: unlike how they were mere moments ago, the wings on my back were glowing, shrouded in a bright, white light. It wasn't a harsh light; certainly not the glow of attack magics or one that conveyed hostility. If anything, it was gentle and soft, with specks of light falling from them like flakes of silent snow.

I could see why Lorraine said as such. The light shrouding my wings was fantastical, almost unbelievable in its nature.

Now, while that was all well and good, I had one qualm with my newly-glowing wings.

"Beautiful...perhaps. But what exactly does this mean...?" I pondered, tilting my head as I continued to think.

Infusing mana and spirit generated lift and thrust respectively. It was an easily observable phenomenon, but this was something else altogether.

Divinity was a strong force, and much more potent than mana and spirit. While I had been hoping for a more marked and dramatic effect, it seemed like infusing my wings with divinity just made them glow. I felt a great sense of disappointment.

What was I to do with the fact that I could now become a human torch at will? If I were to compare a human torch with a flying squirrel or any of its evolutionary counterparts, the latter would surely be more useful. I greatly preferred flight over a strange light source.

"Well, Rentt, it would certainly make you easier to spot in the dark... Hm? This..." As if noticing something, Lorraine turned away, leaving her unfinished joke hanging in the air.

Following her gaze, I realized she was staring at none other than a pot of herbs I had left in a corner. It was placed in the sunniest spot of my borrowed room, and I often used the plants for culinary purposes, occasionally even

preserving food with their leaves. What was so out of the ordinary about a potted plant I cultivated in my spare time?

Lorraine remained silent, observing the plant intensely.

“Rentt...I think your plant is...growing.”

It looked a little bigger than it was just a moment ago, but I could argue it was nothing more than an optical illusion of sorts. Lorraine, as if reading my mind, promptly strode over to the pot, picking it up and exposing it to the light of my wings. Almost immediately, the herbs in the pot began growing at a rapid pace, stretching and trailing this way and that.

“This...”

“So, if you infuse divinity into your wings, Rentt, plants around you grow at a faster rate! But...I am not quite sure how to interpret this observation...”

Lorraine seemed pleased at the fact her hypothesis turned out to be correct, but she soon caught herself in the midst of her own celebration, and was once again deeply immersed in thought.

I echoed Lorraine’s sentiments: was there any meaning to my wings behaving in such a manner? Alas, even I had no answers.

“Maybe I could fly around in the skies, occasionally stopping to bless people with a bountiful harvest?”

“I see. How noble of you, Rentt. Are you saying you would stop adventuring and instead explore the possibilities of becoming a mobile fertilizer merchant?”

No. That really didn’t seem like a very appealing career.

But I couldn’t deny I was apparently capable of such.

Even I had heard rumors of those who had been blessed by spirits or gods of the land, and how they were capable of feats similar to what I had just done. Those blessed by the land are promised an eventually bountiful harvest, but their fields would still have to be naturally cultivated and harvested after a period of time. In my case, I seemed capable of accelerating a plant’s growth, skipping that waiting period completely. It was undoubtedly a useful ability.

If I were to enter a church or religious organization somewhere in these lands,

I would surely be worshiped as a harvest saint, or something along those lines. Those who didn't think too highly of me, on the other hand, would most likely think of me as some sort of on-demand fertilizing service.

It goes without saying, though, that I had no interest whatsoever in the agricultural trades. As I was so fond of reminding myself, my aim was to ultimately become a Mithril-class adventurer.

Predictably, I turned to Lorraine and informed her as such: "I have no intentions of quitting. But...I suppose there must be some more uses I haven't thought of yet..."

"Well, even I could assume as much. Maybe... Hm. Yes, why not..."

Maybe Lorraine felt like she should take responsibility for suggesting I become a magical farmer.

As if coming up with an idea, Lorraine reached into her robes, and was holding something in the palm of her hand.

Now, what could that be...?

"What are you planning to do with that knife, Lorraine...?"

"Ah, nothing much, you see. Just...this." Lorraine casually responded as she nicked the top of her thumb with the instrument's blade.

It was a familiar motion to Lorraine, visible in how she handled the knife. This was probably to be expected, given how magical contracts and certain alchemical techniques often required a drop or two of blood. Lorraine, for her part, hardly seemed bothered by the small cut on her thumb. In addition, Lorraine had been providing me with vials of blood as of late, so I suppose she would be used to the act now more than ever.

What I didn't understand was *why* Lorraine had cut her thumb. As if responding to my curious gaze, Lorraine simply raised her injured appendage to my glowing wings.

"Gone, as expected."

Lorraine showed her thumb to me.

"I see. Your thumb is completely healed...so I guess the light has curative

capabilities.”

“One way to put it, yes. Is this not worth celebrating, Rentt? Not only can you fertilize their fields, you can also heal the wounds and ailments of the hardworking farmers!”

Another one of her jokes, I hope; even so, Lorraine had a point. We had just discovered another potential use to these shining wings.

It was reasonable to assume flying over a certain area while having divinity infused into these wings would heal the people dwelling within. While a priest or priestess-saint blessed with curative powers would easily perform such feats, I was previously only able to heal one person at a time. A small improvement on my part, but an improvement nonetheless.

“A plain effect...but it is much better than having none at all.”

“Quite. Think of the possibilities, Rentt! They might even worship you if you portray yourself right! You do glow, after all. Just claim you are a messenger of the gods, or something along those lines.”

Yet another one of Lorraine’s jokes, I suppose...but her statement had a ring of truth to it. However, the mere thought of being worshiped and making such claims terrified me. I didn’t wish for such strange kinds of attention, at the very least. I would have to choose when to use this ability somewhat carefully.

“But then again, I am a solo adventurer... There doesn’t seem to be many opportunities for me to use this, Lorraine.”

A lonely statement, but one that was true: more often than not, I adventured alone. What would a solo adventurer like me do with an area-of-effect healing skill such as this?

Lorraine didn’t seem to agree.

“I would not necessarily say that, Rentt. Do you not recall the times where monsters multiply unnaturally? Adventurers head out en masse in response, no? Those capable of wide-area healing skills are treasured, yes? But of course, such events were always answered with a Compulsory Request by the guild...”

Lorraine was referring to the occasional multiplication of monsters around

towns. To immediately dispose of the threat, adventurer guilds often mobilized all their members to thin the numbers. Such encounters often resemble miniature wars due to the sheer numbers involved, and adventurers skilled in healing techniques were often highly valued by the guild. These adventurers capable of healing magic or divinity were rare, and most could only tend to one person at once. As such, any adventurer who had the ability to heal individuals in a given area were treated as treasures in their own right.

Under normal circumstances, adventurers could bow out of Compulsory Requests if they had a good reason for it, or if they weren't crucial to the effort. An area-of-effect healer, however, would most likely be dragged to the battlefield regardless of their personal opinions.

I suppose this ability of mine would have to be hidden, then...

But...that would go against my conscience as an adventurer. Even if I weren't human, I would still answer the guild's call should such an event ever come to pass. If I ignored it, there might be a chance that monsters would make their way into Maalt, so regretting my choice then would be far too late. In fact, I now looked more human than ever, so I wouldn't be hunted down immediately based on my appearance alone.

I suppose I would still run into issues if there were an adventurer in their midst with a good eye. The most I could do was not stand out very much—or at least, that was what I thought.

"I would give up and go along with the guild if that ever comes to pass... But I'd greatly prefer if we could do something about this glow..."

Even if I were to utilize my newly-attained healing skills, having a pair of glowing wings on my back was a little too much for me.

For a while, I held my head in exasperation, searching for some sort of solution. Given how I was now, being treated as some sort of divine angel was the last thing I wanted.



"With this, we have performed all the applicable tests in regards to your wings," Lorraine announced, an expression of great satisfaction on her face.

On Lorraine's instructions, I attempted to fly while infusing my wings with divinity. As per my previous experiments, it seemed like divinity and mana each flowed through different structures within my wings, and, thankfully, no Fusion-Art mishap related explosions occurred. I suppose there was sufficient separation within my wings to prevent such an accident.

My wings were newly developed with my latest evolution. But I was most deeply grateful that they had been engineered not to violently implode, explode, or any mixture thereof. In exchange, the sudden bursts of destructive power observed during my utilization of blade-based Fusion-Arts couldn't be replicated in my wings. As far as I was concerned, though, being able to fly was more than enough. Expecting any more would be asking a little too much from my newly-grown wings.

"Ah...yes. There was one thing... What is it, exactly, that I've evolved into..." I asked, suddenly aware of the fact Lorraine hadn't classified me into a monster type as she normally did on such occasions.

I felt Lorraine had a general idea of what I had become, but I had yet to press her for the specifics. Lorraine, meanwhile, shook her head at my question.

"Honestly, Rentt, I have no idea," she said, still shaking her head.

"Come now Lorraine. You seem like you have a general idea. You were reading that tome on Vampires as I woke. Surely you did so because you had some idea of what I could be?"

Of course, Lorraine could have simply been thumbing through the book in a panic, searching for something resembling the creature I had become. But Lorraine didn't seem to be in much of a rush while she was reading. It seemed more like Lorraine already had a general idea of what I'd become and was just checking the tome to verify her assumptions so as to inform me as I woke.

Perhaps I was mistaken in my reasoning; either way, Lorraine continued her explanation.

"Well, I suppose you could say that... But you see, Rentt... I can no longer be sure after seeing those wings of yours. Vampires are not monsters with wings in the first place. They are mostly indistinguishable from humans—they do have fangs for sucking blood, of course, but... Ah! Yes, that. What about your face?"

Adjust your mask so I can see.”

I nodded, shifting my mask to give Lorraine a better look. I mentally willed the mask to alter its shape, and soon exposed the lower half of my face. Although I wanted to give Lorraine a more complete view, this was a stable shape that could be maintained for a long time, and it was ultimately the one I adopted.

Before, my molars and jawbones were visible, with bits of dried flesh and muscle clinging onto my skin here and there, Lorraine let out a small gasp as she carried out her inspection.

“Oh! You have actual flesh there now. That same soft, slick skin as the rest of you... How detestable. But yes, your skin is undoubtedly pale. If I have to say, you hardly look like a healthy individual.”

Although Lorraine made such a claim, I personally found her ability to maintain a relatively smooth complexion while living such a messy and unhealthy lifestyle a more impressive feat.

Come to think of it, Sheila had made such a complaint recently. Although her skin was somewhat smooth and beautiful by itself, she spent a fair amount of time and money on its maintenance, so that much was to be expected.

Lorraine herself was no stranger to such practices, manufacturing her own high-quality skincare products and other cosmetics with her alchemical abilities. Her daily habits and food choices left much to be desired, however, so it was unsurprising her actions got on the nerves of the more mundane womenfolk of Maalt.

“I can’t really wrap my head around the concept of a healthy Undead, Lorraine...”

“Hm. I suppose that is a fair point, Rentt. On one hand, you are dead, yet on the other, Undead. Is being alive in death not the best state of health...? But enough semantics. You do have fangs. Unmistakably those of a Vampire—I would think so, at least...”

Lorraine raised her hands to my cheeks, and soon began roughly manipulating them—pushing, pulling, pressing—apparently trying to get a better look.

“Not as obvious as I thought it would be, no? Well...one does not exactly have

the chance to observe Vampire teeth on a daily basis, yes... Most interesting. However, I cannot yet say with confidence that you are a Vampire... It could just be a particularly sharp set of teeth you have... Hmm..."

Finally releasing my long-suffering cheeks, Lorraine walked over to the table, picking up a vial of blood before returning.

"Open wide, Rentt."

I obediently opened my mouth. Lorraine promptly opened the bottle, dipping a small wooden stick into the vial, and placed the bloodstained instrument into my mouth.

"Oh. Hmm. It seems like your fangs extend when you think of sucking blood. Would it not be easy to identify Vampires, then? But one does not simply get all the townsfolk to line up and open their mouths for a test... I suppose that was a silly thought."

It seemed Lorraine was using me as a model to come up with some Vampire-detection test to use on the townsfolk of Maalt. But as she had surmised, such a method would be strange at best since it was impossible to have all the townsfolk participate. On top of that, Vampires commonly lived in tightly-knit groups of multiple individuals. Even if one was found, it would surely inform the rest. More often than not, it was simply more efficient to summon a priest or priestess-saint skilled in identifying monsters, who would then spend some time locating and eradicating the monsters in question. Lorraine's technique was probably useful as a supplementary method of identification.

"Well, then, Rentt. Show me the upper half of your face next... Vampires have red eyes, after all."

Nodding, I altered the shape of my mask once more, this time exposing the upper half of my apparently flesh-filled face.

"Ah, yes. How nostalgic... That face of yours, I mean. A far cry from how it used to be, with those empty holes and strands of exposed muscle and flesh. You were quite removed from your human features at one point..."

Lorraine reached out to touch my face. Her hands were gentle, not like the rough manipulation she had exposed my cheeks to moments ago.

“Looking at you now, I feel like I should say something to your face...”

I tilted my head at Lorraine. “What is it?”

“What else could it be?”

Welcome back, Rentt Faina.

Were the words Lorraine said.

I felt like something had truly returned to me; a renewed sense of humanity, perhaps? Or maybe...I was just imagining things.



“Well, then...regarding the specifics of your classification as a Vampire...”

It was just like Lorraine to suddenly jump from a somewhat emotional conversation to cold scientific dialogue. Though I suppose what she was about to say was equally important.

“So...what do you think, ultimately?”

“Well...if I had to guess, you have evolved into a Lesser Vampire of some kind. A variant, perhaps. Definitely a step above a Thrall, and something along the veins of a Vampire. I could not find a firm classification in the end, however. Your eyes are red, you have fangs which react to the presence of blood... All those considered, you are indeed a Vampire, but I cannot be sure of much else.”

An unusually vague statement, given her usual disposition.

Perhaps my discontentment was evident in my face, for Lorraine frowned in response, curtly continuing her explanation.

“What else would you have me do, Rentt? I have never heard of any sort of Vampire with wings. You expect far too much of a rural, border-town scholar such as myself. In addition...you are far too removed from most monsters. Your body is special, and you are...different. Due to your unique nature, you would not fit in any preexisting classifications or noted variants or subspecies. That would be the most accurate observation. At the very most I could say you are

an existence close to a certain kind of Lesser Vampire, but again, that is all I can objectively say.”

“So, does the discussion not end there if you phrase it that way, Lorraine?”

“Exactly. This was why I originally intended on not saying anything, Rentt.”

Lorraine was slightly annoyed; maybe she expected me to say nothing if I had already arrived at a similar conclusion myself. I suppose I was being slightly thick...

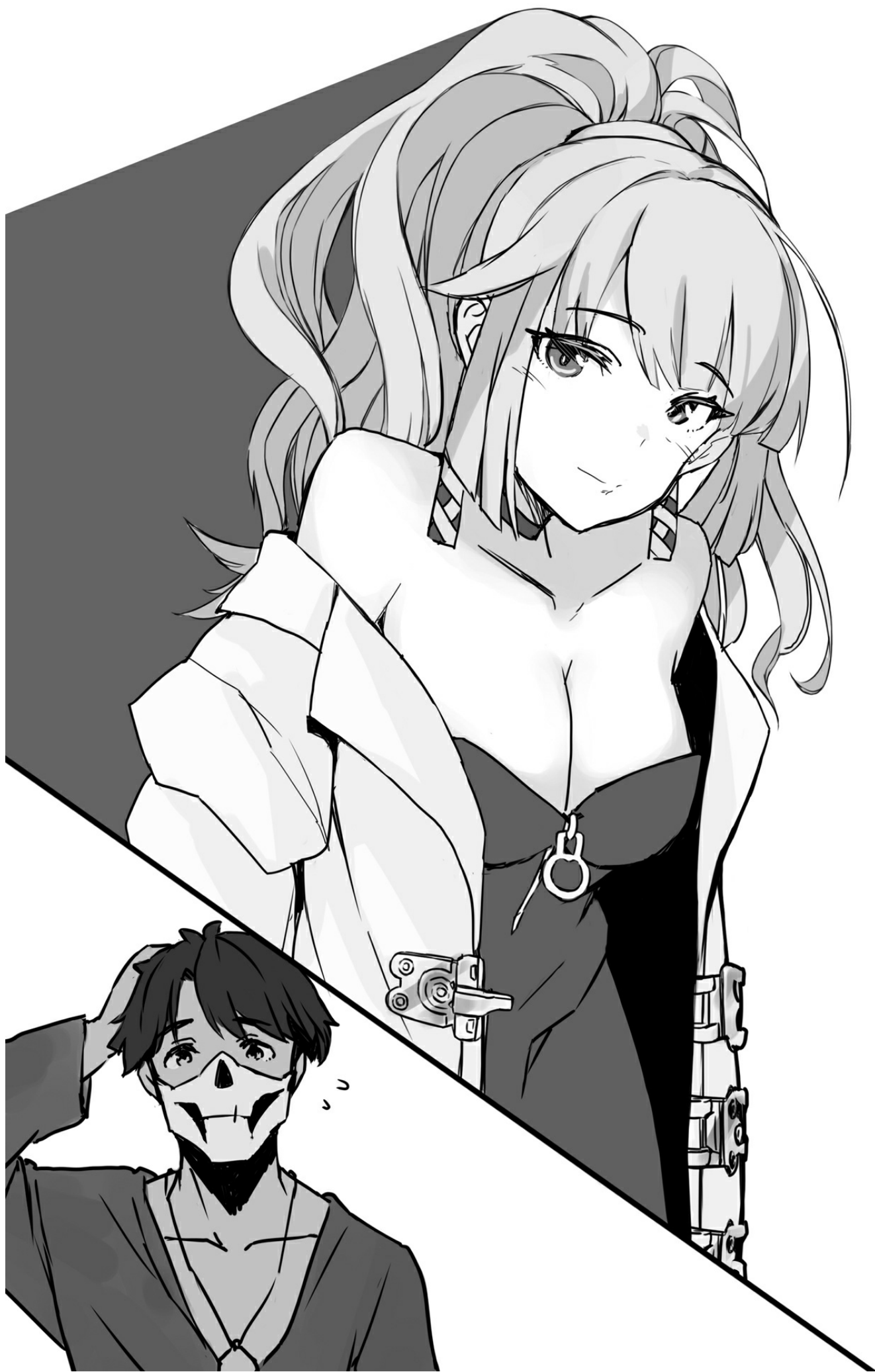
“I apologize.”

“It is fine if you understand. Jokes aside, you have evolved somewhat smoothly, have you not? At the very least, there is no reason to doubt that you are constantly evolving and bettering yourself. I do wonder, though... What would you become in the end, Rentt? Not something I could ever imagine, I suppose. Having some strange wings that defy classification when you are simply a variant of Lesser Vampire... Are you going to grow horns, twenty arms, and maybe fifty eyeballs next? Even if you did, I would hardly be surprised.”

“I pray I don’t become anything like that...”

Her words provoked some twisted image of a crazed monster fitting her description in my mind.

Lorraine’s point was valid, though, as there was no precedent to assume I wouldn’t become a strange, inhuman being. If possible, I simply wanted to remain like this—and for the rest of the day, my thoughts were fixated on that very topic.





“Did you really need to bring that with you?” Lorraine asked as we both walked down the streets of Maalt.

I nodded deeply at her question. “It is not a question of need, Lorraine. I brought it with me because I *wanted* to bring it with me.”

Held in my hands was none other than the remote control mechanism of the little airship. I was casually infusing mana into it as I walked. I had done the same after Lorraine and I had wrapped up our discussion of Vampires the day before, but I was unfortunately unable to fill up the crystal entirely. I was doing the same today, slowly infusing the crystal in light of my magical deficiencies.

As a result of my consistent hard work, however, the crystal seemed to be mostly full—about seventy percent, if I had to guess. I still had quite a bit of mana left in me, though, and with that, the little airship could probably fly for about two hours. Logistically accounted for.

On another note, the place we were headed toward right now was none other than...

“Hm. This is the place, yes? Ah, a knocker...”

Arriving at our destination, I stared on silently as Lorraine nodded to herself, raising a hand to the familiar-looking knocker. I held my peace, observing Lorraine with my bated breath.

Lorraine grasped the knocker with some force, intending to utilize it as anyone would and—

Crack.

With an equally familiar sound, the knocker, base and all, detached itself from the door.

“It is not my fault... I am innocent. It was broken from the start.” Lorraine slowly turned her head to face me, looking straight into my eyes as she declared her innocence in a panicked voice.

While she may seem somewhat collected to the average onlooker, I had known Lorraine for a considerable amount of time, so the unfortunate fate of

the knocker really had gotten to her.

But of course, anyone would be surprised at a door knocker detaching itself without any rhyme or reason, especially if one wasn't even being rough with it. I, too, had been surprised by this mechanism twice in the past.

Lorraine's observations were correct: it was I who had broken the knocker in the first place... But I didn't have to state that. Lorraine didn't have to know—and a panicked Lorraine was a rare sight.

I predicted such a thing would happen, and had prepared an extra-strong adhesive, refined from slime fluid, for this very purpose. Silently placing some adhesive upon the door, I took the knocker from Lorraine, holding it in place without a word. In just a few minutes, the knocker looked pristine, as if it had never been detached in the first place.

Still maintaining my silence, I calmly knocked on the door with a knuckle—after all, one doesn't attempt to use just any door knocker they find.

“Yes? Who is it... Ah! AH! Rentt!”

Alize poked her head out from behind the door of Maalt's Second Orphanage.

Yes, the place Lorraine and I had traveled to was none other than this. Our aim was to take Alize in as our collective disciple, and to also have Lorraine meet the child in person. We had to speak with Sister Lillian first, however, on account of her being the administrator of the orphanage. This was why we had made the journey here, adhesive and all.

Alize seemed intensely excited to see us. She threw the door open, happily leading us into the orphanage's hallways.

“You came at such a good time, Rentt! We just received word today that the medicine is ready! We can cure Lady Lillian's illness once and for all!”



My original request was to deliver a single Dragon Blood Blossom to the orphanage—what happened to it after was anyone's guess. I, however, had become somewhat invested in the fate of Sister Lillian, and wanted to know how she was doing. The request was issued with the purpose of healing her in

the first place, so to walk away because the request was over was a somewhat lowly thing to do. I had played a fair part in the process, after all.

But there were a fair number of adventurers who did just that. They would deliver what they were contracted to deliver, then never see the client again. While some of my colleagues were somewhat detached in that regard, I was personally more interested in the eventual outcome of the situation.

On that note, Alize's cheerful notification came at exactly the right time.

"Oh... Right, Rentt. Who's that lady over there?"

The three of us were seated in a familiar reception room. Alize was referring to Lorraine, turning to look at her as she asked me for an answer. Given that I had always visited by my lonesome, I suppose it was right for Alize to treat my companion with a certain degree of curiosity.

I didn't always travel or work alone—Rentt Faina had friends, too!

Realistically speaking...I couldn't call anyone other than Lorraine and Sheila "friends" at this point in time. A pitiful thought, but, regardless, I nodded, offering Alize an answer.

"Ah, I have not yet introduced myself, have I. A pleasure to meet you, Alize. I am Lorraine Vivie, scholar, mage, and occasional Silver-class adventurer. I am here today in the capacity of a magical tutor, Alize, namely to educate you in the ways of magic."

Something seemed to finally click in Alize's mind.

"A mage! And a Silver-class one?! I... I am Alize. Is... Is this really all right? I have little in the way of coin, and I'm also an orphan..."

Alize had defaulted to her more formal way of speech once more, perhaps because she had never met Lorraine before.

I remembered my initial meeting with the child. Judging from her overall choice of words, Alize was suggesting she wasn't worth Lorraine's time; while I had mentioned I would bring her a magical tutor, I perhaps left out the fact that Lorraine was a Silver-class adventurer. Mages were a rare breed in these lands, so a mage of the Silver-class would appear to have command over

incomprehensible magics and arcane spells. That was how a relatively normal person would view them.

They would also come across as dangerous—infinately more dangerous than the common gangs of street thugs. If one had crossed some thugs, they would at most be brutalized by a flurry of punches and kicks. If one had done the same to a Silver-class mage, however, they may very well be reduced to ash in the blink of an eye, never again to see the light of day.

How terrifying, Lorraine...

As if telepathically probing my thoughts, Lorraine shot me a death glare before turning back almost instantly. Alize seemed oblivious to this, and she was speaking with a somewhat more pronounced smile.

“I heard about your arrangement with Rentt. Was the coin not accounted for that way? I also enjoy the fact that he is now indebted to me, so there are no problems there. With regards to you being an orphan, well, I could not care less about such matters. Ah, I do not mean that in a derogatory way. I simply mean to say I would offer my services to individuals of any social standing, as long as they were willing to learn. I am a mage, but also a scholar, after all. The path to knowledge is not paved by gold or one’s position in society, but passion. That is why I would like to ask of you: have you enough passion? That would be all I need to know.”

Quite the lengthy speech...is what I would have thought. Something else other than its length caught my attention, though. Why the path to knowledge? Last I checked, Alize wanted to be an adventurer, not a scholar.

I wanted to point this out to Lorraine right away. But as usual, the current atmosphere would hardly permit me to do such a thing.

Alize swallowed hard and closed her eyes, apparently lost in thought. Soon after, she had an answer for Lorraine.

“I don’t have much in the way of coin, yes... But I have passion. I’ve wanted to become an adventurer to help Lady Lillian, but now... Now, I want to become an adventurer—an adventurer like Rentt. I want to become an adventurer who helps other people. I’ve heard many things from Rentt, and know full well that it’s not a simple task. Even so...I want to help. I want to try...doing good work. If

studies and hard work are required, and I must give my all, then I will. I will give it everything I've got. So..."

Alize seemed to have trouble finding the appropriate words. She delivered her lines somewhat stutteringly, as if her train of thought was constantly being interrupted. But it was clear to see Alize had given the question posed to her a fair amount of thought. She tried her utmost best to communicate what she felt in those few stuttering lines; that much was understood.

This was probably why Lorraine nodded deeply at Alize's words.

"Very well. With this, the contract is sealed. From this day, Alize, you are my disciple—the first disciple of scholar-magus Lorraine Vivie. Let us walk the path of magecraft and knowledge together!"

Alize responded enthusiastically to Lorraine's words, a wide smile plastered across her face. It was a beautiful, moving moment, the instant in which the bond between a teacher and their disciple was formed.

But...the path of magecraft and knowledge?

Knowledge... Eh...? Wait. Wait. But Alize isn't a scholar! She just said she wanted to become an adventurer!

I wanted to shout a cry that would echo from the bottom of my heart. Alas, it was impossible to do—again, not in the current atmosphere. Eventually, as the realities of the situation continued stacking on top of each other, I was forced to realize Alize would now become an individual like Lorraine—a scholar-magus, apparently. Or something like that.

But...Alize is my disciple, too...

Although many thoughts crossed my mind, I held my tongue.



"Well, then. Now that Alize has agreed to the arrangement, all that is left is to seek approval from the orphanage's administrator. This...Sister Lillian, was it? Would it be right to assume she is the administrator?" Lorraine asked.

Alize, being one of the orphanage's children, was technically bound by its rules, and Sister Lillian's views on the matter had to be determined. Although

she had some degree of autonomy in her day-to-day life, discussions concerning her future were probably best conducted with all parties present. We could simply march Alize out of the orphanage and proceed without verbal authority, but it wouldn't be a polite thing to do.

There would be no issues with purchasing items, or accepting requests from the guild, but...

Lorraine had already taken this all into account, hence her question. Alize nodded, offering a quick answer.

"Yes, Lady Lillian is the administrator of this orphanage, and is a nun with the Church of the Eastern Sky. She is currently bedridden, but the medicine we ordered should be on its way soon..."

"Ah, the request Rentt took on a while ago, yes? In that case...would it be a bad time for us to visit? If she is unwell, we could always come again another day," Lorraine said, in an uncharacteristically flexible and mature manner.

Alize, however, shook her head. "No, that is quite all right. I had already informed Lady Lillian that guests would be visiting today... Please, this way."

Alize stood up and led us out of the room.

Sister Lillian was most likely still in the room I had seen her in last. She seemed to still have trouble moving about. Personally, I felt we could have visited after she had recovered, but if the sister herself felt she was well enough to see us, then it would be impolite of us to refuse.

Giving Lorraine a quick sideways glance, we both stood, following Alize out of the small reception room.



"Begging your pardon, Lady Lillian," Alize said, rapping on the door softly.

A soft voice soon motioned for us to enter. It wasn't a healthy voice, but the good sister seemed a little more lively than usual. Maybe she was in better spirits today.

I didn't know if Alize mentioned anything of the medicine to Sister Lillian, but I knew she would eventually recover, given recent developments. Maybe that

was why I felt that she seemed more...healthy.

Beyond the door and lying prone on a bed was a middle-aged woman—not much had changed since my previous visit.

“Ah... You are the adventurer from a while ago. Mister Rentt. I have heard of your deeds. It seems you have defeated the monsters in the basement storage...”

It had to have been my face, my robes, or my overall strange getup, but my appearance definitely caused a memory to surface in the good sister’s mind, and she addressed me almost immediately.

Like she said, at least on paper, I was here to clean up the monster-infested basement...and in truth, I had done just that. But “defeat” wasn’t quite the right choice of words. Then again, the sister said little of turning those monsters into my familiars.

On another note, Edel had seen fit to visit the orphanage before we did, and was currently playing around with his subordinates. The mouse generally kept himself busy, at least when we weren’t plumbing the depths of a labyrinth. Though, I had hardly given him permission to do so. Edel simply loved running off on his own.

Strictly speaking, I managed just fine without Edel most of the time, and he was more useful during combat encounters, so I suppose this was fine. As a familiar, however, I would have preferred a stronger sense of loyalty—but that was a topic for another time.

I drew my attention back to the conversation at hand.

“It wasn’t a big deal. I’m more pleased to know the orphanage can now return to more peaceful days,” I said to Sister Lillian.

“No, no, Mister Rentt. You have done us a great service. No matter how small the monster, it would surely grow in strength if left alone. I had heard the monsters in the basement were Puchi Suri, and if those grew in number, it would have been quite troublesome...”

Sister Lillian was right. Although Puchi Suri were small, mouse-like monsters that didn’t seem to pose much of a threat, the true danger was their ability to

colonize towns and cities by multiplying and creating huge populations. Very rarely, a strong specimen might appear among them, and this large Puchi Suri would spend years—decades, even—quietly amassing its power in a city's streets, or maybe the sewers. It would rule over its brethren and build a huge nest, eventually amassing an impossibly huge army of Puchi Suri...

That was what I'd heard, anyway. Nonetheless, I could no longer remember where exactly I heard it from, so I decided to forget about this little caveat almost instantly. I didn't want to think of a scenario whereby Edel became some sort of underground mouse mob boss. To begin with, such an endeavor would take him a long time, and, if such an event came to pass, Edel was still my familiar.

"There weren't that many of them. Also, Alize managed to take one down herself."

I hadn't expected Sister Lillian to be so surprised at what I just said.

"Alize did? Really, now?" She cast glances at Alize and me.

Alize's face slightly soured, and she slowly gave an answer.

"Yes, Lady Lillian..."

Had I said something bad? I quickly added on to my explanation.

"I wanted her to gain some experience, in the event of anything untoward happening in the future. Was that unnecessary?"

"No... Nothing of the sort. But...Alize, you should have informed me such a thing had come to pass."

A fair warning, but the good sister didn't seem upset.

"My apologies, Lady Lillian... I didn't wish to worry you."

"But I am fine, Alize... You should not worry so much about me."

The two seemed to care about each other a great deal. I, on the other hand, was simply relieved there were no uncomfortable tensions in the atmosphere.

"Ah... Yes. Now, who would that be, over there?" Sister Lillian asked, turning to Lorraine.

“I am Lorraine Vivie, scholar-magus. An old friend of Rentt—quite some years, at that. It is a pleasure to meet you, Miss Lillian.”

“I see... I am the administrator of this orphanage, Sister Lillian of the Church of the Eastern Sky. Please, the pleasure is mine. What brings the two of you here today...?”

Just as we were about to answer, more loud raps came from beyond the door, followed by a few louder voices...

“Big sister Alize! Mistert Unbert and Norman are here!”

The younger children of the orphanage, judging from their voices.

Alize had always answered the door when there were guests, as it seemed the other children were too young to appropriately do so.

If memory served, those two were the healer and herbalist I had spoken to when delivering the Dragon Blood Blossoms. Last I checked, they were off to make medicine with them.

“Ah...” Alize fidgeted upon hearing those names. “Would it be all right if I answered the door, Lady Lillian? There is no one else...”

The other children probably could have answered the door, but having walked through the orphanage once, it was fair to assume the older children had moved on at some point. Even so, it was only natural that Alize was eager to answer the door. Sister Lillian, for her part, seemed to understand the situation, and she smiled somewhat awkwardly.

“I do not mind, but what about your guests, Alize...? Would it not be rude to simply leave them here?”

Lorraine and I weren’t really bothered by these developments, so we both gave our responses.

“We’ll be fine, Alize.”

“Yes. We must speak with Sister Lillian regarding some other matters, too. You should run along, Alize.”

Sister Lillian tilted her head slightly at our choice of words, but didn’t offer any other words of protest.

“We thank you for your hospitality. Go then, Alize. Do return as quickly as possible,” Sister Lillian’s tone was somewhat stricter now.

“Yes. I do apologize, Rentt, Lorraine. I will return soon...” Alize said, bowing her head as she left the room.

Sister Lillian sighed as the door closed behind her. “She was always a jittery child. I do apologize. My efforts at instilling into her the appropriate manners were lacking, it seems...”

Personally, I felt Sister Lillian hardly had anything to apologize for. But Lorraine was the first to respond accordingly.

“No, nothing of the sort, Miss Lillian. Alize is beyond capable for her age. She is a polite and pleasant child. In addition, she is also...quite talented,” Lorraine said, purposefully.

Her last words predictably caught the good sister’s attention.

“Talent, you say...?”



“Yes. I had affirmed it with these very eyes prior. Alize is a talented child. To be precise, she has a fair talent for...magecraft,” Lorraine declared, in response to the sister’s question.

Under normal circumstances, it was impossible for someone to gauge another person’s magical capacity, especially if the person in question was just sitting idly. A veteran mage, however, was capable of such a feat. There was a certain technique to it—ascertaining another’s magical capacity just by looking at them. Lorraine, in particular, had quite the eyes for it; magical eyes of her own, perhaps. As such, there was no one else more qualified than Lorraine when it came to discerning the magical capacity and innate capabilities of an individual. This was part of the reason why Lorraine had come to the orphanage, though meeting Alize in person was also a factor.

It goes without saying that I wasn’t capable of such feats. Although I had enough mana in me to qualify as a mage of some sort, magecraft was something governed by logic and theory. That was knowledge I had yet to learn.

In life, I learned simple cantrips and spells. So simple were they that only a small amount of mana was required for their execution. For the record, I had been using those very same spells all this time. If I were to utilize higher levels of magecraft, however, I would probably require more detailed study and understanding.

“A mage...? She does have some mana in her, yes, but what about her capacity...?”

I suppose Sister Lillian never sent Alize for a detailed examination. While many individuals were born with mana in them, not all of them had enough of it to become mages in any capacity. To verify this, one had to be examined by a veteran mage, preferably with the assistance of finely-calibrated magical tools. Of course, this process would cost a fair amount of coin, regardless of the result. Hardly a sum an orphanage could afford, especially one with an already shoestring budget.

Lorraine was originally to be paid for her services. However, she was also coincidentally looking for a student to pass her skills down to, and she had decided to teach Alize for free. She remained relatively tight-lipped about her intentions, but I gleaned as much from my prior conversations with her the previous day.

Alize insisted on paying Lorraine a fair amount, and was allowed to do so. I was loaning her the appropriate sum of coin, after all.

“Perhaps I overstepped my boundaries, good sister, but I had already assessed Alize’s abilities when we were sitting in the reception room. I would need more precise instruments to get an exact reading, yes, but from what I can see, Alize could easily work toward becoming a Court Mage if she tried,” Lorraine said, once again delivering shocking statements with a nonchalant expression.

Alize having talent was one thing, but having enough to one day become a Court Mage was something else. Court Mages were mages in service of the Royal Court, the pinnacle of magecraft practitioners in the kingdom of Yaaran. They answered directly to the king himself, and they were all mages of tremendous magical strength. The mages of the king’s court, in turn, all

possessed great reserves of mana, and the knowledge to weave it into proper spells. One had to have extensive knowledge of magical theory to achieve such a feat. Naturally, most mages looked up to them, hoping to one day be one among their number.

But of course, few ever managed to take on the title.

“Is that really true, Miss Lorraine? Even if she does have talent...”

Sister Lillian was adequately shocked, with one hand over her gaping mouth as she stared at Lorraine in disbelief. But Lorraine merely shook her head slowly.

“I understand your surprise, good sister. Even I was surprised as such, yes. However, I am not joking in the slightest. With the proper education and training, Alize is sure to become an extraordinary mage. Even so, she could very easily end up as a commoner without anything to her name if she were lazy. It is all up to the child’s desires...and perhaps her drive to succeed. That would be about the gist of it, yes.”

Lorraine had a point, as some individuals ended their lives as run-of-the-mill mages even if they were blessed with great reserves of mana.

While mana capacity was important, one couldn’t hope to become a first-rate mage with that alone. Magical knowledge was also important; an understanding of the foundation and theories of magic went hand-in-hand with mana capacity. Only by having both could an individual embark upon the path of magical greatness.

For example, I knew little in the way of magical theory and magecraft. No matter the amount of mana I had, I didn’t have a reliable way to use it. But now that I had a higher mana capacity, I could start studying basic magical theories. However, my mind was fixated upon Existential Evolution, and, if possible, I would like to evolve again as soon as I could. These thoughts, in turn, forced notions of studying magecraft out of my head.

Since I was a swordsman in life to begin with, all I knew were simple spells to strengthen my body or equipment. They were simple but effective, and I had memorized those spells long ago. I suppose I would go as far as I could with my current arsenal, and if I ever came to some sort of roadblock, I could change

directions then.

My recent trek into the Swamp of Tarasque turned out quite all right, but I felt certain magical spells could have made my journey much smoother. For instance, some long-range attack magic would have made short work of those Goblins, and a well-placed thunderbolt or freezing spell would have gotten rid of that entire swarm of fish-beasts. When the bridge collapsed, I could have strengthened it with earth magics right then and there, and it maybe wouldn't have broken down in such a spectacular fashion. At the very least, I could imagine Lorraine doing all these things and more, for she would have approached the problem from a much more strategic angle.

"I see... But then, what about Alize? What has she said about becoming a mage?" Sister Lillian asked, worry evident on her features.

It was common knowledge the path of a mage was a difficult one; the challenges began early, and they never really ended. Even basic magecraft training was particularly taxing. One had to give it their all—a halfhearted attempt wasn't sufficient when it came to learning magecraft. One had to memorize and fully understand magical theories before eventually putting them into practice. Even then, the prospective mage had to be mentally prepared for the inevitable lash of feedback should any of their spells fail or go awry.

In addition, most people associated mages with battles and combat, or at least, professions that involved such occurrences. Other career paths existed, where one could end up becoming a magical tool researcher and craftsman, or serve the king or leader of some kingdom or other. Some would become adventurers, spending their days slaying monsters and other beasts across the lands. Combat situations were the perfect opportunity for a mage to utilize their magical skills, and they were paid handsomely for their services.

Even so, many individuals with the mana capacity necessary to become a mage often did not wish to do so, if only because they valued their lives more than a lucrative career.

The good sister was probably wondering if Alize understood all this. Maybe I should have told her of what the child said from the very beginning...

"About that... Alize had actually discussed her dream of becoming an

adventurer with me during my previous visit.”

“Eh...?”

“I recall mentioning she had defeated a Puchi Suri just now, Sister Lillian. That was a test, to see if she had the mettle to become an adventurer... I felt she should experience it with her own hands. If she had reacted to that situation with fear, she never would have made a good adventurer. But Alize defeated the monster fairly. I feel like she understands the risks involved.”

But I was just a third party, so I could never know how Alize felt in that situation, so I couldn’t simply declare that my conclusions were absolutely correct. However, Sister Lillian had known nothing of this prior to our conversation, and I felt I should tell her what I knew about Alize’s hopes and dreams. All for reference, of course.

Perhaps I should have sought Alize’s permission before speaking of her dreams, but it was still true she had such aspirations. I assumed I wasn’t stepping out of line.

Sister Lillian hardly seemed to be the type of person to trample on another’s dreams, either. Even if Alize didn’t have concrete aspirations, she was at the age where most children still had hopes and dreams. For better or worse, few followed through on their childhood dreams, but even I had decided on becoming a Mithril-class adventurer from a young age.

Sister Lillian seemed lost in thought, contemplating my words. After a brief silence, she slowly nodded.

“If that is the case... If Alize truly wishes for it, then I would not stop her. However...why an adventurer, of all things?”

At that precise moment, a few raps echoed from outside the door. Alize had picked a good time to return.



Alize’s voice rang out from behind the rickety wooden door. “Lady Lillian, I’ve brought Mister Unbert, the healer, and Mister Norman, the herbalist. They wish to see you. May we enter?”

“But...” Sister Lillian turned to Lorraine.

Lorraine and I shook our heads in unison.

“I don’t mind, sister. I’ve met them before.”

“I do not mind, either. If we are in the way, good sister, we will take our leave,” Lorraine added.

Lorraine and I were both relatively thick individuals, but we were both capable of reading the atmosphere when it really counted. We had simply decided not to do so in our daily lives, for one reason or another.

I suppose that was the simplest way of putting it...

“Is that right...? We will partake in your hospitality, then. They are probably here to discuss the issue of my illness, one that has been plaguing me for quite some time...”

Unbert was the healer responsible for checking up on the sister, and Norman was apparently his associate. It was easy to understand why they had come.

“Well, then. You may enter.”

Alize escorted the men into the room in response. It was a familiar sight—a thinly-built, middle-aged man, and a slightly rotund youth. While they seemed a little surprised to see Lorraine and me by the sister’s bedside, they soon recognized me, and they greeted us both with polite smiles.

In total, there were five people in the room, excluding Sister Lillian. Quite a gathering for a small, cramped room. Lorraine and I motioned to give up our seats since there were only three in the room. Alize quickly noticed this, once again bolting out of the room in a panic.

“I-I will bring some more chairs!” she said, disappearing through the doorway once more.

Surprised by Alize’s sudden disappearance, I stopped, frozen in a comical half-squat. Norman and Unbert motioned for us to sit, and, at their insistence, we did as we were told.

It was an awkward atmosphere, and Sister Lillian was the first to break the silence.

“Sigh... She has always been a jittery child... I do apologize on her behalf, ladies and gentlemen. Perhaps my efforts at instilling manners into her have been lacking...”

Sister Lillian seemed a little exasperated, but she was smiling in resignation, and she didn't look angry or upset in the slightest.

But Alize was merely a child of 12 years. The fact she was able to do this much was worthy of some respect. In fact, compared to how I was when I was that age... No. There was absolutely no reason for anyone to be unhappy with Alize. Lorraine, too, seemed to be having similar recollections, if her expressions were anything to go by. Even Unbert and Norman seemed to be having similar thoughts.

Unless Alize had been brought up unnecessarily strictly, it was almost impossible for a 12-year-old girl at an orphanage to have perfect manners. The fact that she'd noticed a lack of chairs and had rushed off to get more was in fact a good indicator of character.

“No, we do not mind at all. She is much more well-behaved than we were as children, after all,” Unbert the healer said, with a gentle tone.

Unbert seemed to possess a gentle disposition, but the stubble on his face and his general demeanor made him look more like an adventurer. Given how he had set up a dispensary in Maalt, and had offered healing to its citizens, it wouldn't be strange if he was an adventurer at some point in his life.

“I am very glad you feel that way, Unbert. But what about the others...” Sister Lillian said, looking away from him and toward the other three adults in the room.

From what I could see, we all had a similarly vague smile. I suppose we all had our childhood memories.

“Well... I suppose everybody was a child, once. Even I had such a time... Well, then. Unbert, Norman, you wanted to speak with me? I do apologize for conversing with all of you at once like this. I had already sought the permission of Mister Rentt and Miss Lorraine here, you see. Is this perhaps about my body—my condition?”

Sister Lillian proceeded to explain the situation to Unbert and Norman, who nodded after listening attentively.

“Ah, I see. I do not really mind if they are here, but there is just a possibility of the discussion going on for some time. Would it suit you two better if you wrapped up your conversation first...?” Unbert said, looking in our general direction.

If this kept up, the adults in the room would be caught up in an endless loop of social courtesies. Lorraine quickly put an end to that.

“No, our discussion would take some time, too. If what you have to say to Sister Lillian pertains to her health, then it concerns us, as well. Perhaps we should all sit down and speak of the matter at hand, no?”

In truth, Alize had only wanted to become an adventurer to find a cure for Sister Lillian’s illness. Having Unbert and Norman speak about her illness openly would allow us to explain Alize’s aspirations later on in the conversation.

There was also the matter of medicine, involving the mixture Unbert and Norman had concocted for the good sister. All Sister Lillian had to do was drink it and begin the healing process, so explaining Alize’s intentions from that point forward would undoubtedly be easier.

The sister herself seemed confused at Lorraine’s words, but Unbert and Norman seemed to have inferred our circumstances.

“If you are fine with their presence, Lady Lillian, then there are no issues. They would hear of the reasons for your recent illness, however. Is that all right, Lady Lillian?”

She nodded slowly. Sister Lillian didn’t seem to have any issues with the proposition.

“I do not really understand the situation...but if there is a need for them to be present, then I do not mind. Please, let us begin the discussion.”



“Then...by your leave, Lady Lillian. About the illness that has afflicted you...I hope it does not alarm you, but you are suffering from what is called

‘Accumulative Miasma Disease,’” Unbert said, straight to the point.

Maybe he wasn’t the type to mill about, or perhaps he felt doing so would cause the good sister an even bigger shock... Whatever the case, Unbert delivered his diagnosis plainly.

I knew of this disease before Alize had even said anything of it to me, so I could only assume it was a common term among those who were capable of utilizing divinity.

All the color drained from Sister Lillian’s face as soon as the words left Unbert’s lips. I suppose such was the severity of the illness...

The afflicted wouldn’t die from the disease immediately, but the prospect of dying in the next five to ten years would terrify anyone, I suppose. Unbert had probably predicted her reaction, hence his initial warning.

Perhaps he should have told her there was a cure... On the other hand, even if the cure was known, the ingredient involved—the very same Dragon Blood Blossom I had trekked into the swamp for a while ago—was incredibly expensive. Sister Lillian, of all people, would know of the difficulties in procuring such an item, along with the costs involved.

“But then...how long do I have...to obtain something as costly as a Dragon Blood Blossom... What will become of this orphanage...?” Sister Lillian said, haltingly.

However, her assessment was correct, and, after a while, the good sister stopped, seemingly more composed. Slowly, she shook her head.

“I do apologize. My thoughts got the better of me. So, then, how long do I have? I will contact the headquarters of the Church of the Eastern Sky... It would take some time to find a successor, someone who could run the orphanage well. Should I begin the preparations...?”

Her face was still pale, but the good sister put on a strong face, and spoke with a steady voice. Her determination was formidable.

However, there was no cause for worry, and Unbert shook his head as he continued.

“As I said, Lady Lillian. Please do not be alarmed. I was not quite done yet. You see, your illness will be healed. There is nothing for you to worry about.”

Sister Lillian’s eyes opened wide.



“Cured...? This...Accumulative Miasma Disease that is plaguing me?”

It was an almost hoarse voice of disbelief, perhaps, echoing from deep within the sister’s throat. From her reaction, it was plain to see Sister Lillian knew of the specifics of the disease, and how it wasn’t something one easily recovered from.

Unbert repeated himself in response to the sister’s reaction, as if to reinforce his point. He spoke once more, slowly and purposefully.

“Yes. Judging from how you responded just now, Lady Lillian, you must know the only cure to the disease is medicine made from a Dragon Blood Blossom. However...we already had some specimens on hand. And we have already finished synthesizing the medicine in question... All you must do now, Lady Lillian, is drink a certain amount of it at regular intervals.”

It seemed regular treatment was needed, as one was presumably not healed from a single gulp. I suppose that was acceptable, since one only needed to drink the medicine for a complete cure.

Sister Lillian seemed to understand as much, but her expression remained somewhat pained.

“No, well... But... I do not have the coin to purchase such a medication...”

She shook her head in apparent resignation. Unbert stopped her.

“We do not require any payment. Isn’t that so, Norman?” Unbert said, turning to his rotund friend.

“Exactly.” Norman the herbalist nodded deeply. “After all, we did not have to spend any coin to procure the most expensive ingredient in this mixture... Not to mention the other ingredients were somewhat cheap. In any case, we have been more than adequately compensated for our efforts...”

Norman referred to the additional Dragon Blood Blossoms I had given to him,

I suppose. He would surely be able to sell those medicines elsewhere, to individuals other than the good sister. He mentioned he made medicines for the poor, but I had given him more than enough ingredients for some profit on the side. After all, it would be difficult to continue doing what he did if he had no profits whatsoever. I assume Norman understood the nature of his business well enough. If Norman wasn't the man I thought him to be, and instead engaged in shady businesses, I would demand my flowers back from him; even so, he didn't seem like the sort. For what it was worth, I trusted him.

I understood his frugality from the clothes he wore and how he carried himself. It was difficult imagining Norman had an immoral medicine smuggling racket under the proverbial counter. One could argue he was putting on a front and changed into more battered clothing, but the doubts would never end if I entertained those thoughts.

"You did not spend any coin...? But, did you not just say that a Dragon Blood Blossom was required to cure this disease? I know how much that ingredient would cost, Norman. Even if you two did obtain it somehow... I know Unbert used to be an adventurer...but not one who was skilled enough to tackle the Swamp of Tarasque. I apologize for my bluntness, Unbert..."

The good sister eyed the two men suspiciously.

It was as I thought—Unbert was one of my colleagues, albeit a long time ago. He seemed like he had quite some skill; a lower Silver-class adventurer, perhaps? Owing to the fact that he was a healer...upper-Silver-class, maybe. But even then, Unbert would be ill-equipped to tackle the swamp on his own.

Unbert didn't seem offended by the sister's words, and he instead nodded calmly.

"Of course. It would have been impossible for me. It just so happened we were...lucky, perhaps. We crossed paths with a kind-hearted adventurer who had just returned from the swamp, and he allowed us to have some Dragon Blood Blossoms...and at a very good price," Unbert said, looking in my direction.

The shock on Sister Lillian's face was evident. As if remembering my initial reason for coming to the orphanage, Sister Lillian turned to me.

"You did that...for me, Mister Rentt? But...were you not contracted to clear

the basement storage facility of monsters...?”

That was indeed what I had told Sister Lillian, but only because Alize wanted me to explain the situation as such. Now I understood Alize’s reasoning for doing so, as she didn’t trust me entirely back then, and she had doubts on if I would truly bring back a blossom for her in the first place. Alize wasn’t mistaken in her judgment since it wasn’t an ingredient that could be so easily procured. Even I had run into some issues along the way.

I offered an explanation of my own.

“Simply a means to an end, Sister Lillian. For starters, I didn’t know if I could make it through the Swamp of Tarasque intact. We felt it was best not to get your hopes up before I had successfully returned, then had the medicine synthesized. Alize didn’t wish to worry you.”

More of Alize’s reasoning than mine, if anything. I felt it wasn’t necessary to speak of what happened before I had accepted the request. Issuing a request at the guild was all fine and good, but there was a chance no one would have offered their assistance, and the ever-present possibility of failure even if an adventurer had answered the call. Alize had decided it would be relatively pointless to get the good sister’s hopes up before a concrete solution was found, and that very solution was me. I accepted her request, and saw it through to the end.

That was that—nothing more, nothing less. Alize had simply taken the best choice in an unfavorable situation, then set about solving the problem as best as she could.

Thinking back on it, I felt like I should take a moment to admire Alize’s determination and spirit. Though, I suppose Alize didn’t truly understand the logistics of such an operation, since the Swamp of Tarasque was a place where even grown adventurers preferred not to step.

Even if Alize’s aspirations were somewhat reckless, the fact that she had made up her mind to do such a thing was admirable in and of itself. Alize must have really looked up to Sister Lillian, in one way or another.

“I... I see. But then...why would you go all that way to pick Dragon Blood Blossoms, Mister Rentt...?”

“It was a request, of course.”

It was exactly that. I suppose now was as good a time as any to explain the entire situation.

“But...from whom?”

“I suppose you already have your suspicions, good sister. The client was...‘The Orphans of the Second Orphanage of Maalt,’ clearly written on the form.”

“The children...?”

While she seemed shocked, Lillian herself quickly came to terms with this development. It was plain for anyone to understand who had put the request in, even if I had said nothing.

“Especially Alize...” I continued my explanation. “We were discussing the difficulties of picking such a flower, yes? If no one answered the call, Alize had intended to become an adventurer herself, and would one day venture into the swamp... That’s how much she respects you, Sister Lillian.”

“Alize would do that...for me? I... I see...hence the talk of becoming an adventurer...” Sister Lillian said slowly began connecting the dots.

She nodded, slowly and repeatedly. Unbert took this opportunity to interject.

“Perhaps we can leave that discussion for a later time. In any case, Lady Lillian, you will be cured. Norman has the medicine with him. Please accept it.”

Unbert stepped back, allowing Norman to approach the sister’s bedside. Retrieving a small wooden box from his bag, the herbalist handed the medication to Sister Lillian. With trembling hands, she accepted the gift, opening the box’s lid slowly. Inside were a sizable amount of large pills, about the size of one’s fingertip.

“Take one each day, for about a month. These pills will expel the miasma built up in your body and, with that, you will be rid of the Accumulative Miasma Disease that has plagued you so. The healing process varies by person, however. Should you be in need of any more, we have spares in storage. Do not worry, we will provide whatever you need free of charge should it come to that. You should be able to feel yourself recovering with each application. Do

remember to take a single pill with water every day.”

Picking up a pill, Sister Lillian held it before her eyes, her hand shaking slightly as she did so.

“I... I really will be cured? I don’t...know what to say. Thank you, everyone... I will never forget this gift, for as long as I live...”

The good sister bowed her head. Large droplets of tears fell down onto her white bedsheets. At the same time, a familiar knocking sound rang out from the direction of the door.

“I have brought the chair—huh...?”

Alize, who had swung open the door with chairs in tow, nearly dropped them as she gaped at what she saw.



“Wha...? What happened? What’s going on?!” Alize exclaimed, upon seeing Sister Lillian in tears.

Alize rushed into the room in a panic before realizing something tremendous had happened in the room during her absence. The chairs, of course, were left sitting in the hallway; I suppose such was to be expected for this situation.

Sister Lillian, suppressing her sobs, responded to Alize slowly. “Alize... Oh! I should be saying that to you! What have you been doing, keeping this all a secret from me...?”

At those words, Alize spun around, looking at all of us before quickly turning back to Sister Lillian. It seemed like she had been adequately brought up to speed.

Alize responded somewhat apologetically.

“Ah... I’ve been found out, huh... I apologize. Um. But...we... We really wanted you to get better, Lady Lillian...”

And so it came to be that Alize told Sister Lillian of everything, not leaving out a single detail. While I assumed Sister Lillian would be upset at Alize’s actions, she had instead smiled gently, not a hint of anger in her voice.

“I understand. I have no intention of blaming or reprimanding you, Alize... No. Instead, I feel very blessed... Under normal circumstances, the Accumulative Miasma Disease would remain untreatable—such is the difficulty of procuring a Dragon Blood Blossom. Among the faithful and those blessed with divinity, it is a most fearsome disease... Even so...”

“It’s a miracle of the Great Angels... It has to be. A... A miracle, in recognition of all the work you have done for us, for the orphanage, Lady Lillian... A miracle...”

Alize lowered her head. The good sister’s emotional words had probably moved her close to tears.

Sister Lillian continued smiling, shaking her head slowly.

“I have only done what should be done. Perhaps this is indeed the guidance of the Great Angels, but, more than anything, it was you, Alize. You worked hard with your earnest wish to help me. Mister Rentt braved the swamp and found the blossoms...while Unbert and Norman synthesized the medicine. I am deeply grateful...for all your help. Truly. Thank you, everyone...”

Something seemed to well up from deep within her heart, as tears soon flowed from the good sister’s eyes once more.



“Rentt! Rentt! Can I go next? Can I go next?!”

“Oi! I’m up next!”

“Eh?! But I was first in line!”

A small crowd stood around me in the orphanage’s small chapel, their eyes trained upon a familiar-looking little airship, zipping this way and that in the air. The crowd was none other than Lorraine, myself, and all the orphans of the Second Orphanage of Maalt.

The airship flew somewhat precariously and appeared unstable at times, but it remained firmly airborne. As if obeying the will of the individual controlling it, it stayed clear of the ceiling and walls. The one holding the remote was one of the orphans in the crowd, a boy of about five years of age, I suppose. I had

begun playing around with the airship idly a few moments ago; the child stared on enviously, so I thought it fair to let him have a go. The boy had no mana of his own, but I had recharged the airship's crystal adequately so one only had to hold the remote for it to take to the skies.

Perhaps one would question how I ended up in such a situation. The explanation was simple: Unbert and Norman had returned after giving the good sister instructions on how the medicine should be taken. Sister Lillian, however, had wanted to speak to Alize in private. Lorraine and I had been asked to wait outside.

The conversation was undoubtedly about our plan to turn Alize into an adventurer-magus-scholar of some sort. It was quite a commitment, so I didn't expect an immediate answer; a few days, or maybe even a little longer, perhaps.

Strangely enough, we were told the conversation wouldn't take very long at all. Curious, I asked for a reason, and was given one as such. Although we looked a little strange to Sister Lillian, she didn't think of us as ill-intentioned individuals, and she felt we could be trusted. She simply wished to ask Alize about Alize's determination and dreams for the future.

But...

A little strange?

I felt like I should have said something about our perceived strangeness, but ultimately decided against it. Lorraine, sensing my discontent, quickly dragged me out of the room, announcing we would be waiting in the orphanage's chapel.

Perhaps I should have been more resolute. Strange? Us? Why? In what sense...?

But I suppose that was all said and done now. The two really did need to talk.

"Well, Rentt. Is that really all right? Does that not mean a lot to you?" Lorraine said, staring up at the little airship zipping about above our heads.

Lorraine was right—the airship meant a lot to me, but I felt I shouldn't prohibit everyone else from touching it. The joy of controlling such a wonderful

magical tool should be shared among as many people as possible... At least, that was what I thought.

For that to happen, participants were required, but I was more concerned about the possibility of theft. Luckily, there was no need for such concern in this particular situation, and I found myself enjoying the atmosphere in the room more than I should have.

"It's fine. They all seem to be enjoying themselves," I said, casting my gaze toward the children who were passing the remote among themselves.

"I suppose." Lorraine nodded, shifting her gaze as well. "But, Rentt...what do you think of it? Would she approve?"

A change in subject, no doubt, with the subject in question being none other than the matter of Alize becoming an adventurer.

"It should be fine, I think. Let's consider the fact that the career options of an orphan are somewhat limited. If they were hardworking and smart enough, they'd end up as monks or sisters in a shrine somewhere. Most of the children here, however, would have to find a job on their own accord. Alize is still young, but she would come of age in two, maybe three years, then she'd be in the same boat, too. We are merely accelerating the process."

Lorraine had a somewhat pained look on her face, which was to be expected, given the cruel reality that awaited most of the orphans before us.

"Yes, yes. I suppose you are right." Lorraine quickly shook her head. Her voice sounded a little softer than usual.

At that moment, a familiar sound echoed out from behind us; the chapel's doors were opening.

"It would seem like they are here, Rentt."

Standing in the doorway were Sister Lillian and Alize. I found it strange for the sister to be up and about so quickly, but as she approached, I could make out a smile on her face.

"It has only been a short while since my first dose of medication, but already my body feels lighter. Some of my divinity has returned, as well. With this, I

would surely be able to return to my duties.”

It was a good thing indeed. Sister Lillian already seemed much better. Alize, however, whispered to her in a small, yet urgent voice.

“Lady Lillian! You’re not well yet! You should be resting your body. I will handle the day-to-day affairs of the orphanage for a while longer...”

Looking at the pair, I couldn’t quite make out who was the orphanage’s administrator. Lillian turned to Alize, that same gentle smile still on her face.

“Haha... Well, then, Alize. I suppose I will do just that for a little longer. Even so, my child...were you not going with these kind people here to learn the ways of adventuring, magecraft, and scholarly pursuit? From now on, you should no longer be trying to do everything yourself. Learn to rely more on others, Alize.”

At those words, Lorraine and I felt a sense of relief. It seemed the good sister had given us her blessing in the end.

Alize promptly turned to face us.

“Well...that’s how it is, Mister Rentt, Miss Lorraine. I will be in your care from now on. I... I’ll work hard!” Alize said, bowing her head deeply.

“Yes, we will be working together from now, you and I. Let us blaze a glorious path toward the betterment of magecraft and knowledge,” Lorraine said, somewhat theatrically.

I continued close after her.

“I’m glad to work with you, too... You do want to become an adventurer, right? Right...?”

For some reason, I felt like I had to have a proper confirmation from Alize to set my mind at ease.

“Well, then, my students. A most basic question, one of the foundations of magecraft... Do you know what is required to weave spells?” Lorraine asked, holding up a wooden pointer of sorts and occasionally rapping it against a large, flat board mounted behind her.

We were, of course, now in Lorraine’s living room. And by students, Lorraine

referred to none other than myself, Rentt Faina, and Alize, who was seated next to me.

Alize had formally decided to pursue the path of a mage—or adventurer—just the day before, and this was the very first lesson we had to take, on the very first day of our new curriculum.

Perhaps one would wonder why I, Rentt Faina, would be seated next to Alize. The reason was because Lorraine was currently educating us on the basics of magecraft. Alize had a deep reserve of mana, and as such should rightfully be trained in the ways of magecraft. But Alize wasn't the only one with said talents, for I was the same.

Of course, this was a relatively recent development. Before, all I could do was cast some low-level attack spells, or maybe cause a trickle of water to come forth from my palms. No one would have claimed I had magical talent of any sort in the past, but my circumstances were now slightly different... After all, my mana capacity and aptitude for magic had greatly increased since my most recent Existential Evolution—somewhat unbelievably, even.

Chapter 4: Magecraft

I was now able to utilize magecraft, probably on the level of a proper mage. While I was technically able to do this, I still found it all very difficult, primarily due to the fact that my theoretical knowledge on magecraft was severely lacking. Some studying on my part was required, then the rest should come naturally. I had asked Lorraine to tutor me on the subject as well, and, before I knew it, I was taking lessons with Alize.

For her part, Lorraine quickly accepted me as her student, though she did say I had to pay twice the fees.

Twice! And she said that without hesitation!

Lorraine just meant I had to pay my fair share, not that I had to pay twice the going rate. Given that she was tutoring Alize and myself, this wasn't too unreasonable. I had wondered if I deserved a bit of a discount, given that I'd been taking care of all the domestic chores in this household for as long as I could remember.

Not something a freeloader like myself should be saying, I suppose...

For starters, there were only two realistic options when it came to learning magecraft: one either had to become a disciple of a famous mage or to attend a magecraft academy. Both choices involved tens of gold coins—not a small sum, by any means. Lorraine's fees were charitably low in comparison—maybe a little too low.

Either way, I could confidently say Lorraine had already given us a discount of sorts... And so it came to be that Alize and I were seated in front of Lorraine, listening to her very first lecture. Incidentally, the curriculum had a name: "The First Magecraft Lecture *Magecraft Explained! Even a Goblin Would Get It.*" Lorraine had come up with the title herself.

Already, Lorraine had a question for us. I motioned to answer it, only to be interrupted by a cheerful voice.

“Yes! I know!”

It was Alize, eagerly raising her hand.

Lorraine, eager to play the part, pointed her wooden wand at her equally eager student.

“Well, then, Alize. Go ahead.”

Alize bolted upward from her chair, delivering her answer confidently.

“Yes! For one to utilize any form of magecraft, mana is required!”

“Well done. You may sit down, Alize.”

I have been outdone...

It wasn't like I didn't know the answer. I was just...slow in raising my hand.

Yes. That was all there was to it.

“It is as Alize has said. Mana is required for any and all kinds of magecraft. It is also worth noting that having great reserves of mana does not mean an individual would automatically become a great mage. However, all great mages strive toward a bigger, more capable mana capacity. The reason for this is simple...”

“Yes! Me! I know!”

I cut Lorraine off mid-sentence, desperately waving my hand in the air. Alize, who was seated calmly next to me, gave me a quick sideways glance, muttering something about how I was being immature. I, however, didn't pay her much heed.

Rentt Faina hated losing. One loss was fine, but I would definitely come out on top next time.

Lorraine's gaze shifted from my raised hand, then to Alize's exasperated expression. She sighed, pointing her wooden wand at me reluctantly.

“Yes, go ahead, Rentt...”

An equally exasperated tone of voice, too.

“With a small mana capacity,” I swiftly answered the question, “the types of

spells an individual can utilize are limited. For example, they would be limited to cantrips and other weak spells, sometimes referred to as Livelihood Magecraft. They would also be unable to utilize any types of attack spells—such circumstances were common. In fact, I was the same, a long time ago.”

“Yes, well done. Aren’t you glad, Rentt?” Lorraine said, evidently unimpressed.

The last bits of my answer seemed to have drawn Alize’s attention, however.

“Eh? Really? You couldn’t do much of anything at all in the past, Rentt?” she questioned, not bothering to hide her surprise.

What, does Alize think of me as some sort of omnipotent, superhuman being?

She defaulted to her more casual manner of speech after I had told her it was quite fine to be herself. Even Lorraine was on board with the idea—at least, outside of lesson hours. When Alize was studying the ways of magecraft, she was to address Lorraine as “professor” and observe all sorts of social pleasantries...a strange set of rules even I was bound by.

According to Lorraine, such practices were common in the school system she had been a part of in her youth.

I wonder how schools usually were in the Kingdom of Yaaran?

I had never stepped into a place of learning before, so I didn’t know the answer. Lessons given by the adventurer’s guild were also relatively casual, and everyone was treated equally regardless of age or experience. By comparison, Lorraine’s insistence on these methods of address were oddly refreshing.

“I’m by no means omnipotent, Alize. In fact, there are many things I can’t do, even now.”

Alize didn’t seem too convinced. Lorraine interjected, nodding as she spoke.

“You see, my dear Alize...Rentt is the sort of person who does what he can do. If he cannot do something, he is utterly incapable of it. He is, of course, reasonably capable and skilled in many areas now... But even so, he has his shortcomings. Do you understand, Alize? Of course, adventurers usually hide their deficiencies when going about their business... Such is the nature of

things.”

Alize slowly nodded, seemingly still in some disbelief. Turning to Lorraine, Alize continued on.

“So Rentt couldn’t use any magecraft except for...Livelihood Magecraft, in his past...?”

“That was the reality of it, yes. Rentt has not been able to utilize any complicated spells, at least up until recently. For most people, their mana reserves remain stagnant after puberty, neither increasing nor decreasing over time. Exceptions, however, do exist. An individual could have their mana capacity suddenly increase because of special circumstances, or the like.”

It was a good way of hiding the truth, I suppose; Lorraine had already come up with a justification for why I was attending her lessons. According to Lorraine, it was best to mention such a reason in Alize’s presence as soon as possible.

“What sort of circumstances would those be?”

As expected, Alize was drawn to the supposedly special circumstances responsible for my sudden spike in mana capacity. Lorraine seemed more than prepared for her question.

“An exhaustive list is impossible, yes. I can, however, think of some common examples, such as...the consumption of a special elixir, perhaps, or maybe the slaying of a particularly strong monster. Some individuals may also receive divine blessings of some kind, while on the other hand, possibly form a pact with a demon, exchanging some part of themselves for power... So on and so forth.”

While the mana capacity of most individuals remained relatively stagnant, it was entirely possible to increase it with special means. However, all those methods were risky, and they often came at great costs. Plus, there was the question of luck; something could, against all odds, go very wrong.

For instance, a mana elixir would be difficult to come by, and, even if it had, it’d be sold for astronomical prices at an auction. One would have to slay a beast of legendary proportions to gain such powers—a questionable feat, if

nothing else. As for the blessing of faeries and the divine...a matter of luck. But then again, lucky individuals didn't just drop out of the sky. Lastly, contracts with demonic entities were dangerous in every sense of the word, and it often didn't matter how many lives an individual could hypothetically have. Even I would have already increased my mana capacity in life if it were so simple.

I continued slaying monsters and absorbing their powers, but the increase was miniscule at best. I had slain Goblins and other creatures for a decade, but I didn't feel any different, mana-wise.

Even so, slaying monsters was probably the most straightforward route, but I did end up getting eaten and killed at one point, so there was that.

"I didn't do anything special, in my case. Maybe it was just a matter of luck that it suddenly increased," I said to Alize.

As Lorraine said, exceptions were possible in very rare cases. It was impossible to say such occurrences absolutely couldn't happen, and that lined up with Lorraine's explanations perfectly. Alize's knowledge on magecraft was still somewhat limited, after all.

"Oh...is that right? So that's why you're taking lessons with me now, Rentt..." she said, seemingly convinced.

I suppose the day would come where Alize would eventually realize I was strange or different in some way, but that was another explanation for another time...



"And there we have it. For a mage to utilize magecraft, they must first be able to sense the presence of mana in their bodies, then tap into that reserve on their own accord. Even if one has reserves of mana within, an inability to sense and command it would prevent one from becoming a mage. A more common scenario than you would think, yes. So, Alize, do you feel the mana inside you as we speak?" Lorraine asked, looking up at her student.

"No..." Alize shook her head slowly. "I can't feel a thing. Um...Professor Lorraine. Am I not cut out to be a mage...?"

Alize's features were filled with unease, as if a door that had been opened to

her before was now violently shut in her face. The most direct interpretation of Lorraine's words would be saddening to Alize, for if she couldn't feel the mana within her, then she wouldn't become a mage. It was easy to empathize with Alize's fears.

But Lorraine shook her head slowly as she smiled reassuringly at her new student.

"There is no need to rush. That is not quite how it works, Alize. While I cannot make any promises now, it is too early on in the process for you to be worrying. In fact, the examples I gave just now, say, of individuals who could not feel the mana within, more than half of them would be self-taught...or had at least attempted learning magecraft on their own accord. Of course, becoming aware of one's own mana reserves is a difficult feat. There is that one legend, yes, of the 'Magician of Beginnings'... While he discovered and utilized the mana within himself without any assistance, few individuals would seek to imitate his actions. I suppose there could be a few people here and there who do succeed...if they have the innate feel for it, yes. We could put it that way."

Alize raised her hand. "Professor Lorraine, what about you? How did you learn it?"

"Ah, yes. That? I was able to sense and weave the mana within myself into spells, yes. Are you not impressed?" Lorraine said, without the slightest hint of embarrassment.

Even though I turned and stared straight at her while she was making her claims, there didn't seem to be a single shred of humility in Lorraine's being.

"What about Rentt...?"

I suppose that would be the logical continuation to Alize's question...

"Of course not, Alize. I am but a mundane individual."

True, to a certain extent. While I had reserves of mana within me, I didn't have the means to utilize them. Alize would surely ask about how I was able to use mana for other purposes next, and, as expected, she did.

"What would one do if they were unable to draw out their own mana?"

“There are a few ways, yes. The easiest method would be to obtain the cooperation of an individual who was already skilled in the use of their own mana, who would then channel their mana through the body of the recipient. This gives them a feel of what mana is like, so to speak. Assuming the individual in question is not particularly thick, they would be able to sense their own mana in due time. The period varies from individual to individual, of course, with some even saying those with large reserves tend to become aware of it relatively quickly.”

“Are there any other ways to become self-aware, then, Professor Lorraine?”

“Hmm. While I do not recommend it, one could do battle with monsters and the like. As you may know, those who defeat monsters often absorb their strength in the process, and that power is often made up of several different types of energies. Mana is one of these energies. If one absorbs said power, they would feel a similar sensation to the previous method, where some mana will run through their bodies. It is, however, a small fragment of energy, so it would take quite a long time for an individual to become capable of utilizing their reserves if this path were taken.”

“Hmm... Is there not a fast method that anyone could try their hand at?”

Perhaps Alize thought it troublesome since both of the methods Lorraine described had their own shortcomings, hence her question. Under normal circumstances, one would assume it was impossible for an individual to suddenly gain powers or abilities without lifting a finger. Most of the time, this was true, and, from an educational perspective, this should perhaps be reinforced. Lorraine, however, didn't shake her head.

“There is a way, yes. To take on the impact of a spell with one's body. Straightforward, no?”

“Eh?”

“You do know of monsters that are capable of casting spells, yes? From primitive to complex spells... Well, the complexity of the magecraft in question would largely depend on the monster's species. For instance, take a typical Goblin Mage—their magics are primitive, yes? But they do know of magecraft...to some degree.”

“Y-Yes, but...to take on the impact...?”

“Literally, Alize. Foteia Borivaas, or maybe a Gie Vieros...anything is fine. You just have to get hit by it.”

It was terrifying enough to hear such a notion, let alone seriously attempt doing such a thing. Perhaps it wasn't meant to be taken seriously.

“But Professor Lorraine, even if it were a weak spell, a person who did that would...die.” Alize seemed stunned, her voice trailing off as she finished her sentence.

Lorraine nodded sagely in response.

“Well, yes, that could happen. If one were unlucky, they would die. Conversely, if one was relatively lucky, they would live. Not a normal method by any means, but definitely one that works. If the individual survives, they would surely be capable of feeling the mana within them. Now, perhaps you would ask why. The reason for this is simple: the mana within a normal human's body is usually stagnant. This causes it to be somewhat difficult to detect. If one is incapable of utilizing said internal mana reserves, then the alternative would be to take in magical energy from external sources. If an individual were to be hit by a spell, it would send a wave, or a ripple, perhaps, of magical energy resounding through them. Should they ever awaken from their ordeal, they would surely be able to feel the magical energies stirring within.”

Lorraine described a fair amount of benefits to this method, but Alize remained staunchly opposed to it, and it wasn't difficult to see why.

“But Professor Lorraine...surely there can't be anyone alive who would try something as dangerous as that...?”

Lorraine raised her pointer-wand abruptly.

“Oh, but of course there is! Why, one is seated right next to you.”

The raised wand was now pointed clearly and purposefully in my direction. Alize widened her eyes. Her shock, or awe, was immense. It was like she'd seen a dragon or some other mythical beast on the streets of Maalt.

Although she was too stunned to say a word, Alize's eyes were clearly

questioning my sanity. But I was, in fact, relatively sane. I merely had an urge to drink fresh blood every now and then. Even I knew it was an excuse, but I had to say something.

“Well, even I had attempted other, more commonplace methods. The village I was born in was relatively small, so there were few people who could even use magic, let alone complicated magecraft. Even if I had asked to be taught, there were no such resources in place... I had to do something about my own situation myself, you see.”

By the time I had become an adventurer, however, I was already able to weave mana into water and shoot out the occasional spark or two. It wasn't as if I didn't learn of the risks involved, but, either way, I had done some research into the possible ways of activating one's mana reserves, then acted on my own choices.

Simply put, I had sought out a Goblin Mage living in the area around my village, then promptly ate one of its spells face-first. While I ended up being able to feel the mana within me, it was quite a reckless thing to do. Even I'm amazed at the fact I still draw breath to this day.

But it wasn't something I had done carelessly. I'd heard of a Goblin Mage that had gotten old living in the woods. Said Goblin's magic was weakened due to its age, and I had approached it carefully. The spell I was hit with was nothing more than a small Gie Viers. In addition, I was hit at a somewhat favorable location, as it didn't do much other than leave a small scar on my stomach. With that, I was able to escape with relative ease.

After the incident, I had apparently passed out in my home, and for a few days I struggled with a fever and fainting spells, or so I was told. Some even said I was in a feverish coma.

Come to think of it, I'd heard nothing about the Goblin Mage being hunted all these years; perhaps it was still alive. If that truly were the case, I should pay it a visit and offer my thanks.

Such was the story I told Alize. But Alize didn't seem impressed, instead turning to Lorraine with a mixture of exasperation and shock on her face.

“I... I don't want to learn magecraft in that way.”

Such was her blunt rejection of my methods. How terrible.

Or, perhaps I was the terrible one...?

Thinking back upon my actions, I was truly reckless: *Rentt Faina, what were you even doing?*

I was, of course, now an Undead, yet I still had no idea what I was doing.

“But of course you would feel that way. Rest assured, no mage in their sane mind would recommend such a method to their students. A more normal method suits you better, Alize. In other words, all you have to do is have an already established mage channel mana through you. It is a simple method, and we can begin right away. Are you ready?”



“Does it...hurt?” Alize said, that same expression on her face as she turned to face Lorraine.

“No, not at all. Having another person’s mana flow into your body could feel like...a force pressing down on your stomach, perhaps. Even so, it is not forceful enough to cause you pain. How would I describe it... Ah, yes, a momentary shortness of breath, or something along those lines. In any case, it is nothing to worry about, Alize.”

“In that case...please, Professor Lorraine. Do as you will.”

Alize, seemingly relieved at Lorraine’s explanation, bowed her head deeply. Lorraine nodded.

“Well, then. Present your hands to me.”

“Yes.”

Alize did as she was told, and Lorraine promptly grasped the child’s hands in her own.

“All right, I will now have some of my mana flow through your body. Have you steeled yourself?”

“Yes... Um, I did have a question. If all I need is to be hit by a spell, would an enchantment spell or something similar not work in the same way?”

“It would work, yes.” Lorraine’s answer was prompt. “However, there is no benefit for a mage to do such a thing to their prospective student. The process I described just now is for individuals who do not have access to a teacher of any kind, or a mage capable of imparting the ways of magecraft to others.”

“I don’t understand, Professor Lorraine... What does that mean?”

“If you do choose to be ‘hit’ by a spell, Alize, that would cause the mana in your body to churn and swirl, much like waves in a storm. If you do not know how to utilize the mana within you, yet had a mage cast a spell on you, the same thing would happen. In such an event, your body would be wracked by pain, and you would feel nauseated for days on end. You would also feel dizzy, of course, for quite a while... Rentt has experienced that firsthand. Isn’t that right, Rentt?”

I nodded at Lorraine’s words. “Honestly speaking, there were times when I thought, ‘I’d be better off dead.’ I wouldn’t like to experience it a second time.”

Those were my honest thoughts. It was a terrible experience—the wavering consciousness, the fading, fragile sense of time, the feeling this sense of ambiguity and pain would continue on for an eternity... No one would ever wish to experience such a thing. Once bitten twice shy, perhaps.

A masochist, on the other hand, may find a second experience...appealing. I wasn’t a masochist by any means, of course.

“If you are fine with said consequences, Alize, I could enchant you with a simple spell. Would that be acceptable?”

Alize violently shook her head from side to side at Lorraine’s question.

“N-No! A n-normal method is quite all right, Professor Lorraine!” Alize said, almost shouting as she did so.

A reasonable reaction. As I had mentioned before, few would willingly choose to experience such a thing. Even I didn’t get hit by a spell just for the fun of it! There were simply no other ways for me to become aware of my mana.

A typical mage would hardly hesitate to demand unbelievable sums of coin from a simple villager. Maybe it was within their rights to do so, given they had enough mana within them to be called mages in the first place. An expensive

service, nonetheless. I had hardly had such coin, and I had wanted to awaken the energies within myself, so there really was no other way.

“Hmm. There you have it, Alize. Well, then... This time, I will channel mana through you. Focus, Alize. Feel the strange sensation about to ripple through your entire being.”

“YesssSSS?!”

Alize nodded, and, at that moment, Lorraine squeezed the child’s hands tightly. Alize’s eyes widened, more so than they ever had before. From that alone, I understood—that this was how it felt for those who were blessed with talent.

I felt...envious...

“Well, then? Do you understand now?” Lorraine asked, still holding Alize’s hands as she posed the question.

“Yes...” Alize slowly nodded. “I think. I think I understand. Something like...something sticky, oozing, like mud, flowing through...my body...”

It was Lorraine’s turn to widen her eyes, but her reaction was more tame than Alize’s.

“You do have more mana than most to begin with, but to think you are aware of this much... Impressive. Yes, that is mana, Alize. I made it flow with my own energies just now. But can you move it by your own will?”

“It is...a little difficult...”

Beads of sweat began forming on Alize’s forehead. It seemed like channeling and moving mana around in one’s body wasn’t a simple task.

Prompted by Alize’s struggles, I attempted to move the mana within myself—from my stomach, I made it flow into my arms, and even wrap around my body. It was...simple, at least for me. But that was perhaps a given, as I had more experience. After all, I had been using mana for a decade or so, and the only thing holding me back was my small mana capacity.

Mana was a peculiar thing; having much of it within oneself made sensing it easy. The appropriate control and movement of mana, however, became more

difficult the more mana one had. Much like moving many objects around in a cramped room, perhaps.

Take, for instance, a well-filled bag—even if one shook it, the objects within wouldn't move very much. The contents of a somewhat emptier bag, though, would rattle around if shaken. This was why I was able to easily control my mana after I had become aware of it. In addition, I had practiced using it over a long period of time, hence the relative ease of use.

But this alone didn't make me a skilled mage of any sort. While I had become capable of shifting the mana in my body around at will, in addition to adjusting its intensity and becoming able to weave spells quickly, that was all I could do. For one to cast strong, powerful spells, one required a larger mana capacity. Some even said having good control of one's mana was particularly valuable for women, if only because the individual in question would be able to channel mana to any part of their body. The creation of water, in turn, was a simple spell that most beginners learned first, so it was easy for a woman to cry crocodile tears with the aid of her mana. As such, female mages ended up mastering this technique relatively quickly...

Thinking about it, it was a truly fearsome thing.

"Well, then, shall we take a short rest?"

Lorraine looked at Alize with some concern. Lorraine let go of Alize's hands, interrupting the flow of mana. Alize's breathing immediately became irregular, and she soon fell to her knees.

Not exactly a sense of pain, but definitely not a proverbial walk in the park. Having someone else's mana flow through one's body wasn't fatal, but it also wasn't exactly a good thing. Prolonged exposure could harm the body.

Originally, the process took days, to be repeated again and again after the student had ample rest. Alize, however, was able to feel the mana in her body almost instantly. As Lorraine said, she really did have quite the talent.

"Are you all right? Perhaps we should stop here for today."

Alize's breathing was more stable now, but she didn't seem to be in a good way with her face still streaked with sweat. It looked like she had pushed

herself a little too far.

Alize seemed somewhat troubled at Lorraine's words.

"H-How... How long. How many times...do I...?"

"Would you need to get used to it? But of course, until you are able to manipulate the mana in your body freely, Alize. Until you are capable of such a feat, I will keep channeling mana into you. There is no other way. It will probably be difficult, yes."

"N-No... Really...?"

Alize's face filled with despair. It seemed like she was truly suffering.

Lorraine smiled wryly at Alize's reaction.

"There is no need for you to learn it all in one day, Alize. I had planned for the process to take several, as such. Hence..."

Lorraine was suggesting our lessons would end—for today, at least. I held out a hand, lighting a small flame above a finger. In my other, water flowed freely from my palms. Having done those things, I stared straight in Alize's direction, with the hope of communicating that magic wasn't all that difficult.

It didn't take long to catch Alize's attention.

"How... How long will it...be...u-until I can do...that?" Alize said, gasping between breaths and staring at me with marked disdain.

Alize had interpreted my small demonstration as a provocation. I suppose that was one way of looking at it, for, to Alize, I came across as a show-off. None of this was done on purpose, of course; it was a mere demonstration.

Lorraine promptly turned to me, hardly amused by my efforts.



“You really should stop provoking the child, Rentt...” she whispered before turning to Alize and reassuring her in a kind voice. “You will be able to do all that soon, Alize. Those are simple cantrips, so it would not take you long.”

Ah, ten years of my hard work, trivialized by a single statement...

Lorraine had a point, though. I wouldn't deny the magecraft I had just used was simple; if anything, I now felt like I could easily send a jet of water shooting out from my palms if I tried. A simple cantrip from within the small library of Livelihood Magecraft. A small-scale spell, of course, but if I fed enough mana into it, I might be able to amplify its effects...

Maybe it was even worth a try, or so I thought. An exclamation from Alize as she got up interrupted my train of thought.

“Well, then...until I can do that, I'll keep trying!”

Alize seemed spurred on for some reason, eagerness evident in her features. She was tired, but now she stood with a sheer force of will.

“Is that so?” Lorraine smiled at her eager student. “Well, then...let us try for a little longer.”

Lorraine glanced at me slightly, a brief smile crossing her face. Before I could respond, she had grasped Alize's arms once again, and the channeling process began anew.



“Ughhh...” Alize groaned, lost in focus as she desperately attempted to channel mana into the tip of her index finger.

As long as one was accustomed to it, mana could be channeled to virtually any part of the body. For most human individuals, the hands were where mana usually flowed to and exited from.

In these lands, it was common for most individuals to think of magic shooting out from one's palms or fingers. Many explanations had been suggested for this phenomenon: that it was easiest to channel mana through one's arms, or it was something most people could easily imagine. Whatever the case, the phenomenon was true and common.

Personally, I knew of a mage who had the ability to shoot magic from his eyes, and I felt the imagination theory held more water. The mage in question could channel mana through his hands. I once asked him why he chose to use his eyes instead, and his answer was quite memorable: “Because it is impressive.” Ah, a truly unforgettable individual.

Jokes aside, I assumed my mage acquaintance shooting magic spells from his eyes was the fastest and easiest choice for him. Mages like this existed, although their numbers were by no means great.

“Hmm.... Yes. Not too bad at all. You are now able to move the mana within you, I see. Still a small amount compared to what is in you, but, with this amount of mana, you may be able to cast a cantrip or two without too many issues.”

Alize didn't respond, her breaths coming in raspy gasps.

“Ugh... Ha... Ha...”

With her concentration interrupted, the mana in Alize's finger dispersed.

“Are you all right, Alize? This next infusion will be harsh indeed...”

Lorraine warned Alize in a somewhat concerned tone of voice. Alize was hunched over on all fours on the ground, still trying to catch her breath.

Alize's previous exertions were like short-distance, full-speed sprints—about two or three of them. Alize's current fatigue was much like she had run a few marathons around the walls of Maalt, so the child was near her limit.

One may think it a little too much for her first day, but perhaps this was for the best. The strictest regimens should be implemented from the very beginning. To think Alize would come so close to her physical limits just by learning magecraft... She would surely make a good adventurer in the future.

Although mages commonly had less physical strength and stamina than their adventurer brethren, Alize would have to possess a much higher level of stamina than the average townspeople to survive. Even Lorraine, who was a scholar by profession and only took on requests from the guild when she felt like it, was a force to behold. She would, for instance, never lose to some random punks on the street when it came to arm-wrestling. Adventurers were

required to perform physical labors and feats on a regular basis, after all, or would eventually become capable of doing so. The methods by which this would happen varied. Maybe it was training, or maybe it was just power absorbed from the foes they had slain.

“I am...quite...all right. Until I can do what...Rentt... What Rentt...did...I will keep...trying...”

Alize stared daggers at me the entire time. Maybe it was the fountain of water that was still pouring forth from one of my palms.

Admirable fortitude, for a child her age. If I were in her shoes, I would have concluded the session by now.

Lorraine turned to Alize, concern evident in her voice.

“I do not mind, yes...but you really should not push yourself, Alize. Rentt is provoking you, obviously. While he may be playing around, the training he had gone through to be able to do just that was hellish. It is his way of encouraging you, Alize, of telling you to work hard, though you are already so tired.”

What nonsense! I had no such intentions...

Probably...

Humans were a race capable of achieving great feats if they tried. Alize, however, smiled at Lorraine in between her gasps.

“I understand. I am...not...all that angry. But really, Professor Lorraine...is it really possible? For me to be able to do what...Rentt does? In one day?”

“Hmm. Well... Rentt would not suggest something that is clearly out of your reach. If I had to say...you are almost there. A little bit more, perhaps. If you become capable of such...then our lesson for the day can end.”

“Well...I’ll do it. I’ll do it, then... What should I do next?”

Lorraine nodded. “Next would be instruction on that cantrip Rentt has been casting. In other words, it is what brings to your mind the image of the magecraft in question. There are few ways to do it: with a full incantation, a shortened incantation, or without any incantations at all. There are other, more special methods available, yes, but, for now, these three methods are fine. Do

you understand, Alize?”

“I think I understand the...gist, of it...” Alize nodded slowly, but her expression betrayed the fact she understood little, if anything at all.

This was to be expected, and Lorraine understood as much.

“Yes, yes. I suppose a demonstration is in order. Well, then, let us have Rentt, you who have been providing ample provocation from the sidelines. Take responsibility for this task. You do remember the incantation, do you not, Rentt?”

Lorraine seemed amused as the words left her lips, if her smile was anything to go by.



“...”

It was a strange spectacle. I stood silent, in the middle of the room, while Alize and Lorraine watched on.

This was the demonstration of the Livelihood Magecraft in question. Although I was a Bronze-class adventurer, I was also a veteran in the business, so it was natural to turn to me as a magical teaching aid, a smooth transition in the curriculum.

I couldn't say I was confident, however... But then again, it was only simple magic, the very same cantrip that encouraged Alize to go on when she first witnessed it.

The problem was Lorraine's request, namely the incantation of this cantrip. The reason being I didn't really use incantations of any sort. To say I didn't utilize incantations at all would be inaccurate, for I recalled a few textbook examples I had learned in my youth.

Magecraft was a thing that became more instinctive the more one was accustomed to it. Long incantations became short ones, and, with time, no incantations would be required for a familiar spell. For about a decade, I had been casting these three simple spells, over and over again. As such, I hardly needed any incantations to invoke said spells once more. This was why I

remembered little of the incantations I had used in life...

*Wait... Did Lorraine ask me to do this because she knew this would happen?
Ugh...*

“Hmm... Ah. ‘Oh, flame. Let my mana be as grain, and manifest before me...
Ignite Aryumage.’”

As soon as the incantation ended, a small flame materialized on my fingertip. This was a spell that supported me as I camped in the wilderness across all these years. It was only natural I would be able to wield it so simply.

The problem was the incantation—had I gotten it right? Most of it, perhaps, but what about the details? I was uncertain of the wording... Was it flame? Or ember? Fire? Was there something lacking? Manifest before me? Appear before me? Be summoned before... Hmm. No. I really couldn’t remember.

The doubt was probably showing on my face, for Lorraine said nothing. Instead, she silently observed me with a marked expression of amusement on her face. The feeling of doubt crept deeper into my soul.

Alize, for her part, stared at me in awe, as if I were some great pioneer, lighting up the path before her... That is, if the incantation was right.

For a few terrible minutes, Lorraine remained silent before finally deciding to speak.

“Ho... You do remember, after all? How unexpected. Well done, Rentt,” she said, that same smile on her face.

I heaved a sigh of relief. With this, my ordeal was finally over.

“I was uncertain... Very much so... Either way, I’m glad I remembered. Would you be able to do the same, Alize?”

I had expected Alize to be irritated with my constant provocations, but she responded in a somewhat unexpected manner.

“Hmm... I don’t really know. Can I really do it? I still think you’re amazing, Rentt...”

There was no sense of malice in her statement. Between Alize and me, I no longer knew who was the more mature one.

Well...that wasn't entirely true. I was evidently more childish. I knew as much.

Lorraine soon followed up on the conversation. "Of course you can do it, Alize. There are many basic tips and tricks you may employ... You are better of asking Rentt, of course. He is, after all, a veteran when it comes to beginner-level magic."

The mastery of a specific magecraft directly affected a spell's casting speed and power. Having practiced the same three spells for over a decade, I could confidently say my mastery over them even rivaled that of Lorraine's.

Turning around, Alize stared up at me expectantly. *Already asking for advice, I see.*

"Concentrate your mana on a single spot. Then stabilize that concentrated mana. Picture in your mind the desired outcome... These are steps that apply to all sorts of other magecraft. There's no harm in imagining what you wish to do...I think."

Even though I was a veteran in the subject, I couldn't utilize any magic other than Livelihood Magecraft, so I couldn't make sweeping statements about higher level magic.

"Rentt's words ring true." Lorraine nodded in agreement. "The imagination is a powerful thing. Image the outcome in your mind; this will aid in other types of magecraft, as well. Tips and tricks for other types of spells exist, too, of course... In any case, it is faster for you to simply try it. The incantation comes first; memorize it, then chant it. Can you do that, Alize?"

Alize nodded promptly, standing up and readying herself once more.



"Well, then. You must first focus your mana, Alize. As you did just now, focus it into the tip of your index finger."

Alize gave Lorraine a brief nod before focusing intensely, gathering up the mana in her being. While I couldn't see the movements of mana in others' bodies, Lorraine apparently could.

"How's she doing?"

“Hmm... Quite well, I would say. Not as disgustingly fast as how you were moving your mana around prior, Rentt, but, still, this is good progress for her first day. The fact she can do this much is more than enough.” Lorraine nodded sagely.

“All right. It is now time for beginner magecraft, Alize. Try imagining what you saw Rentt do just now. Picture the scene in your mind, then say the incantation. This one right here.”

Lorraine pointed her wand at the wooden board; she'd already written down the relevant incantation at some point in time, probably when I wasn't looking.

Alize, with beads of sweat forming on her forehead, nodded once more and slowly opened her lips.

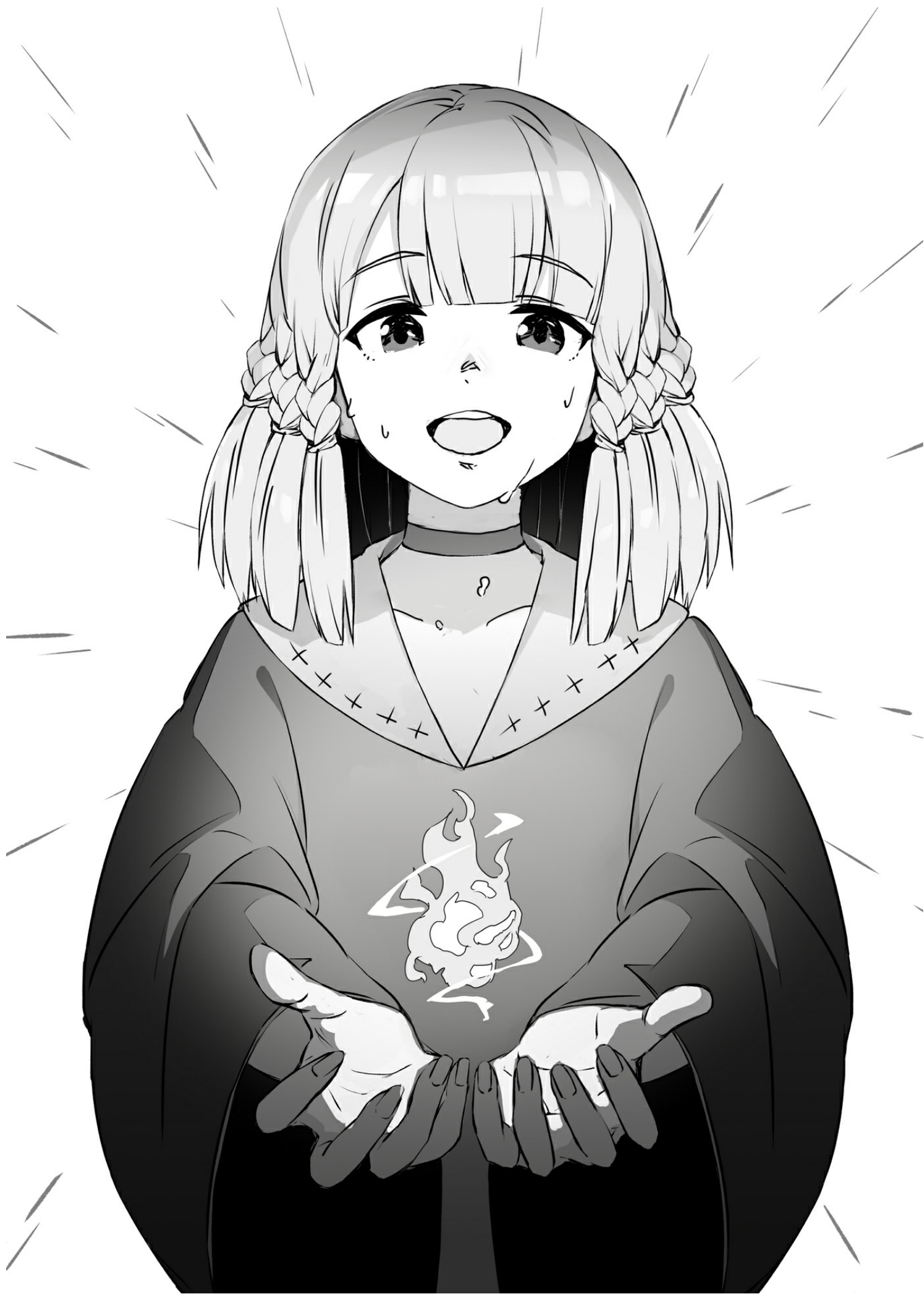
““Oh, Flame... Let my mana be...as grain...and manifest...before me... Ignite Aryumage’!”

With that, the mana in her fingertip wavered, quivered, undulated, before shining brightly on her outstretched finger. This was something that had never occurred when I tried my hand at it. Such a spectacle was observed when mana wasn't properly converted into magecraft. The excess, unused mana dispersed as light.

Due to the fact that I had been constantly converting mana into magic for these past few moments, mana loss didn't occur. Alize, however, was a beginner and not yet used to magecraft. As one became more familiar with magecraft in general, less mana loss and wastage would occur. It was any mage's dream to fully and quickly convert mana into various phenomena. So a bit of mana loss was inevitable in Alize's case.

As the light ebbed, a small flame appeared, dancing idly on Alize's finger. It was about twice as small as the one I had generated earlier. It was a flickering, unstable flame, too small to even serve as an ember or spark.

Alize stared at it in wonderment, her eyes wide open. It seemed she had a hard time believing she was actually capable of magecraft, despite learning the theories and becoming capable of manipulating the mana in her body.



Mages were a rarity, at least among mundane humans. They possessed the power to turn a man into ash with a single strike, and even bend all types of matter to their will without even touching them. It was no surprise Alize would be in disbelief now that she was one of their number. Most individuals who used magic for the first time reacted this way. One could want to become a mage, or speak of becoming a mage, but few were prepared for the actual moment.

“Amazing... Even... Even I can use magic? Ah!”

As Alize spoke, the flickering flame disappeared, most likely due to her disrupted focus. While an individual could maintain a spell subconsciously if they were accustomed to it, such a feat would be all but impossible at the start of their journey since all of one’s concentration was required then.

“It is because you thought of something else, Alize. No matter, after some repetitions, you will be able to do this without a second thought,” Lorraine explained.

“I never knew I had to try so hard just for a tiny flame like this... I don’t really feel like I’d be able to do what you say, Professor Lorraine...”

“No, no.” Lorraine shook her head at her student. “Nothing of the sort. Think about it: even Rentt was capable of it, no? In fact, if you become even more accustomed to it, you could even do this.”

A small flame formed on Lorraine’s finger spontaneously. A small stream of water rose from her palms before dancing elaborately, forming the outlines of a complicated-looking map.

Ah, the techniques of a true master. Few individuals could control the shape of their mana so well.

But this was something even I could do. It was what Lorraine did next, however, that I could never hope to imitate.

The flame and stream of water from her hands slowly became larger, forming the shapes of animals and various creatures. The flames took on the shape of a bird, and the floating jets of water became dragons, then elephants—a circus of fauna spinning silently in the air. Evidently not beginner magic of any kind, if I

may say so.

It'd be impossible for a beginner to enlarge their summoned flames and water to that size, let alone project it away from their bodies while maintaining control. The very fact this was done meant what we were witnessing was no longer basic in any form. If I could perform such a feat, I would have already begun playing around with my own flying flame-animals.

"Wow..." Alize's mouth hung open.

"And this, as well." Lorraine had more tricks up her sleeve.

With a wave of her hand, earth materialized from thin air, taking on the shape of numerous floating buildings. First was the adventurer's guild's many buildings, then Lorraine's abode; a mansion, then a magnificent castle. Each and every one of these buildings were of different colors; one wouldn't think they were made from specks of earth.

I received a painful reminder of just how far from Lorraine I was in terms of skill.

Eventually, Lorraine dismissed all her spells and the spectacles faded away.

"What do you think? Impressive, it is not? More so than Rentt, at least," Lorraine boasted.

Ah, I see. She wasn't showing Alize the possibilities of magic...but simply demonstrating she was the better mage between us.

How childish, Lorraine.

But of course, I of all people shouldn't be saying anything of the sort. Alize, however, was evidently amazed.

"That was awesome! Professor Lorraine, and Rentt, too! I'll work hard! So I can be like the two of you!"

Alize's earnest praise brought a fresh shade of crimson to Lorraine's cheeks.

"Is... Is that right? Ah, yes. Of course. You did well, too, Rentt..."

There was no malice in her words, either. Maybe she was taken aback by Alize's relentless praise.

Alize was as enthusiastic as ever.

“Yes! To think the two of you would teach someone like me... I’ll do it! I’ll work very, very hard! I hope you continue guiding me from now on!” she said, bowing deeply as she did so.

And so our first magecraft lesson finally came to an end...



“Right, see you again!” Alize said, hugging the textbook Lorraine had made for her to her chest as she made her way back to the orphanage.

Lorraine and I waved to her as we saw her off, until the child was but a mere speck in the distance. It was only then we returned inside.

“Quite the knack for it, wouldn’t you say, Rentt? At this rate, she would be well along the path of the scholar-magus before long,” Lorraine muttered, stretching out on the sofa with a relaxed expression on her face.

“No, no... Wasn’t Alize going to become an adventurer? She may have learned the ways of the mage today, but from tomorrow on, she learns the basics of adventuring.”

Even though Lorraine had promoted the scholar-magus path somewhat aggressively, Alize herself had said she wished to be an adventurer. That goal couldn’t simply be dismissed. I had even affirmed this with Alize as she stepped out the doors, that she would study the ways of adventuring on her next lesson. She then turned to me, nodding eagerly with an innocent smile. Even now, Alize was firmly an adventurer in her aspirations.

What else could she be? She would become an adventurer, right? It had to be an adventurer.

Yes... That’s it.

Lorraine seemed to furrow her brows ever so slightly in disdain.

“Hmph. You are stubborn, are you not? I suppose there is little choice, then. We shall leave it at that...for now,” she said, as if granting her permission for my adventurer’s curriculum.

Something was amiss here. No, definitely. Something...

Or so I thought.

But even so, little good would come of us arguing over the details.

“Well, then? What do you have in mind? This...adventurer training of yours. What would you have Alize do first?”

Lorraine seemed to have shelved her jokes—for now. I didn’t immediately answer, instead stopping to think.

“First...I should teach her basic swordplay. After that, I would take her to the forest, or maybe to the labyrinths...and teach her the basics: materials, the rules of adventuring...all that.”

A wave of nostalgia came across Lorraine’s features.

“I see. Much like what you had taught me in the past, Rentt... Those very same places...” Lorraine paused, as if suddenly struck by a spark of inspiration. “Say, Rentt. Would you mind if I came along?”

These were free lands, but there was also the consideration of Lorraine being Alize’s teacher in magecraft. It would be prudent to have her come along if Alize were to use magic in combat.

Alize needed experience. To that end, she would follow me into the labyrinths, and I would have to show her the adequate ropes as she watched. I could hardly expect Alize to defeat a monster on her own...but if we found one that was sufficiently weak, or one I had weakened prior... Hmm. I suppose she wouldn’t just be watching, after all.

“I do not mind. But what about your research, and other affairs of the sort?”

“It is quite all right, Rentt. In addition, this is not only about Alize. I have seen you fight many times before your evolution, but what of it now? Surely things have changed.”

Even I couldn’t answer that question. My methods had significantly changed between evolutions, and I fought differently when I was a Ghoul or Thrall. It would be prudent to assume my capabilities were now different. I also had to consider the fact that I had spun my body around in all sorts of strange and impossible angles during my time as a Thrall and Ghoul... I could still do the

same...if I tried. The flesh on my body now, however, would likely not take kindly to such odd maneuvers. In fact, it'd be more than a physical toll, for there was also the mental aspect of me contorting myself in a way that was decidedly inhuman.

I suppose establishing one's limits was wise, as it would be too late after the fact. As such, I suppose some observations by Lorraine were in order. We may yet understand more of my current physiology and capabilities then.

I nodded at Lorraine slowly as the thoughts left my mind.



Although we had spoken at length about teaching Alize the basics of adventuring, there were first a few items we had to obtain.

Lorraine's magecraft lessons only required Alize herself, the textbook Lorraine had written for her, and Lorraine's tutelage. A short course in the basics of adventuring, on the other hand, required various tools, instruments, and equipment. Given that Alize was blessed with reserves of mana, she could fight as a mage if she so decided, but adventuring wasn't that simple a business. Alize would run into difficulty should her reserves dry up mid-battle, or if she had come across a monster that reflected or was immune to spells. It was best for her to have some other means of defense.

Even mage-adventurers required a certain degree of martial prowess, as well as physical stamina. Lorraine was no exception, for she was sufficiently trained to handle situations where her magic couldn't be used effectively. This was precisely why Alize required that same degree of training, in one form of martial arts or another.

An adventurer's training mainly consisted of going to labyrinths or the outskirts of towns and learning about the monsters that lived there, or understanding where certain materials could be harvested. While knowledge gleaned from books and studies were important, practical application was also important, if only to better understand how to apply one's knowledge. Adventurers that went about their business without understanding said applications were often inefficient at best.

With all those thoughts in mind, the next course of action was simple: Alize

needed a weapon. Since she was an orphan living in an orphanage, however, Alize would have little in the way of personal possessions, much less weapons of any kind. I would have to provide her with the implement, and coin was needed for this venture. Fortunately, a beginner such as Alize didn't require an expensive weapon. Even so, she needed a weapon of sorts, and I was more than willing to gift her with one. Alize, being the individual she was, though, would hardly agree to such a thing, shaking her head and refusing outright. If anything, Alize would demand the costs of procuring said weapon be added to her tab.

Alize would need a weapon that was relatively well-forged, yet affordable. To this end, funds were required, but my situation in regards to that was somewhat...lacking. There was, of course, the coin I was yet to receive from Laura, on account of not having delivered any blossoms yet, in addition to all the materials I had sold thus far having been used on my own equipment and weapons. I also specifically used a painfully large sum to purchase a high-capacity magical pouch. To make things worse, I purchased a bespoke case for my model airship in the heat of the moment—now that I thought about it, it perhaps wasn't a particularly wise purchase. Given my current financial circumstances, I was in no condition to pay for Alize's weapon, let alone pay for the lesson fees I still owed Lorraine.

However, I had my plans with regards to coin, or my lack thereof.

There was a material that I had not yet sold—but of course! I speak of the Tarasque. I had received notification from the guild a while ago, informing me there were certain discussions to be had in regards to the carcass. If I had to guess, the materials had finally been sold; with that, the long winter in my coin pouch would finally be over.

With a tune off my lips, I waved jovially at Lorraine before stepping through the doors of her abode.

“Would they not have simply told you if the thing sold, Rentt? A discussion, however... Not exactly a typical statement. In any case, do take care as you go about your business.”

Just her imagination, perhaps. There was no need for such inauspicious talk.

Without further ado, I merrily made my way toward the adventurer's guild.



“Ah, Mister Rentt!”

Sheila’s voice rang out the very moment I stepped into the guild’s halls. It seemed like she had been waiting for me all this time, and she wanted me to follow her.

Just how much, exactly, did that carcass and its materials sell for? It was worth quite a sum, wasn’t it?

Sheila approached me as I became lost in my thoughts of potential riches.

“The Tarasque has sold, yes? How much did it go for, Sheila?”

Sheila only stared at me with a surprised expression.

“Oh...? Rentt... You speak so...smoothly, now...”

Come to think of it, Sheila had yet to see my evolved form. In her mind, I should still be a shambling corpse.

Shifting my mask so it showed the lower half of my face, I removed my hat, wordlessly responding to her query. Sheila’s eyes widened at the sight.

“Eh...? Rentt, is this... What do you call it? You evolved, didn’t you?” Sheila said, in a softer voice than usual. “Evolve” in particular was said in a bit of a whisper.

“Yes.” I nodded. “Just the day before. According to Lorraine, I am now a...Lesser Vampire of some kind. I do look like a human now, yes. Just a little on the pale side, though.”

Sheila laughed nervously at my explanation before nodding slowly.

“Yes, there is a lack of...color, to your face. You do look like how you used to in life though, Rentt. Ah...your skin is...so smooth, too.”

“Yes, Lorraine said as such. A strange side effect...”

“Hmm... Looking at that...smoothness, Rentt. It makes me want to become like you...just a little...”

Matters of the complexion seemed to always be quite the topic with the ladies, if Sheila’s somewhat troubling statement was anything to go by.

I shook my head slowly. “Don’t even think about it, Sheila. I started from a pile of bones, if you recall.”

That was the first stage I had evolved from, after all. If there were any other possible ways, I wouldn’t be privy to them.

With that constantly rattling body, I continued defeating monsters, slowly evolving into a dried-up corpse, then a corpse with some meat hanging off it...finally becoming a Lesser Vampire after having miraculously procured some Vampire blood. Even I understood that it was an extremely difficult path.

Maybe I was just lucky it went so well. Even if an individual was skilled, one had to start from nothing at the very beginning. Maybe that was the hardest part.

Sheila seemed to understand my unspoken train of thought.

“I understand. ‘What would I do even if I really did become like you?’ is what I would have liked to ask, but...it would be inappropriate.

“Ah, yes,” Sheila continued. “Since you now look more or less like your human self, what would you like to do with your old records? You could continue on as Rentt Faina... Or do you prefer to go on as Rentt Vivie...?”

A valid question; however, there was only one answer I could give:

“We should continue using Rentt Vivie either way.”

“Why is that?” Sheila seemed a little confused at my sudden, prompt answer.

“It’s very simple, Sheila. For starters, this mask won’t come off...and there’s the question of why Rentt Faina would have such a mask in the first place. Then there would be the issue of my...heightened abilities. If I were suddenly asked to explain all these things... Well, it’d be difficult.”

There was always an even simpler option: I could just tell them I had become a monster. Even if it made for a convincing argument, I would still be hunted down and summarily executed, so, in the end, it wasn’t the best course of action. As long as I couldn’t say I was human without a doubt, it would be quite difficult to go by “Rentt Faina” in the township of Maalt. Too many people knew me here.

“I see... Well, then, Rentt. I will handle your requests and assignments as requested from here on out. Ah, yes... There was also the matter we had to discuss...”

“Right. The Tarasque, yes? I wonder if it sold for a good sum...”

My expectant thoughts were soon cleaved in two by Sheila’s words.

“Eh? No, that hasn’t sold at all, Rentt. It isn’t about that—as we said, a discussion! In any case, please, follow me to the dissection chambers...” She spoke with a slight expression of surprise.

But...what about my finances...?

Perhaps I counted my chickens far before they had hatched...

There was nothing I could do now, so I gave Sheila the best response I could muster as I nodded along:

“Ah... Ah. Yes. Right.”

I followed after Sheila with a looming feeling of disappointment.



“Oh! So you came by, huh.”

Dario greeted us at the entrance as the dissection chambers came into view. It seemed Dario had waited a little too long to see me, and I couldn’t help but wonder what had transpired during the sale of the carcass. From Sheila’s behavior, and from what she had just said, it was hard to imagine the Tarasque materials had even been sold.

“Did...something happen?” I asked, looking straight at Dario, the guild’s Master Dissectionist.

“Well. Ya better come in,” he said, waving us into the facility as he turned.

I had no reason to refuse. I suppose Dario had his reasons, so I nodded as I quickly followed after him.



“Well...? Did something happen?” I asked as Sheila and I sat in Dario’s office. Chairs had been kindly provided for us.

“Yeah... Not a big issue, but...”

Dario seemed troubled. Contrary to what he said, it really did seem like a big issue, if his tone was anything to go by.

“The Tarasque ya brought in, see...” Dario continued, somewhat slowly. “We done finished work on it, and by its quality...we thought it best to put it up for auction. So that merchant we work with, he was supposed to come and take her off... It was then...”

What was it? What happened then? I could feel my concern mounting at Dario’s cryptic statements.

Did Dario not mention this Tarasque’s materials were of high quality, that there were few like it across the lands, and it would fetch a good price? I could hardly think there would be any reason for the merchant to find fault with the materials I had provided...

As if reading my thoughts, Dario continued.

“No, it ain’t a problem with the product, see. It’s the opposite. It’s *too* good... So good that the auctioneer merchant friend of ours wants to take it directly to the client.”

So that was what all the fuss was about...

I suppose things like this happened every now and then. People from all walks of life showed up at auctions, and among them were individuals of great wealth, or some who used great sums of coin for very specific purposes. The Latuules came to mind, as they had great political influence and material wealth.

Those individuals, more often than not, had very special...hobbies. As a result, they would never hesitate to follow their inclinations. Coin was of no object to them—the Latuule family’s hobby of collecting magical tools was one such example.

In a similar vein, a well-heeled client was willing to pay quite a fortune for Tarasque materials that were in good condition—but as to why, I couldn’t quite say. At the very least, the auction merchant involved now felt bringing the shell directly to the client was a definite sale.

None of this was bad news to me. I had tasked Dario with the sale of these materials, and he could do with them as he saw fit. Could he not have just sold it to the merchant? Why the discussion now?

“I don’t mind if you sell it as you see fit, Dario... So what seems to be the matter?”

Dario shook his head, a complicated expression across his features.

“Ya think, no? Would be good if I could sell it. What ya told me to do, that. I’d have liked to do it. Get ya the best deals, yeah, but...this time... It’s a little different.”

I tilted my head dramatically to one side. I didn’t understand what Dario was getting at, not in the slightest.

“Some conditions, ya see,” Dario continued. “Double, Rentt. They be payin’ double yer askin’ price. But in return...they wanna be introduced to ya, Rentt. The adventurer who slayed the Tarasque.”

“That...”

It was as Dario said: this wasn’t something he could decide on his own.

Regardless of the nature of the auction, it was common sense most individuals bid under pseudonyms. This applied to both buyers and sellers; neither party would be eager to expose their true identities at an auction, with the reason being that most items at these auctions were either extremely valuable or rare. If a buyer or seller had exposed their identity, they could be robbed, burgled, or even threatened. Therefore, the need for privacy was paramount in the auction business.

While the auction house itself knew the identities of its clients, having any information leak out would be a disaster in and of itself. If anything like that came to pass, the auction house would lose the confidence of its clients, and, with that, all of its business.

There were exceptions, however, in which case the permission of the client in question was required. In this current case, it seemed like Dario needed my permission to go ahead with the sale.

But something about this transaction seemed a little off to me. The fact that the buyer in question wished to be introduced to me meant they were looking for adventurers capable of hunting down Tarasques. This in and of itself wasn't too difficult.

It was also all too common for the buy-out price on auctions to be set at a high amount. While bidding occasionally exceeded that, the very thought of doubling the original asking price was a fearsome thought. If they had this much coin at their disposal, they didn't need to go through all this trouble. All this mystery client had to do was approach the guild and hire the services of a Gold-class adventurer. Why go through all the effort just to ask for me? I couldn't wrap my head around this.

Dario, still observing me from across the table, probably inferred what I was thinking, so he continued speaking.

"He got a good eye, this client of yours. Came here, once. Looked at the Tarasque ya brought in and was moved... Real moved at the quality. Said somethin' 'bout... 'A perfectly beheaded Tarasque. With no other wounds. Almost perfect, almost. Many adventurers are capable of huntin' Tarasques...but to slay it and preserve the quality of the material! Few adventurers are capable of that. I wanna know more of this individual. More.' ...is what he more or less said."

It almost felt like I was being slathered with praise...

Although I was able to obtain somewhat pristine materials from the relatively intact Tarasque carcass, I knew luck was a large part of said developments. But this mystery client seemed to understand I had purposely taken on the challenge of slaying the Tarasque in this particular way. Even so, it seemed like just a little bit too much praise.

Something about this proposed meeting filled me with unease. What if the client refused to purchase the materials after meeting me? If I wasn't what they expected? I wished to lay low—if possible, I didn't want my name, or tales of my achievements, spreading.

If I were to really meet with this mysteriously rich and powerful client, I would hate to walk away from it empty-handed. Coin was a matter of utmost import.

If one was poor and penniless, one would have to survive on nothing but a small shred of bread for the entire day. Ah, how nostalgic...just like how I was when I first started out. Back then, I would even venture into the nearby forests, foraging for edible vegetables to sate my hunger... And forage I did, with all of my being. The winters were harsh indeed...

“Oi, ya all right? Don’t be spacin’ out on me now.”

Dario’s words shook me out of my nostalgic daydreams. There was a tinge of worry to his words.

“No...” I raised my head slowly. “Just...something I was thinking about. But, tell me, Dario... This client of yours: would he go back on the sale should he meet with me? This isn’t something I would repeat often, but it is a coincidence I had managed to slay the Tarasque this way. You do know that, yes?”

Lies would do little for me at this point. Dario, however, seemed to have already anticipated this.

“Ya don’t have to tell me that. Client knows it, even I know it. Even if ya say that, Rentt, even if ya lucky, some thought went into the materials, yeah? That much is obvious, see.”

“I suppose that’s true...”

A cursory examination of the corpse would reveal I had gone for the Tarasque’s neck from the very start, not wanting to damage its scales. That was the reality of it.

“Now I’m just guessin’,” Dario continued, seemingly satisfied at my answer, “but I think that client of yours be searchin’ for a discerning adventurer, see. Ya should know many are incapable of that, even in the Gold-class. That’s why they wanna see ya. Meet someone who can...appreciate their concerns. Ya still think they’ll refuse to buy after meetin’ ya? Think about it, Rentt. To have so many conditions, then he ain’t buyin’? Is a shame for people like that, see. Now, if you’ve gotten all them worries outta that mind of yours...how ‘bout meetin’ ‘em?”



Dario’s words only caused me to worry even more, but I was nonetheless not

afraid of meeting this client.

There were just some...problems. One problem, in particular...

Namely, the fact that I was a monster. Speaking with people I knew, or was familiar with, was one thing. Speaking suddenly with an individual who wielded wealth and power was troubling to me, especially given the nature of the conversation. If I were found out, I could be hunted down and slain, and I'd very much like to avoid that at all costs.

However, this happened to adventurers from time to time. Such occurrences increased in frequency as one climbed the adventurer ranks. Laura is a good example; she had seen my capabilities, and saw it fit to trust me with a task. The more difficult and high-paying the request, the more likely the client would like to meet with the adventurer in person and ascertain their abilities. Hence the increase in the personal summons.

But Laura's case was markedly different. Specifically, Isaac had the chance to examine me before recommending me to his mistress. The auction merchant and client, on the other hand, had hardly met me before, and knew little of my character and personality. This was why I felt a looming sense of fear...

If possible, I'd like to refuse. But I wanted to become an adventurer of the Mithril-class. It would be a mistake to refuse such a meeting—even I understood that.

Should my contacts among the rich and powerful grow, the nature of the requests I could undertake would also change accordingly. As a result, adventurers of that caliber would be treasured by the guild, and many things would become...convenient, if I could put it that way.

As unpleasant as it is to say, the guild was, at the end of the day, a business. It was in the guild's obvious interests to rub shoulders with adventurers who had large coin pouches...and friends in high society. Even the ranking system, which was said to organize adventurers by their skill and prowess, originally had a simpler function, which was to separate the strong from the weak, if only because stronger adventurers naturally earned more coin. The guild would then be more interested in such individuals.

This was a known but unspoken fact among adventurers. But adventurers

were prideful individuals with specific views, with some objecting to being portrayed as nothing but money-hungry scoundrels. Although I couldn't speak for all adventurers, a silent understanding of the nature of the business was in place.

For instance, who was the better adventurer? A strong one who earned vast amounts of coin, or an honorable one who sided with the weak? A proverbial hero of justice, perhaps? If I were to put it simply, the guild would definitely prefer the former, but most adventurers would side with the latter. Both would, in some way, bring great benefit to the guild. Both hypothetical individuals were also good examples of who adventurers really were. However, the guild would be hard-pressed to declare one superior to the other, so this was yet another problematic consideration in these circles. In fact, this very topic was often the subject of debate in taverns across the lands, albeit among adventurers.

If I had to choose, I would definitely pick the latter. It would be inaccurate to say I wouldn't earn any coin at all, so perhaps a more moderate take on the latter's position would be more...fitting. Compromises had to be made with reality, as always.

Maybe an idealist like myself shouldn't be saying such things, but either way...my current situation was by no means terrible. While dangers lurked in many corners, I had successfully evolved as of late, and my senses felt sharper than ever. Unless my client was someone with very special skills, they wouldn't be able to tell me apart from the average human being...unless I removed all my clothing.

Of course, if I were to suddenly place a hand on my hip and take a deep swig from my blood-filled vial for lunch, even children on the street would point at me and declare me a Vampire. But I was no fool.

I turned to Dario once more.

"I will meet them, at the very least. If I were to sell the materials for an expensive price, I should do that much. Plus...getting to know a rich and powerful client isn't exactly a bad thing."

Dario's face lit up upon hearing my response. "Oh! That right? I be tellin' them

that, then. But yeah...sorry 'bout that. To ask this much of ya... Feels like I ruined it somehow, ya know. What with this good material and all."

From his words, I could tell Dario wasn't exactly keen on the idea from the very beginning. But I should have expected as much since he was an expert dissectionist of monsters and other creatures. His original calling was dissecting carcasses into high-quality materials, not liaising with potential buyers and being pestered by their every whim. Dario had surely seen quite a few transactions in his time, and maybe something about this entire deal seemed a little off to him, as well.

It was, by all means, not an entirely negative situation for me, so I was a little surprised to see him show this much concern over the matter. But, then again, while I was a customer to Dario, Dario was a customer to the auctioneer in question. While every party involved had their own interests and a general sense of ethics, Dario was a craftsman first and foremost; one could feel his passion for dissection just by looking at his work.

So it would go without saying that Dario would support the adventurer who brought in good materials to his workshop, as opposed to, say, a merchant of some kind.

"I don't mind. If I had any reservations, I'd say so... I do have one question, though. Do you trust that auctioneer...?"

I wouldn't have wanted to deal with an intimidating or unethical auctioneer who tried to make forced sales. Luckily, Dario reassured me.

"Ah, that? No problem, see. They're someone I've known for a long time. From the Stheno Trading Company... You heard of 'em?"

Of course I knew of them. They were a famous company and mercantile organization in Maalt—one of the big ones at the top. In addition to their roaring auction business, they also had a few shops and storefronts on the streets of Maalt.

I had even been to one of the Stheno Trading Company's shops in life. I had been avoiding them ever since my foray into undeath, though, but hearing that the auctioneer in question was from such an establishment eased my worries. They were indeed a trustworthy company.

“Yes. I have purchased containers of sorts from them, and other grocery items... Knick-knacks and such. Either way, Dario, I understand the circumstances now. When should I go meet with this auctioneer?”

“Well, I should tell ‘em you’re fine with the meetin’ and all that first. Then they’ll want a day to decide...and maybe contact me again, yeah? Maybe tomorrow...or the day after. That good, Rentt?”

I suppose it would be strange if I had suddenly shown up at their doorstep, so I nodded.

“Please. I leave it in your capable hands.”

Dario nodded slowly in response, before sitting up suddenly. “Oh, yeah... Almost forgot... Here.” He placed a booklet of sorts on the table, pointing out several pages to me.

“This... Ah, yes. The other materials I had left in your care, I presume.”

I skimmed through the contents on the receipts. Written in the booklet were entries of the other materials I had left with Dario, as well as materials and equipment needed for the dissection process. Materials and ingredients that weren’t sold by auction were sold off via some other channels, and the final earned value was recorded on the papers I was now thumbing through.

I could tell at a glance that I had earned quite a fair sum from their sale, and I was grateful for such an outcome.

“I see you put quite a bit of effort into moving these other materials...”

“Yeah, well...got ya in all this trouble this time, see. Not to make up for it, of course... But even the rest of them materials are preserved well. Not even damaged. Would get more than the standard asking price if I were to sell ‘em normally, ya know? Buyers can tell quality when they see it.” Dario heaped even more praise on my harvested ingredients.

I was just a Bronze-class adventurer who hardly earned anything. Due to the fact that I had wanted to sell as many high-quality ingredients as possible, I studied the ways in which one could use monster materials. I took notes and conducted research on how not to damage materials during extraction, and methods on how to defeat monsters while ensuring an easily salvageable

carcass.

I suppose my efforts had paid off.

“I’m glad you think so highly of my materials. If I come across any good materials on my travels, I’ll be sure to bring them to you...and in as good a state as possible.”

“I’ll always buy yer materials, Rentt. Also...ya all right with the prices I set for these?”

I nodded. “Yes, quite.”

Dario laid out a series of coins on his desk in response, and I promptly swept them all into my wallet...or pouch, I suppose. With that business concluded, I turned, leaving the dissection chambers behind me.

Epilogue

There was a religious organization in these lands called the Church of Lobelia. If one were to ask the average townsfolk milling around the streets of Maalt, they would say the church didn't have much of a presence. This was perhaps true in the Kingdom of Yaaran, but it couldn't be further from the truth in the great kingdoms to the west, for the Church of Lobelia was one of the most powerful religious organizations there. While they had a church in Maalt, few believers were in its halls. The structure in Maalt was, as a result, a small building, proportionate to the amount of believers in the township. The holy water it offered for sale, however, could only be purchased at ridiculous prices—prices that wouldn't be forgivable for any other church.

Such was the nature of the Church of Lobelia. While these observations were more or less accurate, it didn't show the entire picture—far from it, actually.

While the church had few followers and a reduced presence, their efforts in the Kingdom of Yaaran hardly faltered—espionage was espionage.

“So, this is Maalt, huh...” the figure said, looking out from the window of the horse-carriage.

A glimpse at their surroundings was enough for them to understand they were no longer in the Holy Kingdom of Ars. Maalt had a somewhat wilder feel to it.

The place they were heading to now was none other than a certain rural town on the border of the Kingdom of Yaaran, a certain town by the name of Maalt. One couldn't help but wonder if the brave pioneers there lived arduous lives.



It wasn't the first time they had set foot in Yaaran. They had previously visited the capital, and some small towns and villages around it. The fact they were so removed from any central locales was somewhat refreshing, and equally rural.

At least, that was what Myullias Raiza, priestess-saint of the Church of Lobelia, thought of her destination.

Myullias looked preoccupied, glancing out of the horse-carriage's window with her crystal-like, purple eyes. Those eyes were framed with shining silver hair, which all added to a certain aura of mystery surrounding her being.

There were many other priestess-saints, but they weren't limited to the Church of Lobelia. priestess-saints were blessed by the spirits, or even gods, and were often gifted with reserves of divinity, along with some other mysterious powers. Myullias was one of these priestess-saints. The god that had blessed her was none other than the only god the Church of Lobelia believed in, and her powers were equally awe-inspiring.

The Goddess Lobelia—she who had created these lands, the world, and various other existences.

Those who receive her blessing are often gifted with varying kinds of powers, often unique to the individual. For instance, Myullias wielded powers specialized in healing and purification. If she so desired, she could bask the entire township of Maalt in healing light, purifying it in its entirety. Myullias would, unfortunately, find it difficult to stand after bringing about such a feat, but the fact she could even do anything of the sort was shocking in and of itself.

Myullias was also somewhat new when it came to being a priestess-saint. There existed certain individuals in the headquarters of the Church of Lobelia, individuals who could snort and laugh at Myullias's supposedly awe-inspiring powers. As such, Myullias herself merely performed her duties, without a shred of arrogance in her manner.

For the Goddess Lobelia, and to spread the teachings of the Church of Lobelia across the lands, she would preach and give sermons, heal, and bless. All so the shining light of guidance could reach far and wide.

This was why she traveled between towns, demonstrating her powers. This

was also why she was currently headed to Maalt.

Just the day before, a priestess-saint from another religious organization had offered its denizens healing and blessings—or so she heard. From what she was told, the priestess-saint in question wasn't from the Church of the Eastern Sky, said church being the largest religious organization in Yaaran. That incident alone was enough to prove that various religious organizations operated in this kingdom.

It has long been said that the Kingdom of Yaaran sat on troubled lands. Due to most of Yaaran's citizens belonging to and worshiping the Church of the Eastern Sky, it was difficult for a foreign church to simply barge in and offer its own teachings. To make things worse, the teachings of the Church of the Eastern Sky were...unique. Compared to other religious organizations, it placed little burden on its followers, and encouraged its monks and nuns to live pious, frugal lives; this was quite a painful reality for most other religions.

While no specific organizations would be named, it was common knowledge that corruption was rife in the upper echelons of many churches, and heavy tithes were expected of their followers. The Eastern Sky was different, though, and their members were often proud to be part of the church.

Even so, there was the occasional priest or monk who fell astray, hiding their true motives while working under the guise of expanding the church. But the citizens of Yaaran were quite perceptive of these ruses, and they often exposed them before they did any real damage. This was probably why the Church of the Eastern Sky had a choke hold on the Kingdom of Yaaran, and why other religious organizations had a hard time even establishing themselves.

However, recent matters changed that.

Monster sightings were increasing across the lands. As the world slowly sank into darkness, even the rural border Kingdom of Yaaran couldn't escape its influences. As the desperate voices of the public crying out for salvation grew louder, so did the preaching and promises of various priests and other supposedly holy men, all offering a simple means of salvation.

The Church of the Eastern Sky believed that one had to look for salvation from within, which was quite a strict teaching. Increased monster sightings seemed

to have shaken that belief.

One could say religious organizations could only truly shine when the world was plunged into chaos.

One would assume said organizations would use this chaos to gain more followers. The Church of Lobelia, however, didn't view it that way. They instead thought of this chaos as a great trial from the gods, and that humanity would do well to believe in the church to overcome it. Not too different, really, but quite an interesting perspective, if one may put it that way.

Myullias herself would probably give a vague answer if asked for a personal opinion on the matter. But as long as she was part of the Church of Lobelia, she had no choice other than to accept its teachings as the one and only truth.

But that was quite troublesome and irritating for Myullias. It was also especially true as of late.

Maybe it was a thing most inappropriate for a priestess-saint to say, but was the Church of Lobelia really correct? Was the Goddess Lobelia, the very same that blessed her, the one and only God, even really Lobelia at all?

The Church of Lobelia believed Lobelia herself took on many forms, and that the blessings other individuals across the lands received were all part of her work. For example, Vansurt, the Wind God, who was worshiped in other religions, was thought of as Lobelia, albeit in disguise. The Goddess with hundreds and thousands of faces, she who is all and all who is one: the Goddess Lobelia.

The blessings that each individual received were tailor-made to their personality and character, all so they might better receive the power of the great Goddess Lobelia. At least, that was the official explanation.

Was this truly a blessing of the gods? After all, it was all but impossible for one to trace where a certain individual's divine blessing had come from, other than certain relatively special circumstances.

Said circumstances were somewhat simple, like praying directly at a certain altar then being blessed, or situations similar to that. Or perhaps one had done something worthy of receiving a blessing, and, after a short while, felt a spring

of divinity awaken in them—circumstantial evidence and the like.

Other than those few methods, most individuals couldn't trace the origins of their power, and that was the norm. This was also the case for Myullias, who one day just so happened to stare at an injured person, and had felt she could do something about their injury.

That was really all there was to it.

But a priest had suddenly showed up at her abode one day, claiming she had received the blessings of the One True Goddess Lobelia. Even she thought what the priest said was suspicious. However, the priests and priestess-saints of the Church of Lobelia all believed in the Goddess without question. Some might even say their belief bordered on the edge of madness and obsession, which was definitely a possibility.

It didn't take very long at all for them to realize Myullias had heretical thoughts. It wasn't too much a stretch to assume her thoughts had somehow influenced her external behaviors. This was also most likely why she had been put under surveillance as of late, and why there was a supervisory priest seated opposite to her in that very same carriage. He had a name, of course: Gilly.

He was a young man with sharp eyes and an even sharper gaze. More of an assassin than a priest, if his movements and facial expressions were anything to go by. Then there was the issue of his sharp, bladed instrument, tucked away neatly on one side of his waist. Not exactly fitting for a priest, hence the initial observations. It was as if to say a certain series of actions would be done if she so much as misbehaved. This much was obvious to Myullias, as was the fact this was all probably the will of the powers that be from headquarters.

"What exactly are we here for, again...? The visit, I mean."

Despite her best efforts, Myullias couldn't exactly slice through the intensely heavy atmosphere within the carriage. She only muttered on, seemingly to herself, just like how she'd been doing this entire time. She seemed to be speaking to Gilly, but was she really? It was all very...vague...

While Myullias had been mumbling to herself for some time, her most recent statement seemed to have elicited a response.

“You are to declare you are healing and cleansing this town, in the name of the Church of Lobelia. You are also to gather up the citizens of Maalt and, with a sermon, offer guidance.”

Gilly shook his head at Myullias’s decidedly disrespectful attitude.

“Please take care not to speak of such things after we enter town. You are a priestess-saint of the Church of Lobelia; it wouldn’t be in your best interests to suggest anything that would breed...suspicion, of the church’s noble intentions. You would do well to think about the directions you were given back at headquarters. It’s for your own sake.”

A stiff man; stuffy, too.

Myullias reacted with surprise at the modicum of gentleness she felt from Gilly’s otherwise threatening words.

“Is that a bit of worry I sense in your voice...?”

“Your words are far too blatant. I am beside myself with worry that you would someday end up like Fourostoroa.”

Fourostoroa was the name of a hero who had slain a great and evil dragon long, long ago. The dragon had tormented the people, and Fourostoroa summarily got rid of it. He also ended up drinking too much at the festivities that very night, and had ended up humiliating the king before all the king’s subjects—and right in the front of the king. For his transgressions, Fourostoroa was executed. A tale of a foolish hero.

An old fable of sorts, although one would be hard-pressed to say if he really existed.

Although it wouldn’t normally be a humorous comparison by any means, Myullias found mirth in her current situation, which wasn’t too far from the illustration she had been presented with.

“Heh... Well. I’ll make sure to be careful...”

Gilly nodded stoically at the faintly smiling Myullias. “I pray that you would do as such.”

His voice rang with no shred of emotion.

Afterword

Hello, readers, it has been a while.

This is Yu Okano.

This marks the third book release of *The Unwanted Undead Adventurer*. Again, thank you very much for purchasing this book.

Although less characters were featured in this volume, the amount of characters slowly began increasing as I wrote, and the plot has begun deviating from the story I originally had in my mind. While that isn't exactly a bad thing, I am worried if the readers would find this development enjoyable to read.

There's a saying among the authors in the world, that their characters have a life of their own. I, however, have never felt this feeling. I do hope to one day write in such a fashion.

I often find myself incapable of visualizing how a character moves, and in which specific way, or where they would be standing at certain points in the story. It isn't exactly good for one's confidence...but maybe it's not so good to be overly critical, as well.

The attitude I have towards my writing is that I feel I write in a way that aims to please my readers, as opposed to making me happy. Maybe that will leave more of an impression on a greater amount of people. That's how I feel, anyway.

Maybe this comes naturally for some geniuses out there, and while I am envious of their ability, I just can't do the same... I would like to work hard, so I may one day be able to do that, too.

And so I sit here today, thinking about those very things I had just written.

As I thought, writing an "Afterword" is hard... I wanted to write one about this length, so maybe I should just have it end here for now.

If possible, I hope we can meet once again in the next volume.

This is Yu Okano, signing off. I hope you will continue enjoying my work from here on out.

Bonus Short Stories

Rentt and the Beauty Contest

“Wow! As expected! What a beauty!”

This bright and cheerful voice belonged to none other than Sheila, a staff member of the adventurer’s guild. Sheila, in turn, was looking straight at a woman before her—a stunning woman, to be precise.

Her blonde hair cascaded in hypnotizing waves, its beauty enough to distract any passer-by. Her almond-shaped eyes, further accentuated by her eyeshadow, made the woman seem almost bewitching. A single look sent shivers down the spines of the menfolk, many of whom who may lose themselves to their lust at any moment.

Even her body was picture-perfect, an impossibly sculpted ideal. The woman had all the right curves, emphasized in all the right ways. Her waist, hips, and just about everything else resembled a work of art.

In spite of all this, however, she was by no means scandalous or inappropriate. If anything, she was miraculously dignified.

The woman’s expression immediately changed as she sat down. She seemed tired of this entire affair, and sank deep into the chair like some sort of mollusc.

She parted her lips. “How did it come to this...?”

Her voice was a familiar one, belonging to the Scholar-magus of Maalt, a certain Lorraine Vivie. While she was dressed differently, had her hair done up, and seemingly had different facial features, those who knew her well only needed to lean in for a closer inspection, upon which they would undoubtedly recognize this was Lorraine herself, and none other.

The finery and beauty that Lorraine now exuded were the efforts of many individuals, beginning with Sheila, and followed closely by many other members of the adventurer’s guild of Maalt.

The story began just the day before...



“The budget...is tight...” Sheila said, holding her head in her hands as she said so.

Standing before her in a small meeting room of the guild were Lorraine and myself—Rentt Faina.

There was no one else here.

One would wonder why Sheila was suddenly discussing the matter of the guild’s potential bankruptcy with us at this point in time. See, Lorraine and I were secretly the guild’s biggest sponsors, and we could bend them to our will at the snap of a finger.

I jest. A silly lie, that.

We were called here due to our statuses as veteran adventurers—to be specific, we have been with the guild for about eight years. Sheila, who had known me for all that time, found it easier to discuss her concerns with us. Of course, Lorraine and I both had our specialties and certain abilities which may come in handy in a variety of situations. More importantly, however, was the fact that Lorraine had always been a relatively beautiful individual. She wasn’t all that interested in cosmetics and the like.

It was all somewhat beyond me.

“You see...” Sheila continued, “the guild’s staff union has decided to hold a beauty contest this year. That’s all fine and good, but the rewards... Ugh. That union president of ours got too drunk, you see, and said he would give an impossibly huge reward to the winner, instead of our usual prizes! It would be impossible to purchase such a price on the current budget, and so I wanted to see if anything could be done... So. Would you please attend the beauty contest, Miss Lorraine?”

Such was Sheila’s description of the problem.

On another note, beauty contests were, as their name suggested, a contest in which women competed against each other in a display of feminine beauty. The most beautiful lady took home a title, and a prize. This was an event held at set periods by the adventurer's guild, with the primary aim of helping adventurers find potential wives and partners. This contest was also set up with this aim in mind.

Under normal circumstances, the prize for coming in first place was helpful but not extravagant—a year's worth of dry supplies or food, for instance. This year, however, the guild staff's union president seemed to have gotten a little too drunk, and had announced in a noisy tavern that a most expensive object could be provided as a prize. This, of course, angered the usually gentle Sheila. Honestly speaking, seeing Sheila snap in this fashion was terrifying in and of itself.

Due to the fact that the announcement had been heard by members of the public, there seemed to be no way around this...unless a woman who secretly sided with the guild would take part in, and win the contest. That way the prize would go back to the house, and no ridiculous sum of coin would be spent.

"In that case, could you not simply go yourself, Sheila?" Lorraine said, grimly.

"Ah...but I cannot, as I am a member of the staff, you see..."

Would Sheila be able to guarantee victory for the staff union even if she did participate? I couldn't help but think. As if reading my mind, Sheila huffed, visibly irritated.

"IN ANY CASE! I won't win even if I do participate! Yes! I know! But...if Miss Lorraine goes...I feel like we could really turn this around!" she said, through gritted teeth and balled fists. Sheila was undoubtedly serious.

I turned to look at Lorraine, our eyes meeting. We both seemed to understand this was a difficult request to turn down. But Lorraine suddenly seemed to find all this very funny, a small smile creeping onto her lips.

"If you put it that way, Sheila, I suppose I have little choice... Very well. I shall accept."

"R-Really?!"

“I do, however, have some conditions.”

“Um...conditions...?”

“But of course. Firstly, that I will participate under a false name, then...”

Lorraine leaned in to Sheila, whispering a fair amount of secretive conditions into her ear.

Sheila nodded in intervals. But her expression slowly turned into one of anticipation and mischief. Finally, she stared at me pointedly, as if meaning to bore holes through my very being. After a short silence, Sheila nodded deeply before declaring her acceptance in a strangely unsettling voice.

“Ooooookay. We will do just that!”



“Pffft... It fits you well...Rennie...? Ha...”

Lorraine had a blonde wig sitting on her head. She was, however, looking straight at me.

Yes...

It was I, Rentt Faina, who was standing with Lorraine in the beauty contest’s waiting room. A room only contestants were permitted to enter.

I was currently dressed as a woman.

It wasn’t a shoddy job by any means. My make-up crew had ensured I would appear as nothing but a woman, even going so far as to fit me with a corset. For all the right curves, they said—and of course, certain...prosthetics were added, to my behind and chest.

This was Lorraine’s secret condition: that she would only take part if I did the same.

What a mess... Perhaps the sort of mess Lorraine enjoyed. In any case, I was in no position to decline.

I was curious as to how far they would go with the whole thing, and as such didn't expect I would be standing in this room...with Lorraine.

"Right! Our next contestant is..." a staff member announced, holding the door to the waiting room open.

They then announced the name of the next contestant...

"Miss Adeline Fran!"

Said name was, unfortunately, the false name Lorraine had come up with...for my use.

"Ah, they are calling for you, are they not? Go forth, Rennie... Ah. Perhaps Ren-Ren would be more fitting? Steel yourself! You are next!" Lorraine said, cheerfully waving me toward the venue.

Damn it all... Just you watch, Lorraine. I will pay you back in full for this humiliation...

Oh well. I suppose it will be done. Perhaps I will just take a portion of her next guild request's rewards.

Slowly but surely, familiar words rang out through the air.

"Ren Ireed! You're up next!"

Obediently but unwillingly following the announcer's instructions, I slowly shuffled out of the waiting room and headed toward the venue.



Of course, the winner was none other than Lorraine. And, as expected, the runner up was yours truly.

I jest. That was a silly lie... Although it didn't quite end that way, no one suspected who I was, and the contest passed without incident. I did, however, make it into the final selections—and the entire time I sought answers for this terrible predicament of mine. I couldn't say much, obviously, and instead suffered in silence.

“Do I have a feminine face, Lorraine?” I asked, walking by Lorraine’s side as we headed back to her abode.

Lorraine had long since changed out of her costume and disguise. Turning to me, she gave her answer in a strangely serious tone.

“Hmm. I would not exactly say that, Rentt. It is just that you do not have many...distinguishing features. It allows the make-up to stand out, you see. You also have a light build and musculature... I would not call you muscular by any means, for instance...”

In other words, I was apparently suitable for ventures that involved cross-dressing. Not exactly something I could be proud of.

That aside...

“It was a given that you’d win, Lorraine. You’re quite beautiful, after all, so there was no doubt.”

“You, saying such things in broad daylight...”

“It’s the truth, no?”

“Hmph. Say what you like. However...it is a bit of a waste if we let this end here. What do you say, Ren-Ren? Want to do this with me again sometime?”

“I will politely decline...”

Personally, I felt like such an event would hardly repeat itself, but, just in case it did, I fervently offered my prayers up to the gods—that I would never have to do anything like this ever again.

An Adventurer’s Worth

Adventurers—the collective term for individuals who made a living from slaying monsters.

A normal person hardly had an inkling of their strength. They were fearsome and dreadful, but in ways that weren’t really comprehensible to villagers from rural communities. Even someone like me had memories of adventurers—two of them, actually...

If only because those two adventurers had saved my village.



The two of them showed up sometime in the spring. Winter had passed, and snow was slowly, but surely, melting. Some still remained on the paths, so few people visited us. It was a quiet time.

A quiet season...

My village, however, had certain problems with monsters. Having harvested the fields in Autumn, we stored the crops and preserved cattle products in our storerooms and barns. It was these structures the Goblins targeted.

There weren't many of them, but we could hardly stand up to them, monsters being what they were. All the young and capable men had to join forces just to defeat one Goblin, only for it to be replaced by another the very next day. Even a fool would know the Goblins had a nest somewhere in these parts, and that they were coming from there.

But there was little we could do. We were only villagers.

This was why the village chief had gone off to the big city to enlist the aid of adventurers, who would solve this problem for us.

There were two adventurers who answered the call, their names being...Rentt Faina, and Lorraine Vivie.

The two of them looked relaxed enough, hopping off their carriage and walking into the village. They immediately spoke with the chief, then asked for information about any forest entrances from our hunters.

"Somewhere around here, I would say."

"Yes. Carcasses of dead animals and such, the hunters say. The Goblins have been hunting... Ah, and this bark being peeled off the surrounding trees. They're fond of this sort of thing."

That was the nature of their discussion. Curious, I approached them.

“What are you two talking about?”

“Hmm?” The female adventurer turned around. “Ah, a child from the village. Are you perhaps interested in our discussion?”

She smiled as she spoke. I nodded, and the woman happily launched into a detailed explanation of their tasks.

“We are searching for a Goblin nest, little one. Goblins have statistically preferred a certain lay of the land, so we were asking the village hunters if such an area existed in the forests nearby. We did find a likely candidate, along with carcasses of prey, and seeds of certain plants they like to gnaw on in the region. With that much information, it was all but too easy to pinpoint where exactly their nest would be located.”

“Well...” The man next to her chimed in as well. “I suppose that’s the case with how most of these requests are. We still have to investigate the grounds ourselves, however. With this much information, though...it won’t be too difficult. Even so, we may find a small mob of Goblins—wouldn’t hurt for us to be careful, at any rate. I think this is very much doable, Lorraine. Let’s be on our way.”

“Yes. Let us take our leave.”

The two spoke, looking at each other as they spread a large map between them. Before long, they had folded it up and were headed deep into the forest. They were walking head-first into danger even though they had just arrived a short while ago... Would they really be all right?

I was hardly the only one who had such concerns as everyone in the village looked equally uneasy as we saw them off. But the two soon returned, and the sight of these adventurers made us collectively gasp.

In the pouches they carried were ten Goblin ears apiece, each seemingly from a different Goblin. Did these two people really defeat all those monsters by themselves...?

“Is the village chief in?” the female adventurer asked, spatters of blood decorating her previously pristine overcoat.

I just nodded.

“Thank you.”

Saying so, the two faded from sight, and I just stood there, watching them as they walked away.

From what I heard later, they truly had defeated those very same monsters we had so much trouble with, and in less than ten minutes. There were twenty Goblins in all; if they had been left alone, they would have definitely attempted to attack, or even sack the village.

Upon hearing their report, the village chief was deeply moved by their valor, and offered to increase their reward. Although the two adventurers initially refused to hear anything of the sort, the chief was insistent, and they eventually ended up accepting the offer.

From what I heard, the chief’s reaction was only natural—this village was apparently that close to destruction. No one was surprised he would offer a big reward to the two saviors of this village. All the villagers agreed with the chief’s decision; not a single person complained.

At night, a large banquet was held for the two. They then spent the night at the village chief’s, before returning to their big town the very next day.

With this, even someone like me knew adventurers really were something else...



“No matter how you put it, Rentt, I feel we have taken a little too much,” Lorraine said as we sat in a horse-carriage bound for Maalt.

I, Rentt Faina, shook my head.

“There is no such thing, Lorraine. That village chief asked for help in slaying five Goblins, and offered such a reward. While we assumed there were at most ten of them, there were actually double that. I think we did fair work.”

Such was often the case with requests taken on by adventurers. This particular request was written to enlist the assistance of adventurers who had a

cheaper rate—veterans, however, would see through such lies easily. In truth, both Lorraine and I had already noticed this, yet still chose to accept the request.

This was also why we had said certain things to the chief after our expedition—that he would be forgiven just this once for misrepresenting the nature of the request and engaging in unethical bargaining, and should he ever do anything like it again, adventurers would no longer come to his village.

Not a threat, of course, but a warning. There were all but too many villages that engaged in similar behaviors, only to eventually be destroyed.

Upon hearing as such, the village chief became white as a sheet, and immediately offered to increase the reward for the task. The amount of coin we then received was a little more than the appropriate amount for the work we had to do. A little of it was for us keeping his transgressions a secret, perhaps.

“Either way, I think that should be it for this particular incident. I do not think the chief would ever do anything like this again.”

I nodded in response. “I suppose... In fact, didn’t that chief take on the title only a short while ago? He probably has little in the way of experience.”

He had also promised us he was remorseful, and that there’d never be such an incident in the future.

But the appearance of monsters in such rural locations spelled doom for these types of settlements. This was the real reason we had accepted such a request in the first place, and I would probably accept similar requests should I ever see them.

Half of it was charity, or perhaps even unsolicited help. I felt this could occasionally be a good thing.

My train of thought carried on as the carriage rumbled on back to town—our home, the frontier township of Maalt.

A Continued Dream

“Just...a little bit...more...”

Yes, just a little bit more, I thought as I stood on the edge of a cliff, reaching out to a surface above me.

“If I stretch...like...this...can I...?”

My fingers lightly brushed against the object in question, and, with a final, decisive stretch, I grasped it in my hands.

It was a small, beautiful flower. A Tetona flower, one that only grew on the faces of these harsh, steep cliffs.



“I’ve... I’ve got it. Picked it...for you,” I, Rentt Faina, said as I triumphantly opened the doors before me.

I quickly lost my voice, however. Before me was a young girl, seated in a chair. She was watching over another girl, who seemed peacefully asleep in bed.

That’s right. The girl seemed peacefully asleep. The girl seemed that way...but... But...

“I’m sorry, Rentt...and thank you, but...it’s too... Just a little too...”

Looking at the streaks of tears running down her face, I knew I was too late.



The girl in the chair was Rin, and the one in the bed was Ran. They were twins whom I often played with as a child. The two of them looked exactly the same, and had similar personalities. They even lived in a similar way, which was why I had assumed they would live as such into a ripe, old age.

But the gods were cruel. The heavens decreed that Ran was to suffer from an incurable disease, while Rin was to be completely fine.

Ran’s illness got worse. There were no known treatments, so Ran slowly

became weaker.

The two of them, however, had a dream: to one day open a florist's shop, just the two of them. To fill the world with flowers—that was their dream.

It was somewhat childish and cute, yes, but the twins were serious about this dream of theirs, that they would one day find a way to cultivate the Tetona flower, which was impossible to raise in captivity, then spread it throughout the world.

That was their dream.

Ran was now no longer able to pursue it. When that had become obvious, Rin had at the very least wanted her sister to see the real thing, just once. And so it came to be that she posted a request to the guild, and I was the one who picked it up.

The contents of the request were simple: to bring Ran a Tetona flower before her life ended. It *was* a simple request, yet...

"I've...failed..."

There was nothing else I could say. I had indeed failed. I should have been faster. I knew that. I even *thought* it.

Rin shook her head slowly, a faint smile lighting up her tear-streaked face.

"No...it's all right. You've done enough, Rentt. Ran wanted to say...she was sorry. For having to leave first."

"But..."

"It's okay, Rentt. Hand me the request forms..."

Rin snatched the forms out of my hands, declaring the request as complete with a flourish of her pen.

I hesitated. How could I accept this? Rin just pushed the papers back into my hands.

"We're grateful, so please... Also, you did bring the flower to us. I'll do my best to find a way. To make them bloom and grow. Then I'll send them to lots of places. That...is still our dream," Rin declared.

What a strong girl..

She had lost a member of her family, yet she didn't wallow in despair—she was already looking ahead. Individuals like her were rare. Her statements weren't those of a child, but of someone who had steeled their resolve, who had made up their mind.

I, of all people, understood this, which was why I turned to Rin and said the following:

"If there is...anything... Anything at all I can help you with, tell me. I will do what I can."

"Thank you, Rentt... Well, if I ever want floral specimens from dangerous places again...would you bring them to me if I asked?"

"What, like a Dragon Blood Blossom?"

That was the first thing that came to mind as I thought about plants that were rare, or difficult to procure.

"Haha... Yes, that would be dangerous indeed. Maybe a little too much for a Bronze-class, right?"

"Yes, that's right. But it's also my dream to one day become a Mithril-class adventurer. So...when I become much stronger, I'll bring you one of those. A Dragon Blood Blossom."

I didn't know if I would ever reach such a level of strength. Somehow, I felt I had hit my limits already.

Even so, I would do what I could. Rin, this young girl before me who had lost her family, still hadn't given up on her dream. There was no way I could give up either. Not before her eyes.

"Well then...it's a competition. Let's see whose dream comes true first... I won't lose, you hear?"

"Me neither."

As our eyes met, it was clear to me Rin's smile had gotten just a little bit brighter. It wasn't a smile from the bottom of her heart—she was hurting. Even so, life would go on. Our lives, too, had to go on. I had to walk forward; there

was no other way.

And that was all there was to it.

The Race

It happened on a day when I had been walking around the streets of Maalt, albeit with Edel perched on my head.

While I was an adventurer, and a busy one at that, I couldn't exactly work around the clock as not much would be done that way. It was true many problems had been popping up around me lately, and I had been hopping from one incident to the next. Humans, however, always found a way to get some rest in, lest they be crushed by the weight of their duties. All that work with nothing to show for it—not a prospect I could laugh at.

On the other hand, I wasn't currently human. Perhaps those thoughts were nothing more than a waste of time, but it was at that moment when...

"Hmm...? Hey, you there. That thing on your head..." someone called out to me.

A middle-aged, male adventurer, to be precise. A glance at him was sufficient for me to understand he was no longer new at the business. While he wasn't exactly a veteran, he probably had some degree of sense. The equipment and weapons on him were equally mundane, so he didn't seem like a dangerous individual at the very least.

Even so, I had my guard up, for a moment of carelessness was all that was needed for the foe to launch an ambush.

For example, what if he suddenly poured holy water over me? Perhaps that would work on a normal Undead, but it would be worthless on me. Though, maybe there were some poisons in the world that had unknown effects on me, or maybe I wouldn't be completely immune to them. I couldn't discount such a possibility. I didn't expect this to happen, of course, but if we were to engage in combat, I was confident I would come up out on top. Regardless, I was still cautious.

All things considered, the man didn't seem hostile. He took one look at Edel,

then turned to me and said the following:

“Ah, right. You, you’re going to the races? I see, I see... Yeah, he looks like a good mouse. Maybe you’ll even get first place if you participate...”

I shook my head at his words. It appeared the man was mistaken. I felt like I should correct him, but before I could do so, he was already tugging on my sleeve.

“Even I feel like I could bet on your mouse... Hmm. Okay, this way! Quickly, to the registration counter! I’m betting on you, friend!” he said, as he continued pulling me to some unknown place against my will.



From his words and demeanor, it wasn’t difficult to guess what the man was up to. Race, bet, registration... With all these keywords, even a fool would know what the man had mistaken me for. The place that he had taken me to was also obviously a place for such a purpose.

This was nowhere within the streets of Maalt, but just outside of it, along a particularly long wall. A corner of the nearby forest, once creeping up to the wall, had been completely cleared. In the clearing sat a course with several steep inclines and tunnels—such a complicated thing.

One might ask what exactly this course was for: Puchi Suri racing. In fact, there were about six of the mice at this very moment, all running toward the goal.

Around the course were throngs and crowds of male adventurers, all holding wooden plaques of sorts—betting chips, perhaps—as they cheered on their selected champions. Occasionally, some of them would make a terrified expression as their mouse of choice lagged behind.

“A betting race, I see...”

“What, didn’t know?” the man next to me said.

Like the rest, he was holding a wooden plaque in his hands. His name was

Aidi, a Bronze-class adventurer. He was caught up in these races as of late, and hadn't been taking on any requests at all. He did the absolute minimum so he wouldn't be struck off the register, but the rewards would once again be spent betting on these races.

"When was a place like this built...?" I asked.

"This place? Pretty recently. They say the Puchi Suri in the town have calmed down recently—not that aggressive anymore and all that. So there was this guy...thought he would try seeing if they listened to instructions, if they could be trained. So it turns out they could be, and he got reminded of them races back in certain districts...and if it were mice he wouldn't need to do very much. So he built this place."

I felt like I understood the reasons behind all this happening. Edel's power had changed the Puchi Suri of Maalt, causing them to become less aggressive to humans. More importantly, however, they gained some semblance of intelligence.

This...was supposedly the result of it all.

On one hand, no one would be injured or killed in these events, and I suppose it could be safely ignored for what it was. On the other, the people here were obviously addicted to the races, even if their families were starving, or they themselves were becoming impoverished. I felt some pangs of guilt at those thoughts.

"It's getting real interesting around these parts, see..."

Although I gave the man cursory responses, he continued rambling on, eventually speaking of the people he had encountered, and the things he had seen at this place. Tales about men who became rich, men who lost everything, and men who dragged themselves to the races even if they were broke. I shook my head as he continued on, with stories of terrible individuals who stole their family member's savings... All strange, absurd, sad, and funny tales. Perhaps some of the people here wouldn't find these stories very amusing at all.

He went on for a while, regaling me with more of these unfortunate tales.

"Ah... There he is. That mouse of yours."

As expected, Edel was lined up at the starting line along with the other Puchi Suri. Due to his insistence, Edel had been registered for the races at the counter prior. There were entry fees, of course; nothing grand, and there would be no penalties for losing. I suppose just one time was fine, so we went ahead with the process. For some reason, Edel was enthusiastic about the whole thing.

Before long...

“All right! Positions! One... Two... START!!!”

The staff member’s voice was amplified several times by the object in his hands; an artifact from the depths of a labyrinth, if I had to guess.

The Puchi Suri were off, as if understanding the significance of the sound. Each and every one of the mice were about Edel’s size, and their speed was nothing to scoff at. I suppose each of them were much like Edel, with followings of smaller mice in their nests and caverns.

The color of their pelts differed, albeit slightly. Bolts of ash, brown, and black darted through the racecourse. They were also capable of using mana to enhance their bodies, seeing as Puchi Suri were monsters after all.

While Edel could have taken some mana from me and gained an advantage over his peers, he refused to do so in the name of sportsmanship, perhaps. That made me feel like this race was now worth watching a little bit.

“Would you LOOK at that! Number one, Jacks Tiger! He’s fast! There he goes, taking those corners at such an aggressive speed! But wait, what’s this? Close on his tail is number two, Edel! A first time contestant this black wind may be, but he’s hot on the Puchi Suri race king’s back! WILL HE CATCH UP?!”

A cursory look around the venue revealed many of the audience had bet on number one—the reigning champion, it seemed.

Aidi, however, had a plate for number two, Edel. It was as he said; he really did bet on us.

“ALL RIGHT! Come on... Come on!!!”

Aidi watched on, muttering prayers under his breath. His intense expression was much like that of an adventurer confronting a powerful monster. The

reality of the situation, however, was quite different, and the absurdity of the situation was somewhat pathetic.

Finally...

“HERE WE ARE! The LAST corner! Turning... He’s turning... There! We see him! Number one, Jacks Tiger! Will this end as...? Oh? What’s this? Coming close behind and CLOSING IN! Number two, EDEL! What terrifying speed! I have never seen a catch-up like this in the history of Puchi Suri Racing! Jacks Tiger presses on! On and on as Edel closes in! He’s closing in! Closing... THEY’RE IN LINE! This is it folks! The SHOWDOWN! Who’ll be the victor? One? Or two...?! TWO! It’s TWOOOOOOO!!! EDEL HAS SECURED FIRST PLACE!!!”

And so it came to be that Edel caught up to his foe, passing it to achieve first place. At that moment, Aidi jumped up with a triumphant cry.

“YEEEEEEEEEEEESSSSSSSSS!!!”

Aidi raised his fist in the air in celebration of his victory, a sharp contrast to the sea of disappointed faces, along with a heap of discarded betting plaques on the ground. The fallen plaques were then gathered by a few men of whom I supposed were staff members, most likely for recycling or some other purpose.

Hmm. Quite sustainable indeed.

“We’ve done it! We’ve really done it! With this, I can play around and relax for quite a bit longer... There’s a payout for you, too! Come visit when you feel like it, I’ll surely bet on you again!” Aidi said, all smiles.

That was one thing, I suppose, but Edel was, for all intents and purposes, a fortified Puchi Suri. Was that not a violation of the rules? Either way, there was little in the way of fine print. I wouldn’t concern myself with that now.

This was how I came to learn about this strange new form of leisure in Maalt. Would other strange spectacles soon pop up in this small town? For one reason or other, I felt like a wave of change was sweeping through Maalt.

I, of course, couldn’t say with certainty what was bringing about these changes. Yes, I knew nothing at all... Just because strange things were happening around me didn’t mean I was responsible for any of it. That’s right, I wasn’t.

With the prize money, Edel had me purchase food that was to his liking. With the remainder, I procured a good vintage, sharing it between Lorraine and myself.

To think this day would come! A familiar paying for its own expenses... Ha. A good mouse, truly.

Of Ghosts and Pets

“...seem a ghost has appeared...” Lorraine said, with an expression of utmost seriousness.

I looked up from the book I was reading, scrutinizing her face carefully.

“What...? I beg your pardon? Would you mind repeating yourself, Lorraine?”

A joke, perhaps, or maybe a trick of the mind. Had I misheard her?

Lorraine, however, repeated herself calmly.

“It would seem a ghost has...”

I held up a hand, stopping her mid-sentence.

“All right, I understand. So I didn’t mishear you.”

“Good that we have come to an understanding, Rentt. Well then. What do you think?”

“What do I...think? Well, we could just defeat it when we feel like it, no? Some cleansing magic, maybe? If I recall, a normal ghost could be sent on its way even with normal spells...”

There was no cause for alarm or fear. It was just a ghost, after all. Perhaps I would be afraid if I were a child, but I was an adult now.

Given that ghost materialization was a natural phenomenon and ways of defeating them existed, there was no reason to panic. There was also Lorraine, who would provide magical backup in case physical attacks didn’t work.

So...what was the problem? Why the serious face?

“You would think that, yes... However, if you did defeat it with magic, they do

give off that awful howl, do they not?”

A good point... It wasn't known if ghosts could feel pain. When struck by magic, however, they had a tendency to let out an ear-splitting wail. This was why exorcising ghosts of the dead at night were troublesome, to say the least. One's neighbors would be inclined to agree. As such, these requests also came with the task of making the rounds, preemptively apologizing to all the people who lived around the haunted building in question.

It was all quite troublesome.

Despite all the trouble, most people would just quietly accept the apology, and calmly close their doors. Most would prefer not to have a ghost in the vicinity, after all.

For instance, someone could come home to find their abode a mess, even though the windows were shut and the doors locked. Plates and bowls would be broken, strewn all over the place—a common phenomenon when it came to stray ghosts. Even if we assumed one would put up with broken plates, they could possibly wake up in the middle of the night to find a translucent, blood-spattered woman standing over their bed. Or maybe a disembodied voice during mealtimes saying, “I want to eat, too...” or something similar. While some individuals didn't mind any of these strange happenings on account of their unbridled courage, they would at least be irritated, or slightly put off by these occurrences.

In addition, ghosts had a tendency to become stronger if left alone, and the incidents would eventually escalate to the point where someone would be grievously hurt. Once or twice a year, possibly, one would hear of townsfolk murdered by...ghosts. It was more likely than one would expect, and an occasional exorcism was necessary.

They were like...cockroaches, for the lack of a better word. Cockroaches that wailed when they were crushed. Terrifying.

We had little choice, however.

“What of it? There's little we can do about these wails.”

“Not quite, Rentt. Have you forgotten? If they are purified with divinity, they

pass on peacefully and just vanish.”

“Ahhh...yes. I suppose there is that. Would you like me to assist then?”

“But of course. Your quick understanding is helpful as always, Rentt.”

Such were the way of things. In fact, individuals affiliated with churches often carried out such duties for some pocket change. They had good business, all things considered, and some people would even call on them over adventurers.

That said, these individuals weren’t exactly Priests or Priestess-Saints. They could just be men or women of faith armed with a bottle of holy water as that much was enough to exorcise lesser ghosts, spirits, and the like.

Lorraine could have approached the issue in a similar way, but, instead, she chose to come to me. While I didn’t know of her reasons, it wasn’t an unreasonable task.

I nodded at Lorraine before inquiring about our next destination.



“Is this the place...?”

“Yes. What is it with that face of yours? Surprised?” Lorraine questioned, turning to me as she did so.

I took another look at the place, the location where this ghost had supposedly materialized.

“If only because it’s such a mansion, Lorraine. Wouldn’t these people have the funds to hire a priest or two?”

“I suppose.”

It was a large mansion. Nothing on the level of the Latuules, of course, but it was decidedly bigger than, say, Lorraine’s abode.

Though, Lorraine’s home was the size it was because of her preferences, since she wasn’t exactly one for excess. If she really wished to purchase a mansion, it may actually be possible. I couldn’t even recall a time where Lorraine’s finances

were ever in dire straits.

“Even so, they are bound by certain...circumstances. We should be going, Rentt.”

Lorraine stepped forward, and, after a brief exchange with the guard, we were invited through the mansion’s open doors.



“Oh thank you, thank you so much for coming... Oh? And who might this be...?”

“Ah, yes. This is the adventurer who will perform the purification.”

The client, seemingly convinced at Lorraine’s explanation, took a step toward me. From her demeanor, it seemed like she was asking for...a handshake. The client looked like a lady who was particularly well-to-do, and was exactly that.

“Oh, please, please kind sir! I implore you! Lay the soul of my Sweetpea to rest, that he may ascend to the heavens above!”

“Sweetpea...?”

Lorraine turned to me. “A monster, Rentt. One that Lady Emilstead here treats as her own family... A variant of Puchi Suri...”

The meaning of “variant” in this case would refer to reduced aggressiveness, or perhaps a cute appearance, optimized to be attractive toward humans.

I see. I understand now.

I suppose priests and the like would find this request difficult as most ghosts appearing in town were human in origin, so the goal would be to peacefully put them to rest. Failing that, they would be blown away by a few well-placed spells.

In this case, Lady Emilstead would probably be deeply unsatisfied with such a procedure, seeing as it would only cause the monster’s soul pain.

This was why I was called here, I suppose...being another individual having a

mouse for a pet.

I understood the lady's feelings well enough. This was why I turned to her and spoke, holding her hands in mine.

"Leave it to me, madam... I will do everything in my power to put Sweetpea's soul at ease."

With that, I did as I had promised, seeing the mouse's soul off to the heavens. Lady Emilstead shook my hand vigorously, tears streaking her face, offering to once again seek out my services should she require anything. It seemed I had obtained a good client.

Immediately after this, Lorraine presented the woman with a few Puchi Suri, a suggestion for her to adopt another to fill the hole in her heart.

While some could argue that Lorraine's actions were insensitive, her demeanor and manner of speech suggested that Lorraine truly cared for this grieving lady. Lady Emilstead, in turn, was deeply grateful, and ended up choosing a Puchi Suri from amongst Lorraine's offerings. She then decided to name it...Sweetpea...

I felt this was a little too simple of an affair...



"Well, Rentt. With this, obtaining information from that household has become all too easy," Lorraine stated after we had left the mansion behind.

"What do you mean?"

"What, did you not notice? The new Sweetpea is a subordinate of Edel's. In other words, he would be our mouse on the inside. Edel had wanted to gain access to that mansion, so I offered some assistance. They are a well-to-do family, you see, and they have guests from all corners of the land. It just so happened there was a good excuse in place...at least for us to do what we did."

Was Lorraine referring to the ghost...?

“Since when were you such fast friends with Edel...?”

“No, it is not quite like that. The truth is a little more simple. That mansion has a barrier around it, you see, generated by a magical tool of sorts. I happened to pass by and witness a Puchi Suri body slamming the barrier repeatedly. Noting its interesting behavior, I stood and observed the mouse for a while, only for Edel to show up and begin issuing it instructions. I then approached him and asked if he would like entry into the mansion...so I offered my assistance, as I said.”

“What, you can even understand him now?”

“A few words, yes. Not the specifics, but that is an experiment I would gladly take part in. A little difficult, however, given how Edel is always so busy. In any case, it is good for your friend to owe me a favor, in case we ever need anything from him in the future.”

And all this had been happening this whole time...? To think Edel had been working harder than me on a daily basis...

For a while, I was at a loss for words...

Rentt, Housekeeper

“Spring has come, huh...”

How long ago was that? A few years after I started adventuring, maybe? Sometime in the spring, when the air had started warming up. I remembered this happened during one spring or other.

It was a harsh winter, with the very air itself drawn taut by the cold. But now, spring was here. I also knew of the fact that fighting monsters in the warm, comfortable spring rays would eventually cause me to make a mistake. That was why I chose to stay in Maalt, instead taking on simpler requests like cleaning, transporting, or hauling groceries. This was also why I was present at the guild around the time new requests were posted up on the boards. It was a little after that when I had heard that voice...

“Hey! What’s the meaning of this?! ”

The voice came from the rewards counter, where adventurers turned completed requests in. It was a young voice, and its owner also looked suitably young—a new adventurer, fresh out of the guild’s registration records. Judging by his expression, he was in a state of panic, probably due to a request that had gone awry.

I strained my ears, listening in on the conversation.

“Even if you say that...it was a request to have a location cleaned. But there was still dust remaining in some places... There was no choice but to reduce the rewards.”

“Dust? What do you mean, “dust”?! I cleaned that place! I did!”

“The client is the final judge of that, I’m afraid.”

“You say that, but! Oh, I get it, it’s because I’m new, so they’re picking on me, huh?! Now that I think about it, that also happened a while ago, for the exact same reason!!!”

From their exchange, I understood both the adventurer and the client had certain problems of their own. Stricter adventurers may say the youth was a fool, and was the one in the wrong—but of course the discussion would veer off in this direction. After all, if the client was overly stingy or picky, he should have been smart enough to notice it before signing the contract. Complaining after one had signed the paper only causes things to go in circles, or so they would say.

He was young, however, and didn’t understand much in the ways of adventuring. He would surely fail again and again, until he eventually learned. Despite that, the receptionist was having a hard time...

I suppose I should have been going as well, and accept a request or two. I tore down a few request sheets, bringing them to the counter. I was an adventurer who was used to doing all sorts of chores throughout the day. Despite my capabilities, taking on too many at once could be problematic, so I thought greatly about my decisions before committing to them.

Even though the guild was relatively empty around this time, there were quite a few other adventurers who were set on doing chores, and only one reception

counter was open. To be precise, it was the counter with the angry youth, who had finally stopped arguing at some point.

The receptionist dutifully read out my tasks.

“Yes... A cleaning request, from Zant Currin. The reward is five bronze coins...”

And so she continued on, with me signing the relevant forms as she did. Upon hearing that, the youth, who apparently still had something to say, turned to me.

“All of those people endlessly complain. They’ll find something to complain about with you. You shouldn’t take those requests.”

It seemed like he had taken requests from this particular client before, but I shook my head.

“I’ve never received any complaints. In any case, it’s well within my rights to take on this request.”

“You... I was even being helpful...”

The youth, now visibly agitated, began going on about one thing or other. I, however, finished signing all my forms, took the correct ones with me, and turned to leave the guild.

But this didn’t mean the youth would leave me alone. Instead, he chased after me, putting a hand on my shoulder.

“Wait!”

“What is it you want?”

“I’ll come, too.”

“Why? You’ll only get in the way.”

“I’ll help!!!”

“I’ve no intentions of splitting the reward, just so you know.”

“That’s fine! Those guys will definitely complain. I’ll make sure they can’t do that this time!”

And do what, clean harder? I thought I’d ask him, but ultimately refrained

from doing so.

I suppose this was quite all right... The youth was nothing more than a noisy newcomer to the business, but he seemed to have some redeeming points. Even the receptionist, who was now a fair distance behind the youth, looked in my direction and promptly winked. Asking me to show the newcomer the ropes, no doubt. I could refuse, of course, but the youth himself said he needed no compensation, so that was that.

I turned to the youth decisively.

“You will follow my instructions to the letter. And no strange statements at the venue. Make sure you work hard.”

“Of course! I’ll show them! I’ll make it so clean...”

Maybe he’d have looked more impressive if he were saying those words before bandits or monsters.

Well...no matter. We headed to the client’s abode.

All of those requests I had taken were for cleaning houses, since it was spring cleaning season in the small township of Maalt.

Some of these houses were large, and the cleaning couldn’t be completed in one day. I suppose this youth showed up on one of those days and received some negative feedback for his work.



“Thank you, Rentt. Truly... And you over there, too. I’ve never seen it this clean before! Here’s a little more for your trouble.”

The client signed off on the request forms before handing me and the youth two bronze coins each. Under normal circumstances, the rewards were deposited at the adventurer’s guild. We received extra today, however—a tip, if you would.

“Thank you. I hope you seek out my services again.”

With that, we turned, leaving the house behind. We had finished all our tasks for the day.

“Not a single one...” The youth’s expression was one of bafflement. “No one complained. Not one...”

The boy just didn’t seem to understand why this was the case.

“Do you know why it turned out this way?”

“Yeah... I’m still not very good...at what I do...”

Cleaning was a simple task, but there were many ways to go about it. How to clean certain surfaces, to scrub or to wash, how to grind off even the toughest stains... All were basics of cleaning and housekeeping. The boy had no such knowledge, and as such performed an unsatisfactory job. That was why his rewards had been reduced.

For his part, though, he observed what I had done and followed my instructions as best as he could. He learned the methods and didn’t hesitate to ask me if he didn’t understand something. This was why the previous client had praised his work ethic.

“That’s how it is. Experience matters. You may have made mistakes in the past, but you should be fine from here on out.”

“Yes... Thanks, Rentt. No, thank you, Mister Rentt... I’ve learned a lot from you.”

“Don’t call me that. I’m not really used to it... Also, we’ll be fairly splitting the rewards, so don’t worry about it.”

Of course I’d do as such. It was never my intention to cheat the youth of his earnings. Nevertheless, he protested vehemently.

“Eh? No no, it’s fine! It’s fine, really! Think of it as a fee for you teaching me all the basics...”

“No no, you worked hard as well. Take it. Next time, you settle your requests to the highest standards, then take that coin to the tavern for a drink. No one will complain about you then.”

“Mister Rentt...”

I slapped the youth's back—for some reason, he had stopped talking mid sentence.

“Well then! Off to the guild we go. We still have to turn these in. That's how you can tell you've truly started on the path of adventuring, right?”

“Yeah!”

A few years later, that very same youth would achieve the rank of Silver-class before I had, then set off on a journey, leaving Maalt behind. But perhaps that would be a story for another time...

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The Unwanted Undead Adventurer: Volume 3

by Yu Okano

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