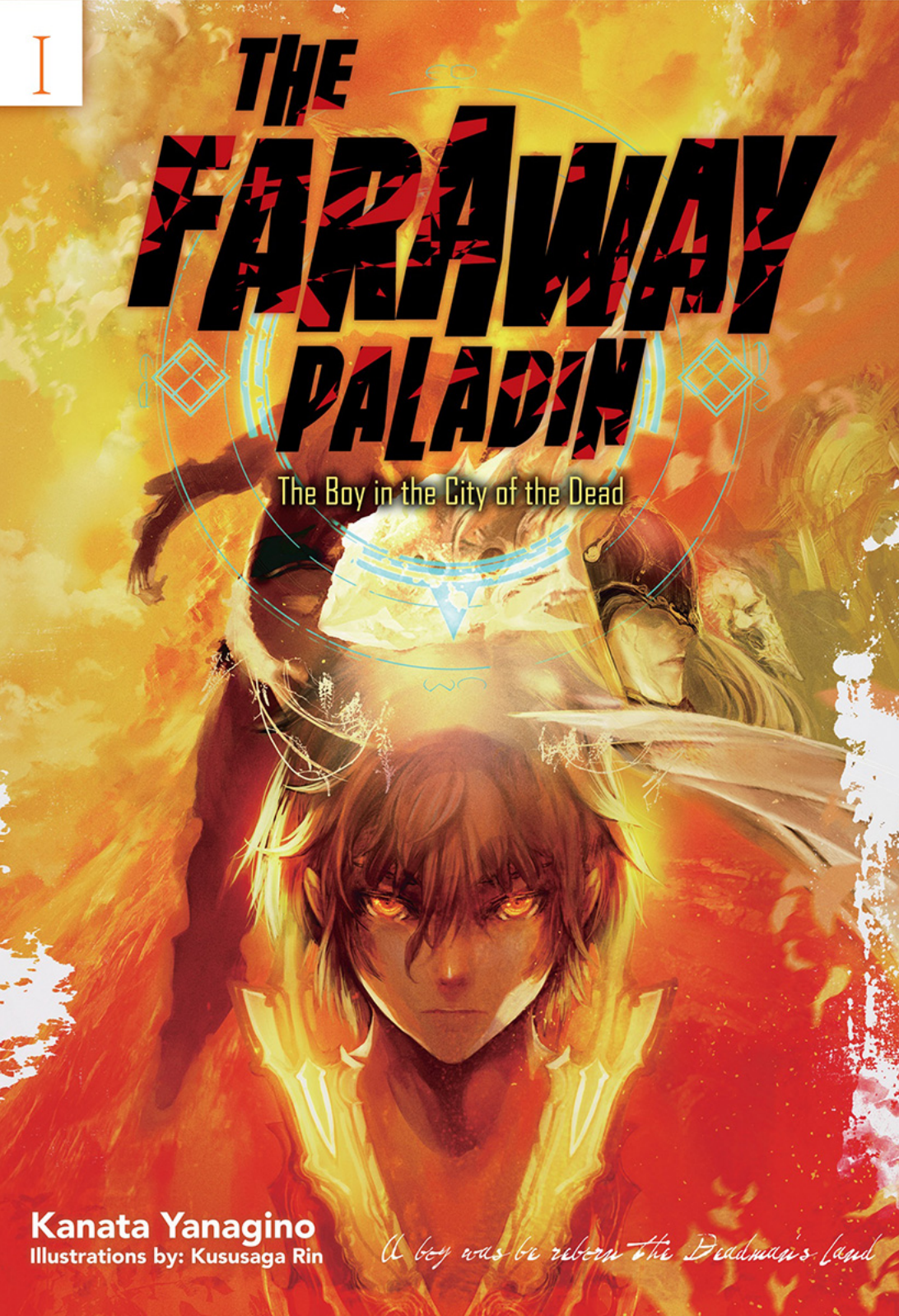
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THE FARAWAY PALADIN

The Boy in the City of the Dead



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Illustrations by: Kususaga Rin

A boy was be reborn the Deadman's land


THE FARAWAY PALADIN | THE BOY IN THE CITY OF THE DEAD



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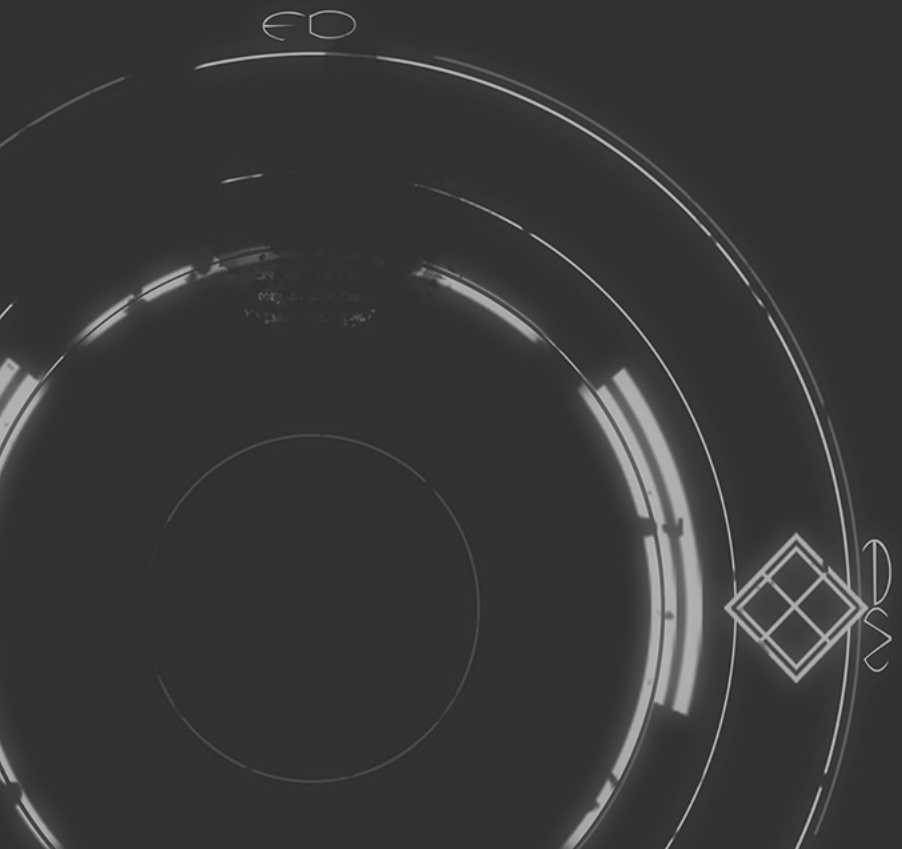
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Then I fixed my gaze straight ahead and started forward, never glancing back. There were traces of an old street that had once run alongside the river, leading away from the lake beside the city. I decided to go down and follow it to the north. Bathed in the radiance of the morning sun, I headed for the outside world.
William

Concentrate your eyes
on darkness, your ears on silence,
and your thoughts on death.
For only amidst dark shall there
be light, and only in silence the
word, and only in dying life.

— From the Proverbs of Gracefeel,
God of the Flame

Prologue



My memories of death were indistinct and muddy. I had spent most of my days in a dim room. I had screwed up. Somewhere, I had screwed something up. It had become almost impossible for me to leave the house.

My family's interactions with me were tepid. They did not scold, nor did they lament. They simply gave me vague smiles and troubled looks. They offered me platitudes, and treated me as if everything were normal. It may have been kindness, or perhaps that was all they knew how to do. But whatever it was, to me, it was poison.

Before long, a sense of restlessness burned me from the inside. Just when it had risen to the point that I wanted to tear myself open and rip it out... My home and my room, which provided me just slightly more comfort than discomfort; the fear and distress the outside world inspired in me; and my tolerant family, who remained forever kind—together, they made me hesitate to take that single step forward.

I might have been able to start over... the day after screwing up, or the day after that. Even a week, a month, a year, a decade after. If I had just taken that step, something might have changed. But I didn't. I couldn't.

I lacked the courage to take that single step. It was like something I needed, something that would give me a push, was missing. Or maybe that was just my excuse. Every moment of inaction gave me another reason to give up.

"It's too late."

"What's gone is gone."

"I don't know what to do anymore."

"They'll just laugh at me if I start now."

The restlessness built up within me, but everything seemed like too much effort. I wanted to take action, but was too terrified to take it. I

wanted to do something, but had no idea what to do. Life was suffering, and yet, I lacked the passion one needed to die.

I ate the food that was given to me, consumed cheap entertainment, and lived by inertia. I was like water that had gone stagnant. Afraid of failure, I averted my eyes from my approaching doom and gave myself over to folly, half-aware of the decision I had made.

The reason why my memories of death were so unclear—It was surely because my life itself had been so hopelessly muddied and indistinct. A dim room. A life where day and night are inverted. The light of a monitor. The clacking of a keyboard. Fragmentary and chaotic, the memories came and went.

And... This memory, which was slightly clearer than the others. The sound of a motor. A handcart trundled by, carrying a white coffin. A cold, mechanical sound accompanied the slow, inexorable closing of the incinerator door. It was one of the few vivid images left in my hazy memory: the deaths of my parents. I wondered, had I shed tears as I stood there, with my parents reduced to bone fragments and ash? All of it was shrouded by fog. There was one thing from that memory I could understand. That event had come far too late to be my stepping stone. The days blurred again. At some point, they had come to an end. My memories of my death were indistinct and muddy. It must have been because my life itself had been so hopelessly indistinct and muddy. Memories came and went. Pain tore at my heart from the inside. Tears spilled. I let out a groan. Soon, the pain silenced even that.

All faded to black

And at my last gasp, I thought I saw a faint flame.

◆

"Wah..."

I awoke from my indistinct and muddy memories.

I made out a gloomy ceiling... and from the shadows, a skull loomed before me. Blue will-o'-the-wisps inhabited its vacant eye sockets. Jawbone clattering, the skeleton slowly stretched a hand toward me.

I screamed involuntarily. The sound that emerged from me seemed unnaturally high-pitched.

Like a young child's, I thought. With a start, I realized that my voice wasn't the only thing that felt out of place. The arm I had instinctively moved before me was curiously small and short. It was pudgy, short, and small, in fact. It was an arm that belonged to an infant.

Skull! Forget the arm! Focus on the skull! And where was I? What had happened?

My panicked thoughts bounded from place to place, refusing to settle. I decided to try to calm down for the moment. I wanted to remain cool and rationally observe the situation—

"■■■■..."

And then the skeleton traced a bony fingertip across my skin.

"Waaaahhhh?!" A part of my brain began to curse at me. *We're in a situation like this, and you expect me to stay calm?!* I flailed about in an attempt to escape.

It was an ambulatory skeleton. A monster. An aberration. A thing not of this world.

A sudden encounter with this thing would have terrified anyone. I

was no different.

And on top of all that, I seemed to be a lot smaller and younger than I remembered. My memories were vague, but I thought I could remember being lanky and a bit on the tall side. However, my memories didn't match up with my current anatomy whatsoever. Imagine yourself, as an adult, sitting on a tricycle you played with as a small child. It felt like that, but taken to an extreme.

"■■■■..."

Seemingly at a loss for anything else to do with me, the skeleton pressed me against its breast with one arm, then began to rock me rhythmically back and forth. No matter how much I struggled in its arms, it kept on rocking me, its persistence unremitting.

"Ah..." At last, I realized. The skeleton's clumsy swaying was fundamentally kind.

It was a rough ride. The skeleton appeared to have little experience with this sort of thing, and its bony arms were far from comfortable. Still, it didn't seem to be contemplating, say, the best way to go about eating me. Well, it probably wasn't.

Of course, I did not possess observational skill sufficient to read whatever passed for a skull's facial expressions. I couldn't exactly be confident when it came to my opinions, and neither could I drop my guard. But it seemed to me that this skeleton was acting in a distinctly loving fashion. When I looked closely at the blue will-o'-the-wisps bobbing in its eye sockets, I felt as if they might have a friendly warmth to them. The thought calmed me down a little.

Wondering what exactly was going on, I diverted my attention from the skeleton for the time being and focused on my surroundings.

My head couldn't move freely, but I could see several large, majestic pillars, and numerous arches. There was an oculus in the middle of the domed ceiling, through which a faint light streamed. I felt pretty confident that I was indoors, but the place seemed terribly

old-fashioned and imposing. I was reminded of the Pantheon of ancient Rome, which I had once seen in photos.

But I couldn't tell any more than that.

Something that should have been dead was moving for some reason, and I seemed to have become a lot smaller and younger. I organized what I knew in the back of my mind, but before I could embark on a search for further clues, my thoughts started to become fuzzy. Moving around had tired me out.

The skeleton was still trying, in its own awkward way, to lull me to sleep.

My body swayed slowly, now feeling as if it was being rocked by gentle waves.

I let the waves take me, and I slowly drifted off.

◆

When I woke up, a cranky old man with a hooked nose was staring at me. He was pale blue and semi-translucent. That is, I could halfway see through him. He was unmistakably a ghost.

I stifled a scream.

Then, I was being picked up. I looked up to see a woman who was all skin and bones, each as dry as the other. That is, she was a mummy.

I desperately held back a scream.

Something was looming in front of my face and peering into it. It was the skeleton I had encountered before falling asleep.

"Waaaaaaaaaaah?!" Finally, my scream escaped me. I bawled. I wailed, kicked, and struggled. But perhaps because of my body's current state, I quickly became tired and hungry. The energy I

needed to violently resist withered away.

"■■■■...?" The old ghost peered at my face, and made indistinct noises to the mummy. She produced from an unknown location a bowl containing some kind of white gruel. Scooping some of it up with a spoon, she brought it to my mouth. Which I kept firmly closed, without so much as a second thought.

I mean, it's not like I could think of any good reasons to open it.

No one dreams of hearing "Open wide!" before they get a heaping helping of who-knows-what from a bone-dry old mummy.

What I was face-to-face with right now resembled nothing so much as the pictures of those mummified monks you'd always end up seeing in history books, who'd starved themselves to reach enlightenment. She was the ruined final state of the human form, dry as a dead tree.

Who wants to experience "say ah" with one of those? I couldn't imagine even a single person who would. And if such a person actually did exist, I, for one, wouldn't want to be friends with them.

Now, all that said, I was feeling desperately hungry. And there was no other obvious way of obtaining food in my present situation. My hunger for both food and sleep was irresistibly strong, probably as a result of my younger body. So I thought to myself, *The hell with it!* I then snapped up the whole spoonful.

It actually tasted pretty good. My memory informed me that baby food was bland, but I guess my tongue was as underdeveloped as the rest of me.

The skeleton stroked my head, as if to say, "There's a good boy."

"Wah...?"

At that time, I came to a surprising realization. It took something being put in my mouth before I noticed it. There were no teeth in there. No wonder my attempts to speak kept coming out kind of funny.

I see. So infants didn't have any teeth. Well, that was news to me. If I'd had any experience with raising children, I might have been able to use that to figure out what stage of development I'd reached. *Aha! No teeth, but not breast-feeding, that makes me a few months old!* Something like that. But that sort of warm familial experience was nowhere to be found in my memories. I didn't know the kind of things you'd otherwise expect of any reasonably mature adult.

There's not much to me, I found myself thinking.

I had died having accumulated nothing more than superficial knowledge and calendar years. "Ah—"

—Of course.

I had died.

I had definitely died back then.

Despite all my muddy, hazy memories, the agony of death was still deeply imprinted upon me.

Was this confusing place, where I was surrounded by the living dead, the afterlife?

If God existed, was this His punishment?

◆

About half a year passed.

I said "about" because constantly falling asleep and waking up again makes the passage of days a little hazy. It turns out that babies really do spend a lot of time sleeping, then waking up because they

got hungry. It felt like I was in a long, strange dream or vision, and so my mind was able to survive the boredom of being constantly horizontal.

About the only information I was able to gain in the meantime was that my situation was neither dream nor vision. It felt far too vivid and far too realistic. And I couldn't imagine what would have to go wrong for a person to start having visions of having their diaper changed by a reanimated corpse.

I was forced to accept that I was an infant incapable of anything more advanced than a crawl, spending my days in the care of three undead creatures.

After some time, I began to understand their speech.

It was some linguist's theory—their name escaped me—that a baby's brain was not a completely blank slate, but instead possessed from birth the ability to steadily construct and learn a language from surrounding sounds. Though my memories were still vague, it seemed like I could still recall a certain amount of my old knowledge.

"Ba... Ba..." I attempted to use my tongue and throat to produce a word, but I had yet to master these organs, so it wasn't going very well.

I couldn't shake the way I had controlled my old body before I died. The two were clashing inside my head. The power of speech, something I had taken for granted before, was now something I struggled with. Likewise, I still couldn't walk properly.

What if I was going to be like this forever, unable to walk or talk to my satisfaction? That fear haunted me.

"There, there. Want a hug?" Possibly sensing my anxiety, the mummy smiled, as if to reassure me.

She wore an old, threadbare robe similar to those worn by ancient priests, and the two around her called her Mary.

While I was a little hesitant to judge the beauty of a woman, not to mention a mummy, I felt that she had probably been a beautiful lady in life. She had a slender body and graceful bearing, with her eyes always averted downward. Her skin was like the bark of a dead tree, but it was unscarred. From it, I felt I could infer the flawless facial features she must have possessed as a living woman. Her wavy blonde hair had, admittedly, grown dull with the passage of time, but it was thick and gorgeous.

"Why don't we take a little walk outside today?"

You'll take me outside?!

"Heheh, that put a smile on your face." She could tell. I had been curious about what existed outside of this... temple?

Yet, with this body, I could hardly just go and take a look. I had been waiting for an opportunity to be taken outside.

"Up we go!" She picked me up. I detected some kind of light, floaty fragrance. It wasn't an unpleasant odor. Kind of woody? It reminded me of the incense-like scent you might expect from a kind old lady.

Slightly soothed, I allowed myself to enjoy the smell.

Mary carried me in her arms as she stepped slowly through the dimly lit temple.

Its floor was a checkerboard of square stones. Soft light streamed in from the ocular skylight at the top of the temple's vast, awfully high, domed ceiling. There were alcoves in the walls, which gave the impression of a Japanese shrine, and within them were sculptures of what were presumably this temple's gods.

One by one, they flowed past my eyes as we walked.

One depicted an imposing man with an air of gravitas, in the prime of life, bearing a sword shaped like a lightning bolt in his right hand and a set of scales in the other.

Another was a portly woman, her smile affectionate, with a baby and a bundle of ears of rice held securely in her arms.

There was a moustachioed man of short, beefy stature, with roaring flames at his back, hands gripping a hammer and tongs.

An androgynous youth smiled amiably, holding a glass of wine and a number of gold coins, and surrounded by what seemed to be pictographs representing the blowing wind.

A fine young woman clad in thin cloth was submerged up to her waist in a clear stream, holding a bow in one hand, and reaching out with her other to what might have been a fairy.

A one-eyed old man who radiated intelligence stood in front of some kind of inscription, holding a cane and an open book in his hands.

Probably the representatives of a polytheistic religious pantheon, I thought. I somehow felt that I could tell what kind of beliefs lay behind each of these gods just by looking at their statues.

But I had no idea about the next one.

There was no background. Perhaps that was meant to represent darkness? The figure wore a robe with a hood that covered its eyes. A gray and cheerless mood hung about it.

Its sole notable feature was the long stick it held, on the end of which hung a lantern. Frankly, this statue gave me the immediate impression of a god of death.



I felt strangely drawn to its lantern.

Of course, having no way of knowing the thoughts of the child in her arms, Mary carried on walking. My eyes followed the sculpture until it left my sight.

There will be other chances to see it up close, I figured. I did my best to shake off my strange obsession.

We continued onward, further and further from the eye in the ceiling, my surroundings becoming darker and darker, until I could hardly see anything. Her footsteps echoed in the darkness.

After some time, Mary stopped under an arch engraved with vines, and rested a hand against a heavy-looking iron door. As the door emitted a noisy screech, a ray of light poured through the gap, then slowly expanded. When the opening had become wide enough, Mary stepped out.

"Ah..." My field of vision opened up all at once.

A refreshing wind blew past.

It was dawn, and a thin morning mist hung in the air at the foot of the hill. A city of stone was spread out below us, built up to the edge of a vast lake. It felt medieval, or even older. I could see tall towers and an aqueduct built with a series of beautiful arches.

All of it was aged and in ruins.

Many of the buildings' roofs had collapsed, and the plaster on the walls had fallen off, leaving the buildings in a state of pitiful disrepair. Grass grew through gaps in the streets' stone paving, and green vines and moss clung to the buildings. The city was decaying away among the greenery, as though it were enjoying a quiet doze after all of the activity that must once have taken place here.

The morning sun shone softly over it all.

My eyes opened wide. It was a view of such magnificence, it shook the soul.

I felt like the wind had rushed right through me, from my feet to my head. The inside of my head felt amazingly clear. My whole body, every last cell of it, felt the world. I felt like I had remembered something very precious, something I had forgotten along the way.

For some reason, I felt tears welling up. I closed my lips tightly, trying to hold them back, but it made no difference. They trickled from my eyes.

I had lived a hopelessly blurred and muddied life, and I had died within that haze, never escaping it. So when I woke up in this world, I suspected it might be a punishment from God.

But this was no punishment.

I didn't know where this was. I didn't know what was going on.

But I was sure: this was grace. Stunning, wonderful grace. Out of the kindness of their hearts, someone had given me back what I had meaninglessly cast away. Without any evidence, I believed beyond any doubt that this was a warm and blissful gift.

"It's lovely, isn't it, Will? My darling little boy..." The voice was Mary's.

William. Will for short. That was my name.

It was the name the three had given me.

My name before dying had been swallowed by the mud. Now, this was my name. This tiny body was my body. The body and name that had felt like they belonged to someone else seemed suddenly to fit, as if this was how I'd always been.

"Ah... Ah..." I tried to speak, and my voice filled with tears. I didn't care. I forced my immature vocal cords to make noise.

I told myself… This time, I was going to do it right.

As Mary cradled me in her arms, I burned with determination. Nothing made any sense at all to me yet. I didn't know what kind of world this was, or why I had been born here. But I had time enough to understand those things.

My knowledge was sparse and I had no skills, but I had all the time I needed to learn. I'd had enough of stagnating, of giving in and hugging my own knees. I didn't care if I failed. I didn't care if I bumbled. I didn't care how much muck I'd have to wade through.

This time… This time, I was going to live. I was going to live in this world! I cried out my resolve with the wail of a newborn child.


Chapter One

There was an angel before my eyes.

He was a young boy, his chestnut-brown hair slightly messy, his eyes a deep blue-green, and his face a healthy color.

“So this is me.”

I had found an old hand mirror on a tool shelf in a corner of the temple. Eager for the chance to observe my own appearance, I stretched up and grabbed it with both hands. I found that I was cuter than I expected.

Upon further thought, it probably shouldn’t have been surprising that I was cuter than most people, given that I was a kid. Everyone is 100% cuter during their childhood years. Even tough-looking bearded men are adorable little things when you look through their childhood photo albums.

“Yeah…” I gently put the mirror back. I clenched my hand, then opened it. Clenched it again, then opened it.

A tiny, soft, puffy hand. My hand.

A year and some months had passed.

To my surprise, after the day I accepted my current name and body as my own, the feeling that my body wasn’t working as it should quickly resolved itself. Memories of how to control my body from before my death faded. Now, it was these tiny limbs that I recognized as mine. My mind and body were operating in unison.

It hadn’t taken me long to learn to totter about, and I was even able to speak, albeit in a faltering manner. I had devoted the past year to practicing walking constantly, and learning words and their pronunciations by talking to Mary and the others.

I still fell flat on my face from time to time, though. Probably because of how large my head was in proportion to my tiny body. It

might also have had something to do with my field of view, sense of balance, and muscles being undeveloped. As an additional complaint, I still had a low threshold of pain. As you might imagine, I cried my eyes out every time I fell over.

But I was making progress, little by little. Progress expected of a toddler, perhaps, but progress was progress all the same. I had at least grown from the phase of crawling and crying to someone who could have attended kindergarten or nursery school. So, I thought it was time to try my hand at the next challenge.

I had decided to live in this world. I wanted a body I could feel proud of, and I wanted to study and learn, one thing at a time. And so, first on the list was...

◆

"Hmm, you say you want to learn to read?"

We were in one of the many smaller rooms that lay deep within the temple. It featured stonework walls, a small wooden chair and writing desk, and even a comfy-looking bed set into an alcove in the wall.

A crotchety old man with piercing eyes and a hooked nose was before me, arms crossed and stroking his jaw. His vaporous body, covered by a loose robe, was half-transparent and had no substance to it. I guess you'd call him a specter? A spirit, as they say. Y'know, a ghost.

"Yeah. Please, Gus." His name was Augustus, technically, but Mary and everyone else shortened it.

At the moment, I was asking him to teach me how to read. To be honest, there were plenty of more important things I wanted to ask him about. This world, for instance, or my strange memories.

But any question a young child like myself could have posed would inevitably have been met with an equally primitive response, using a

crude vocabulary. Would anyone launch into an explanation of astronomy, physics, and the theory of nuclear fusion after a child asked, “Why does the sun shine?” Not usually. Your answer would be something like, “Mister Sun is doing his best to give us all light and keep us warm.”

I had actually tried asking them a few quick questions about the world, but they all got brushed off. It was still too early for those questions. That talk would have to come after I built up a certain amount of academic knowledge, and after I managed to get the others to see me as someone who could hold a conversation at that level.

“Hmm, reading. Reading. I’ll be blunt. If it doesn’t earn me coin, I’m not a bit interested. You’re too young for it anyway, kid.”

“But I wanna understand.”

“Too young. Shoo, shoo.” He waved a hand at me lazily.

Unlike Mary the mummy, who looked after me at every opportunity, and Blood the skeleton, who spent plenty of time with me, the ghost called Gus treated me with indifference. He thought nothing of snubbing me, and if I asked anything of him, he would often irritably turn me down.

He was obstinate and sometimes arrogant, and usually hard to approach. But for all his flaws, there was no doubt in my mind that he was the most intelligent of the three. From his diction to his turns of phrase, I sensed that he was quite educated.

“But I wanna understand.”

“I heard you the first time.”

“Come on! I wanna understand! Pleeeeease!” I pitched a fit, like the child I was. When was the last time I had pleaded with a parental figure like this? For old times’ sake, I started having a little fun with it. “Please! Please, please, please! Come on, Gus! Pretty, pretty

please?!" I felt like such a kid. The age of my body was probably holding back my mental state. That made sense, come to think of it. My brain was a child's, too. But then, why did my consciousness and perception feel so adult?

Sensing that too much deep thought about this would leave me lost in the maze comprised by my brain, mind, and soul, I decided not to go into that, and just whine some more instead.

"By the gods! All right, all right, fine!" After muttering something about kids, Gus sighed and looked at me. "You're a real piece of work. So you want to learn to read?"

"Yeah." I didn't really understand this world's writing.

"Hmmm… Well, then, first things first…" Gus extended a hand toward the bookshelf against the wall, and a single book floated toward him.

Psychokinesis? Well, ghosts were a thing, so sure, why not. The paranormal had completely ceased to surprise me recently.

"You'd better learn the letters." He had opened the book to a list of letters which resembled an alphabet. But—

"No, those are okay."

"Okay? What's okay?"

"I can read those already." I understood this part. I had been living in this temple for more than a year now, surrounded by reliefs, looking at the pictures and text engraved in them as I listened to everyone talk.

Comparing the frequency of the different sounds in speech to the frequency of the letters in the texts had given me a basic understanding. The pronunciation of "E" was the most frequent, followed by "A" and "T," so I started with those and the rest quickly followed.

So, I could already read these.

“Excuse me?” Gus gawked at me.

“I can already read them.”

“What’s this say?”

“It says, ‘The vibrant petals of a fragrant flower, carried on the wind. The world, like my life, is ever-changing.’ Right?”

Easy-peasy.

“Did Blood or Mary teach you that?”

“No. I listened to everyone talking, looked at the letters, and figured it out myself.” Life in the temple was not very stimulating, and there was a limit to how much moving around my juvenile body could handle. I had endless time to think, so I had been spending it on this, using it like a puzzle to stave off boredom.

“Will…” For a while, Gus seemed to be deep in thought, and then he directed a question at me in a serious tone. “What is it that you’re trying to understand, then?”

“The nice-looking complicated ones on the gods and stuff.”

From what I’d deciphered from the inscriptions in various parts of the temple, this world’s letters were an alphabet of phonograms. However, on the gods’ reliefs and other, similar places, complex pictographic characters suddenly appeared. Those were the ones I didn’t understand. What were they, and how was I supposed to read them? Or were they simply there for decoration?

“Ah, the Words of Creation. They’re used in the ancient magics.”

“Creation… Magic…” Now we’re talking creation and magic, huh.

“Hmm. Where do I begin…”

"The beginning," I replied.

Too much was better than too little. I was blessed with a pretty good memory. And anyway, if I couldn't remember everything, I could just ask again, as many times as I needed.

"Get comfortable, then. This is going to take a while. We start long, long ago, longer than you can imagine, when the world was just beginning. Back then, the world was still a thick, boiling pot of chaos, where the Great Mana swirled with heat, and was unable to hold a form."

I didn't expect him to begin with *the* Creation.

"We're... We're starting there?"

"We're starting there." He was dead serious.

"In the chaos, the First God appeared from a place known to no one, and God said, 'Let there be earth,' and mana solidified at God's feet, and became the earth, and mana thinned above God's head, and became the skies. And so the heavens and the earth were parted.

"We call this God simply 'the Creator' or 'the Progenitor,' because a true name was never passed down."

I felt what I'd heard bore a certain resemblance to the creation narratives of Christianity and Greek mythology.

"After this, the Creator spoke the Words and engraved the Signs, made the sun and the moon, split day from night, and gathered water to separate the oceans and the earth.

"Fire was born, wind was born, trees were born. The gods were born, and people and animals were born.

"And when the Creator had made the world, and was satisfied of its beauty, he said to himself, without thinking, that it was 'good.' But to make something 'good' is also to make something else 'evil,' just as

solidifying the ground created the heavens.

"And so it was that malice and the evil gods were born. The Creator tried to take back his word, but not even the gods can return a word to the mouth that uttered it.

"The evil gods that were born into the world killed the Creator, and so life and death were born. And after that began the age of many gods and many legends." Gus took a brief pause.

"The words and signs used in this creation story are the Words of Creation," he finished.

Ah, so that was how it all linked up.

"So they're the words that made the world?"

"That's right. These Words and Signs… Well, let's call them letters. Words and letters have power."

Power. Power, huh?

"What can they do?"

"Hmm, let me see…" Gus's finger danced in the air. A mysterious phosphorescence dwelt in his fingertip and left behind a trail as it moved, drawing two flowing and complex pictographs in midair. His finger slowed, and carefully, deliberately, added the second symbol's final dot.

"Whoa!" I scrambled backwards. The letters drawn in midair had suddenly become a leaping flame that burned a brilliant red. The flame hung in midair, and I could feel its heat. It was real fire.

"Enough for a demonstration, I hope?" Gus muttered one or two melodic, rhythmic verses under his breath. The burning flame vanished entirely, as if it had all been nothing but an illusion.

I stared, enchanted.

It was magic. Not some trick! Real magic. This world had magic in it.

Amazing. *Amazing*. I was genuinely excited by what I had just been shown.

You might ask what's the big deal after ghosts, mummies, and reanimated skeletons, but I would argue that a proper magic system is an entirely different thing than horror and supernatural elements.

"Was that clear to you? Drawing the pictographs for *Ignis* defines fire to exist in that place, and the air will instantly burst into flame. If you speak the Word of Erasure for extinguishing fire, the flames will vanish.

"This is what I mean by the Words of Creation, and what is most commonly referred to as magic."

What came to mind then was not "magic" as I knew it from computer games, but from your more old-fashioned fantasy novels. Not simply another skill to be casually fired off if you had enough points to expend, but one of the world's most ancient secrets, never to be handled without careful forethought.

That was the atmosphere this hook-nosed old ghost evoked in this dimly lit stone room as he spoke with pride about mysterious powers.

"It's important to understand that the Words of Creation are inconvenient things. Their power is a hindrance to both writing and speech. It was the Creator's own use of the Words that led to the evil gods which took the Creator's life."

Yeah, no kidding. Even taking notes would be a risky endeavor if the paper could burn up in an instant just by writing "fire." That would be inconvenient in the extreme, and would have to be an obstruction to the advance of civilization. It would even have to get in the way of ordinary people's daily lives.

"In consideration of this, the one-eyed god of knowledge, Enlight,

selected twenty consonants and five vowels. In order that the Words of Creation should not exert their power, he simplified the characters and their pronunciations, and created the corrupted language we call the Common Tongue."

Got it. To draw an analogy with Japanese, the Words of Creation would be the complex kanji characters. Writing the kanji carelessly was dangerous, and could cause fire to erupt and things to explode. To avoid this, a wise god simplified the characters, and made the other Japanese character set: the kana, which represent sounds.

There was a difference in that the Common Tongue used phonemic characters, not syllabic ones. It was more like an alphabet than the kana, really.

In any case, I now understood that those characters were not from an entirely different language family, and had not just been thrown in for symbolic purposes. They belonged to the same language, similar to the way Japanese was a mix of kanji and kana.

"What you were reading was the Common Tongue, and what you could not read were the Words of Creation, written in the Signs of the gods, and used for the great magics of ancient times. The ones engraved around the temple were written so as not to activate. Some struck through, others intentionally mistaken in places, and yet others incorporated into elaborate designs."

I see. If corrupting the symbols prevented them from activating, then it made sense that you could engrave them in a form just wrong enough to still be able to identify the original.

I wondered why they needed to go so far to record the Words of Creation, but the more I listened, the more I felt like I understood.

"The Words of Creation bring a man closer to God than the Common Tongue, you see. It stands to reason that the Words should be engraved in a temple for revering God and praying to God. Do you understand this?"

“Yeah, I get it.” I nodded repeatedly. It made perfect sense.

“Hmm. All right, Will, how about this. Do you know why the Words carry such power to begin with?” Gus posed the question with a grin on his face.

Uh, so what Gus was trying to make me think about here was…

“So like… why we think a stool is a stool, right?” I asked. “Hmm…” I had the feeling I’d read about it somewhere. It was something I had heard even in my previous world, in a place where they had talked about perceptions, representations, and concepts.

Basically, when we look at a four-legged wooden stool, no matter what color it is, or what wood it’s made of, we think, “This is a stool.” We think that even about stools that aren’t, on the whole, identical. Inside our heads, we categorize it by sticking a “stool” label on it.

We don’t normally perceive it as “four legs and a board,” nor do we think “table,” even though a table has four legs and a board. Moreover, if we see a person sitting on a stool, we don’t think “a combination of wood and a human.” We perceive it as “a stool and a human.”

Of course, it is possible to see the stool as “four legs and a board” instead, if we deliberately try to look at it differently, or even as “a mass of wood fibers.” We’re also capable of distinguishing “this stool” and “that stool,” telling apart different things in the same category.

In any case, what it boils down to is that we affix these labels we call “words” to things. That lets us categorize this chaotic world, conceptualize it, and break it into parts to make perception easier. It wouldn’t be possible for us to survive without that ability.

Language is the power that separates the world from indistinct chaos, just as it was in the creation myth I’d just heard.

It was time for me to sum up my rambling thoughts.

"It's because Words are what separate parts of the world and set out the way it is," I said.

Gus seemed greatly surprised by my answer. His eyes were opened wide, and his mouth flapped open and closed.

I looked down guiltily.

Gus's astonishment made me feel shame more than pride.

Because I had memories from the life I'd once lived, I had knowledge—however shallow—that should have been impossible for a toddler like me to attain. It made me feel like I'd cheated a little.

If a "talent" was a gift you had since birth, then maybe these memories of mine did count as a talent. But it still felt wrong.

Gus flew out of the room, phasing right through the wall. He located Mary and Blood in the main hall, and before even reaching them, he burst out, in a flurry of stutters, "Th-Th-Th-Th... The kid may be almost as gifted as me!"

I began to feel increasingly uncomfortable.

"Goodness. Is there something the matter, Old Gus?"

"Ohh, Mary, that boy! Why, I—"

I watched from a distance as Gus relayed excitedly what had just happened. With his pale blue spectral arms gesturing wildly, he explained how my ability to form an argument was extraordinary for my age, how I was insightful, how the ability to grasp something's true nature equated to magical talent...

Mary the mummy listened placidly. "Really."

As for Blood the skeleton, he was leaning against a wall, looking in another direction. He didn't seem remotely interested.

"If we train him in a few things early, he might actually be good for

something! Personally, I prefer not to pick trash up off the ground, but perhaps this kid is different. He could—"

I froze.

"Old man!" The voice lashed at him like a whip, before I even had time to form a thought.

It was Blood, still by the wall. Pale blue flames roared in his empty eye sockets. "Quit running your mouth. The kid's only a couple years old. What you just said is going too far." I could tell Blood was glaring at him.

"He was found on the ground! Am I wrong? *I* didn't want to get involved with him."

"Not the point."

"Now that I know he's got some talent in him, I'm not saying I won't teach him a thing or—"

"Still not the point." Blood took a step towards him.

To me, it seemed like an invisible aura was enveloping his entire body. I hadn't really been aware of it up until this point, but Blood was very large. What people meant when they said "big-boned."

"Hey, now..."

Even just watching from the sidelines, I could feel my skin tingle from the sheer force of Blood's advance.

"Listen, Old Gus. I know it's your nature to talk like that. I'm not gonna bother trying to change you after all this time. This is what makes you who you are.

"But you don't call a kid 'trash' while he's in earshot. Even you've gotta be able to imagine how hearing that must make him feel." Blood glanced at me, then stared back to Gus.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing.

"Mgh..."

Arrogant, bigoted Gus was being overpowered. This despite the fact that it was normally Blood who got chewed out by the other two for his irresponsible, "it'll do" attitude.

"If you want to stay out of raising Will, be my guest. You can go be a crank where none of us have to listen to you. But if you're gonna be teaching him, do the kid a favor and cut that stuff out. That sound fair to you?"

Gus was silent for a while. Then, shaking his head slowly and sighing, he accepted the blame, and backed down.

"You're right. It was a thoughtless remark. I'll be a little more considerate in future. Sorry, Will."

"Uh, it's okay..."

I'd never seen anything like this from either of these two before. Pulling myself together, I decided to say something to defuse the situation. I had to make a show of overlooking it so we could all move on.

"Um, I'm fine, Gus. Don't worry about it." I couldn't think of anything better to say.

Hearing that, Blood cooled off as well, and bowed his head slightly toward Gus in apology. "I was out of line, too. Shouldn't have gotten aggressive with you all of a sudden like that. Sorry. Can we let it be?"

"Mm." Gus nodded. "Your lack of refinement is nothing new. Forget about it."

"Hey, Mary, gonna borrow Will for a sec."

Mary had been watching over the two of them with her usual

peaceful expression. “Yes, all right. Gus, would you mind telling me a little more?”

“Will, come outside a moment.”

“O… Okay.” I couldn’t really grasp the meaning of what had just happened. It had all been too fast.

But I was sure of one thing.

Blood had gotten angry, and he had done it for me.

◆

The city’s ruins were as beautiful as ever.

The morning sunlight was glittering on the lake.

“Uh, so… Will.”

And sitting on the hill, gazing at this glorious sight: a skeleton.

The mismatch was phenomenal.

“You probably don’t know anything about this, ’cause you’ve been here as long as you can remember, but…” Blood scratched his skull, as if hesitating over how to explain. The pale blue flames in his sockets swayed. “You can still tell, right? That you’re different from me and Mary and Old Gus.”

“Um… Yeah. I know. I’m the only one who’s warm and breathing.”

“Yeah, that. It’s, uh, complicated. All kinds of complicated…”

I was obviously aware there were some unusual circumstances behind where I came from. A ruined city, the undead, and in the middle of it all, one single living human child. It was unnatural.

Gus said I was “picked up,” so maybe I was an abandoned child or something. Mary was the mothering type, so maybe she took me in,

and Gus was against it or something. I could make all kinds of guesses, but ultimately, I wouldn't know the truth until it was explained to me. And...

"Now's... not the time."

"Yeah."

It wasn't surprising. No respectable adult would tell a child my age he was adopted, or try to explain all the complicated background of it to him, no matter how brainy he seemed for his age. You'd keep it hidden.

Blood shrugged his shoulders gently. I suddenly realized that the reason Blood got mad at Gus might not just have been for being so thoughtless around a child, but also because he spilled the beans about my background.

"Uh, and about Old Gus. Don't be too mad at him, okay? When he gets excited, he's, y'know, whatever he's thinking just comes straight out. Even when he's not excited, he doesn't do the whole 'considerately choosing your words' thing in the first place."

"Yeah. It's okay. I'm not mad. It just surprised me a bit." And the reason his anger had been so ferocious might also have been to distract me.

Before I fully understood what Gus meant by "trash off the ground" and started to think poorly of him, Blood had caused a scene and given me something else to think about.

"Hm. You've got a big heart, Will. It's good to be big. How about this. When your body gets as big as your heart, and you're old enough to take it all in, I swear I'll tell you all the things I can't talk about right now."

"Yeah."

It was all for me.

Now that I could understand him, I found that Blood was being surprisingly compassionate towards me.

Blood is amazing, I thought. Had I treated other people like that before I died? Had I managed to be like that? My memories were vague, but I thought the answer was probably no. Almost never? No, straight-up never. The thought made my chest tighten.

"Blood?"

"Hm?"

"Um, thanks. For all this." I couldn't word it very well. He deserved better.

"Hahah! Don't worry about it." The will-o'-the-wisps in his eye sockets shimmered. I couldn't read the expressions of a skull, but I felt as if he'd just grinned at me warmly.

He ruffled my hair and stood up. "Okay. Go talk to Gus and learn about writing and magic and all that. At the end of the day, that old man's a damn good sorcerer. A zeni grubber first and foremost, though." Rattling his jaw in laughter, Blood added, "Ah, I guess you don't know what zeni is. Right..." and cackled a few more times.

"Oh, and if the old man's teaching you, then I'm gonna do my part, too! I've got a ton of stuff to teach you! Look forward to that!"

"Yeah! What are you going to teach me, Blood?" Now I was curious. Blood didn't really look like the scholarly type.

"Hm... Violence."

Come again?

"Violence. How to really go berserk. And how to train your muscles, I guess?"

"Huh?"

“It’s useful.”

What?

◆

“While Blood was alive…” Mary began, as she sat beside me on a bench in the temple’s main hall.

“Uh, while he was alive? Then, wait, that means…”

“Yes. We weren’t always like this, you know. It was… a lot of things. Yes, a lot happened for things to turn out this way.” Mary smiled a little sadly.

I couldn’t bring myself to ask just what had happened. Of course, even if I had, she would probably have dodged the question.

Still, this felt like something important to keep in mind. The three of them hadn’t always been in the forms of a skeleton, mummy, and ghost.

According to my memories from my previous life, the standard for these things was that the dead were being dragged along by their regrets and attachments. Did this follow that formula, or was there some other reason?

Due to my age, I still had very little access to information, and couldn’t say anything for certain. I decided not to engage in conjecture and avoid holding any strange preconceptions.

“While he was alive, he was a warrior.”

“A warrior?”

“A warrior. It means a person who fights in battles with a weapon. Little boys love that sort of thing.”

Then this place had a social system archaic enough for an occupation like that to exist. After seeing the ruins of that city, I did

have this world pegged at about that stage of development, but this confirmed that conflict between humans was present here as well.

If I was planning to live in this world, and I was, it looked like it was probably going to be in my best interest to learn how to fight.

"Blood really was strong, you know? He had lots of experience, and was highly skilled. He started with fighting other humans, and moved up to wild creatures, beasts, goblins, the undead, giants, demidragons, demons, 'whoever wants a piece of me'—like that."

"Huh," I idly responded, and then stiffened.

"Um, Mary?"

"Yes?"

"What did you just say?"

"He started with fighting other humans, and moved on up to wild creatures, beasts, goblins, the undead, giants, demidragons, demons —"

Wait, wait, wait. I wasn't about to jump to conclusions. After all, it wasn't necessarily the case that these were the same kinds of monsters I'd remembered, right?

"Other humans, I get... What are the others?"

"Oh!" she laughed. "I'm sorry, how silly of me. I never explained those to you, did I? How could you have known?" She thought for a moment. "Let me see... I think there was an illustrated book of them all in Gus's room."

She held my hand, and walked with me to Gus's small stone room. Gus was out, but Mary seemed perfectly comfortable searching the room and borrowing the book without asking.

"Here we are. These are wild creatures. Hungry wolves, lions, giant

snakes…" The illustrations depicted a variety of familiar animals. Familiar, of course, only as part of the knowledge I had from before my death, and then only from documentaries I'd seen on TV. I could hardly contain my "joy" at seeing them again.

"Beasts are creatures that are extremely aggressive and fierce."

"Okay…"

"As for the others… You learned how the legends started from Gus, right? The Creator, first of us all, benevolently made all kinds of beings, but also created the propensity for evil. In the end, it was the bad gods that the Creator made which brought about the Creator's own demise. Then, the bad gods created different kinds of minions in accordance with their natures." Mary slowly turned the page.

"The minions of the god of tyranny, Illtreat, are called goblins."

The page showed something like… I dunno, maybe oni? There were unmistakably crafty and cruel-looking little ones, and large muscular ones that would be better called ogres.

"Then there are the minions of Dyrhygma, god of dimensions. They are the demons, who come from Hell…"

Demons and nightmare-spawn filled the next page. Humans with bird heads, spiders that had grown numerous arms in place of legs—disturbing beings that were a muddled mixture of human and animal parts.

"And the undead, which are the minions of the god of undeath, Stagnate…"

Zombies—and skeletons, ghosts, and mummies.

But I couldn't get any impression of intelligence from the undead on the pages of the picture book.

"We entered into a contract with the god of undeath," she

murmured. “The strength of our wills at the moment of death led to our contracts with Stagnate, and the forms we have now. We’re traitors to the forces of good.” Her words felt horribly bleak, and sounded so sad.

“What happened?” I couldn’t help myself, even though I knew there was nothing to be gained from getting involved.

“Heheh… A lot. I’m sorry, this isn’t something a young child like you should have to worry about.” Mary smiled. It was forced.

She collected herself and continued. “The good gods also have minions, of course. There are elves, dwarves, halflings… All kinds of races.”

“Mary…”

“There are powerful neutral races as well, like the giants and the dragons. Some are followers of the good gods, and some are followers of the bad gods. It’s a big, wide world, and there are many races out there. The ones listed in this book are just the most well known.”

She had deliberately changed the subject, and I could tell that she had no intention of going back.

So I played along with her. I had no way of getting information from her that she didn’t want to share. There would be no point in starting trouble about this.

“So this world is… pretty dangerous?”

“Yes, it is. Things were comparatively peaceful while I was alive, but I don’t know about now. I think, most likely, things have gotten much worse.”

The lack of sugarcoating shocked me. I didn’t know what had made her think that, but I was already worried. “Do I need to get strong?”

“I would rest easier if you did.” Her words were gentle, but they

weighed heavily upon me.

I decided to spare no effort in becoming stronger. By the sound of it, only the tough could survive in this world.

At the same time, I felt it was my duty not to forget what the three undead had hinted to me about their own circumstances. Even now, they were trying hard to build me up from someone completely powerless to someone with the strength to make it through life. My parents had once done the same for me, and what had I ever given them back? As I remembered it, nothing but worries and trouble.

I hoped that this time, when I was old enough, I could return the favor.

◆

Five years passed.

I was now seven, but it seemed that birthday celebrations were not one of this world's customs. In fact, they didn't even keep track of birth dates here. Instead, they used a traditional method of counting a person's age. Newborn babies were "one year old," and became one year older at the start of the new year.

As for the reason it didn't start at zero... I was briefly afraid I'd discover they didn't yet have the concepts of zero or place-value notation. In fact, they had both. Newborn babies being "one" was just a holdover from previous times, before the numeral "zero" existed within their culture.

Old habits die hard.

By this world's reckoning, then, I was eight years old, with my "one" added to the seven I'd lived through. Simple enough so far. The only question that remained was when the new year actually began. The answer to that, astonishingly, was, "Nobody knows."

No, technically, everyone *knew* which day was the first of the new

year: the shortest day with the longest night. The day the sun was at its weakest, and one day away from starting to recover its power. In other words, the winter solstice, which marked the beginning of spring's return.

But we were on the outskirts of a ruined city, far from human society. Not only did none of the three have much interest in the calendar, but after becoming undead, they were now less sensitive to changes in temperature, too. As a result, their perception of time was no richer than, "Oh, the flowers have started blooming," "The sunlight is strong," "The leaves have turned red and yellow," and finally, "A little snow is falling."

Their lives here had no interaction with the outside world. What was the point of tracking the movements of the heavens? I had no idea how long the three of them had been living here, but it would only have taken one single slip-up or period of laziness to cause them to forget the date. That would've been, in any case, the end of accurate time measurement.

Anyway, enough of that topic. I had managed to gather a good amount of information through study and questioning, so allow me to provide a summary of the situation.

I've been a bit noncommittal in my choice of words so far. Even now there are still things making me hold back from saying it. Still, all the same, it's time I came to terms with it.

I had been reborn.

Rebirth, reincarnation, metempsychosis, samsara... It wasn't important what you called it. In short, my memories were those of a previous life. I had died and been born again. And moreover, into a different world.

Assuming I could trust memories left from before my death, magic certainly wasn't real in my prior world, and there were no skeletons or ghosts wandering around, either. Those had all been mere products of the imagination. Despite having certain points in common, this

world and my previous one were clearly different.

So: reincarnation. Reincarnation into another world, no less.

There were no obvious issues with this conclusion, but I was still uncertain. That was because I could still imagine a number of other possibilities.

Maybe this world possessed some incomprehensible technology that only *seemed* like magic to me. Maybe my memories were fakes that had been implanted. Maybe I simply had some kind of psychiatric disorder, which caused me to experience strange delusions. Given that there were ghosts, maybe I hadn't been "reincarnated" as such, but this was a phenomenon like "haunting" or "possession," where my personality had taken over another person's body. Or maybe me being here was in fact a hallucination after all, and the brain of the person I remembered myself as was now floating in a tank in some laboratory.

Maybe, maybe, maybe. I could have listed maybes forever. Seriously, forever. As evidence, consider my foray into the classic philosophical thought experiment of the brain in the vat.

It was my opinion that once you started considering unproductive questions like that, you might as well give up. You would never reach a conclusion. That was why I had provisionally settled on the understanding that I had been reincarnated into another world, and I just so happened to have memories of my previous life. It was the most tolerable answer. That is, the one that would disturb my mental state the least.

I certainly didn't want to find out, for example, that I was actually an evil spirit who had obliterated the mind of an innocent little baby and seized control of his body. I wasn't going to claim I'd be crushed by the weight of my guilty conscience, but it would at least depress me to discover I was something the world could do without.

And most of all, I was praying, with relative seriousness, that the day would never come when some shocking fact would come to light,

and moments later, I would discover that I was just a brain in a vat.

◆

"*Flammo Ignis*... Waaagh?!" There was an explosive eruption of heat.

As I flinched and staggered backwards, Gus sharply incanted the Word of Erasure, blowing away the flames in front of me. "Idiot! Don't pronounce it so accurately!"

What a thing to be criticized for.



“You may have talent, Will, but if you don’t get used to adjusting your precision, you’re going to wind up dead!”

Yes, this world, which I had been reborn into eight years ago (by their count), was a dangerous place. There could be no doubt about it. For example, just take the magic and Words of Creation I was learning.

In case anything went wrong, I was practicing outside, on the hill where the familiar temple stood, and I was not having much success.

“Gus, my results are all over the place. Is there really nothing we can do about it?”

“No. It’s just how the Words are. Get used to it.”

I was not finding magic very reproducible. I could get something working, try again the next day, and then never get the same thing to happen again. As for why…

“Let’s review. State the process for casting magic.”

“Umm, three steps. Sense the mana that fills the world, bring it together in resonance with your own mana, and pronounce or write the Word of Creation.”

The arche, the primordial chaos: mana. Sense it, and achieve resonance and convergence. Then, by pronouncing or writing a Word of Creation, define the mana into some form—for instance, fire. On paper, it was that simple. But there was no real room for creativity, and no way to make the results more reproducible.

“What you say is correct. And there have been many attempts through history to seek consistent results from magic. Many sages have bent their ingenuity toward this end, but there is only so much that can be done. Having experienced it firsthand, I expect you can appreciate why.”

"Yeah. The biggest problem is how the mana isn't consistent."

For the past few years, I had been sharpening my perception under Gus's guidance. Fortunately, it seemed I had some talent, and I became able to detect the presence of mana—the thing magic was made of, its fuel. Supposedly, the world was infused with mana, but what I discovered was that mana levels weren't the same everywhere.

Imagine splashing a few drops of ink into water, and then agitating it just a little. The ink would be concentrated in some parts and dilute in others. What's more, these parts would flow in an irregular fashion. And that's just your fuel supply.

"Mhm. There have been a number of attempts to create a consistent mana environment. Convergence devices, for instance—precious gems, precious metals, extremely ancient wood. But I'm afraid..."

"The results weren't worth the cost?"

"Mmm... The mana inside the human body is also in flux, you see. There is a limit to what can be achieved with atmospheric mana convergence alone."

Even if you managed to maintain a certain level of consistency in the mana outside your body, the magic user's own mana, which was required to resonate with it, would still be unstable. Just like the external mana, it varied in concentration like the water and ink from our example as it meandered around the body. This aspect was similarly complicated, and even more difficult than the external mana to mess around with.

"That being said, it undeniably has some effect. Staves made with ancient wood, precious gems, and precious metals are the symbols of sorcerers."

It seemed that the idea of a sorcerer bearing a staff was part of this world's concepts, too.

“Why don’t you use a staff, Gus?”

I had at least seen him holding a staff number of times before. It was studded with emeralds and had a handle at the top like a duck’s beak.

“A grandiose staff attracts attention. In a battle situation, not only will you be singled out if you allow yourself to be discovered as a sorcerer, but the use of a convergence device makes it easier for the enemy to pinpoint the source of your magic.”

That reason was so grounded and pragmatic that I found it a bit unsettling.

“Hmm, we’ve gotten off track. We were talking about the fluctuations in the Words. The mana that fills the world and the body is in flux and not consistent. Attempts have been made to gather it into something consistent, but there were limits to what could be achieved. And human fluctuations also exist in the speaking and writing. To be strictly accurate, humans can never speak the exact same words twice.”

I understood what he meant. Even if the same person were to speak the same words, the waveform of the sounds would be different every single time. No matter how many times a person were to write the same letter, it would never come out exactly the same way. That was obvious enough, really. After all, we humans were not machines.

“For all these reasons, the general consensus is ultimately that one has to use their intuition to determine when the circumstances are right.”

So the only conclusion that could be drawn was that turning magic into a consistent mass-produced product was impossible. The professional expertise of the sorcerer would always be called upon to fine-tune things to follow however the mana felt like behaving on that particular day.

“That’s frightening.”

“Indeed it is.”

My imagination was correct, then. This was not the magic from computer games, which you could spam by burning your MP. It was far closer to the unstable and powerful magic of classic fantasy.

“You must not brandish the Words recklessly. The use of power brings with it significant danger. Well, I dare say I’ve told you enough stories about that.”

Indeed, this was far from the first time Gus had repeated this to me.

According to Mary and Blood, it was no exaggeration to say Gus was worthy of being called a Grand Sorcerer. They had told me, with full faith, that even though his usual manner didn’t hint at it in the slightest, he was a force to be reckoned with when he decided to show his true strength.

Gus himself never bragged about it. Rather, the tales he told were always cautionary, and intended to teach a lesson. There were many of these stories.

There was the sorcerer who tried to reshape the nearby terrain, triggered a huge earthquake, and was swallowed up into a deep fissure.

Another sorcerer periodically manipulated the weather, and ended up destabilizing the area’s climate and being tormented by hunger.

One sorcerer succeeded in transmogrifying himself into an animal —mental faculties and all.

A sorcerer directed a powerful decomposition magic at his sworn enemy, got tongue-tied out of sheer hatred and anger, and blew himself to pieces.

There was even one about a sorcerer who opened a hole to another dimension and got eaten by *something* inside.

"Just learn to use small amounts of magic, sensibly and precisely. And if possible, find a way to not use it at all."

Minor works of magic were useful for getting a fire going, keeping bugs away, manipulating perception (for parlor tricks), or searching for things. Though their effects were small, the risk associated with a mistake was also low. You could fail as spectacularly as you liked, and it wouldn't lead to anything you couldn't laugh about later.

According to Gus, a true sorcerer's ideal was to not use magic at all, and in those situations where magic was necessary, to use the least magical effect to achieve the greatest possible result. Magic was a tremendous amount of power for a single person to possess, and since the possibility of random accidents and human error was ever-present, I felt that his style made a lot of sense, logically speaking. There was only one issue.

"In short—use it like money."

Gus would twist his logic to reach some *incredible* conclusions.

"This again?"

"*Yes,* this again. It's important," he insisted, as serious and stubborn as ever. "If you want something done, you don't have to use magic. You just buy the tools you need or hire some people. Reshaping the terrain is a powerful piece of magic, but if you've got money, you can just hire laborers and workmen to do construction for you instead. Make no mistake," he shifted close to me for emphasis, "the ability to earn money and make it work for you is just as important as magic!"

I flinched. "Whoever heard of a *ghost* with a *money* fetish?!"

"You try suffering in my position! I can't caress gold or treasure, can't feel it between my fingers…"

"He's a pervert!"

"Who are you calling a pervert?!"

“You!”

“Right—change of plan! We’re going to spend all of today learning about money and all the wonderful—”

“No! Today was the legends! We were planning to start the legends today!”

“And you don’t think money is more important?!”

“Maybe it is for you, but you can’t just change the plan!”

“Mmmhh... You do have a point. The money talk can wait.”

Gus could get a little crazy like this sometimes. Seriously, was an incorporeal sorcerer supposed to come off like this? Still, there was no doubting the veracity of Gus’s stories. Many of them were a lot of fun to hear, too.

“I told you a little of the story a long time ago, up to the birth of the evil gods and the killing of the Creator, correct?”

“Yeah.”

“That began the age of conflict between the gods of good and evil. If I were to name the most prominent of their battles... Hmm, yes. Will. Have you seen that sculpture?”

“Huh?”

“The one in the temple of a man with a sword and scales.”

I did remember it. It was a statue of a solemn and dignified god, who was holding a sword symbolizing lightning high in his right hand, and bearing a set of scales in the other.

“Yeah.”

“He is the god of lightning, Volt—the ruler of the virtuous gods, who presides over order and judgment. He is also husband to the Earth-

Mother, Mater, the goddess to whom Mary shows devotion."

Interesting. I was wondering which of those gods held the top spot. Come to think of it, gods of lightning commanded important positions in many mythologies from my previous world, too.

"Volt has a brother, also a god, of course—the god of war, Illtreat, whose domain is tyranny. He rides a chariot pulled by two divine horses, Greed and Wrath, who ride with the speed and ferocity of a raging hurricane."

Gus continued, "The two of them have led their minions in countless battles against each other, but all of their episodes follow a similar pattern. The older brother, Illtreat, maintains the advantage during the battle's opening stages, but the kindhearted Earth-Mother Mater grants her husband protection in his time of crisis. With his sword of lightning given the protection of the goddess, Volt begins to fight back, and ultimately, drives away Illtreat. However, Illtreat continues lurking deep under the earth, and when he finally regains his power after many moons, he waits for his younger brother to show a moment of peace-addled weakness. Then, he challenges him again to battle."

Gus spun one finger in a circle. "And so the cycle continues."

I nodded, then tilted my head in thought. Lightning isn't always a symbol of the terror and absolute authority of the heavens. When agriculture is prospering, lightning is a herald of blessed rain.

"So... is this a fable about how governments start with violent, tyrannical rulers, but as the farming goes well, law and order slowly spreads through society. But eventually it falls apart again, and violent revolution becomes inevitable?"

Gus's eyes opened wide. "You're sharp," he said, nodding. "The battles between minions under the protection of Volt and Illtreat do roughly take that form. It would make sense for that to have been depicted as a battle between gods."

“Protection?” I asked.

“Ah… That refers to the power the gods give their minions.”

“Huh? Um, literally?”

“Literally. What’s so confusing about that?”

Gus spoke as if this was perfectly obvious, but based on my memories and perception from my previous life, it was a little hard to picture the idea of a god *directly* giving power to a person. He could have meant something like giving them courage or luck, but with the way he was talking, I felt that wasn’t quite it.

Besides, I remembered what Mary had once said, that the three of them had formed a contract with the god of undeath. If I was to take those words at face value, it meant that the gods of this world could *at a minimum* turn humans into the undead. I didn’t know what else they were capable of, but it seemed possible that this world’s gods were capable of physically interfering with reality. But what exactly did that process involve? I had just started to consider this question when Gus cleared his throat and continued talking.

“Well, it’s not very important. The war between the gods culminated in every one of them losing their body of flesh. After that, both forces left this dimension behind, and now, it’s difficult for any of them to interfere with this world in any great way. In any case, I’m sure one particular thought springs to mind after hearing this story?”

“It does?”

“Mm,” he grinned roguishly. “The whole business of labeling the two sides as ‘good’ and ‘evil’ is purely a human convenience.”

“Uh?” I made a stupid, confused noise.

Gus elaborated for me. “Think about it. Volt, presiding over even corrupt systems of order, can easily be an evil god, and Illtreat, commanding the revolutions to overthrow corruption, can likewise be

a good one. But the reality is that Volt is never spoken ill of, and neither is Illtreat ever glorified. The priests would not take kindly to me saying this, but in the end, the classification of gods into good and evil categories is merely an artifice created by their followers."

I could tell from his face that he was completely serious as he continued to speak. "The gods are not like us. Their thoughts and actions are concerned with matters of an entirely different scale. My theory is that what makes the good gods 'good' is that they have a comparatively similar thought process to normal people, they are cooperative, and their thoughts and actions are more or less harmless to society. Of course this is just between you and me!" he laughed.

This was a world where gods actually existed and had influence. People had to have deep faith in them—yet here was Gus, unorthodox and unbowed.

"Gus, you're... pretty rock 'n' roll."

"Rock 'n' roll?"

"I dunno, you're... different. In a good way."

Hearing this, the venerable sage broke into another wicked grin. "The words kids come up with sometimes... Yes, it has a good ring to it."

He seemed to like it. There wasn't the slightest doubt in my mind—he really was rock 'n' roll.

◆

Blood and I were by a small spring at the foot of the hill, with its glorious view over the lake and the ruined city. The two of us were squaring off.

"Okay. Practice swings done, running exercises done... Let's do a little swordplay."

As a warm-up exercise, Blood would give me a stick—either resembling a one-handed sword, or resembling a spear—and make me practice swings or thrusts. Which one we'd use was up to what Blood felt like, but the sword was slightly more common. He said that the spear was a weapon for the battlefield, and the sword was a weapon you carried on you at all times, so it was more important to focus on the sword at first.

After finishing the practice swings, we would do some long-distance running and short-distance sprinting, and after that, "swordplay." This was a game where we each held a soft branch or something similar, then tried to slap each other with them. Unlike the relatively boring practice swings and long-distance running, this was actually pretty fun, even though it hurt sometimes. Blood was good, though, and wouldn't let me hit him easily.

"You're eight years old now, so I'm gonna start hitting a little harder."

"Ueeegh?!"

"What's with that reaction?"

"You're stupidly strong! If you hit me hard, I'll die!"

It hurt sometimes already, even with the rule about "barely touching"! If he hit me *hard*...

"It's okay, it's okay. You're exaggerating with 'stupidly strong.' I'm only bones. You'll be fine." Blood paused. "Well, probably."

"P-P-P-P-Probably?!"

Blood's laughter was loud. "Just don't get hit, then. What's the big deal?"

"Stop, stop, stop!"

He advanced on me with the soft branch. "Oh, yeah, you can use

magic, if you want. I bet you've got something, right? Something Old Gus taught you? Fireballs, lightning bolts... Go on! I can take it!"

Blood was still moving toward me as he spoke. He was already pretty close. Despite saying I could use magic, he had no intention of giving me the chance.

"Ah, you're so unfair!"

"Fwahaha! There's no mercy in battle, Willie, my boy!"

As Blood closed in, I shouted the first thing that came into my head. "*Acceleratio!*" It was a combat Word I'd learned from Gus.

"Oho," Blood said, impressed.

I felt my entire body quicken, and sprung backward like a shot, kicking up dirt as I put distance between us.

He was watching me with interest, and I wasn't about to waste that chance. I yelled the Words I'd been holding back as a trump card. "*Currere Oleum!*"

Instantly, a thick layer of grease covered the grass under Blood's feet. He cried out, and his feet slipped from under him.

I'd made the grease out of mana, and it would disappear again after just a little while, but it was more than suitable for making someone slip! And while I had the upper hand...

"*Cadere Araneum!*" I dropped a sticky, spiderweb-like net on him that I'd made out of Words.

"Ah—Hey!" The web clung to him. He fought on the ground to get it off, but the more he fought, the more entangled his bones became.

You could seriously injure yourself if you messed up with fire or lightning magic, but failing at grease or web magic wouldn't cause any catastrophes. If magic couldn't be reliably reproduced, then I just

had to make the best of it and use it intelligently. Just like Gus said, there was no need for flashy magic. Small amounts of magic, used sensibly and precisely, did the job.

I shuffled forward slowly, so the grease wouldn't take my legs out, too. After getting close enough, I let out a single energetic shout as I slammed him with the branch. It made a dry thwack as wood hit bone.

"Gwagh! Damn it, I yield!"

"Yessss!" I pumped both fists and yelled with delight. It was a shutout victory I'd never expected.

◆

"Pretty good," Blood said, impressed. The web and the grease had since disappeared. "Did that come from Old Gus?"

"Yeah," I answered.

He laughed, his will-o'-the-wisps flickering. "Seriously, you've really got it! I feel like I understand why Gus calls you a genius."

I looked at him, confused.

"I mean... I expected you to play with fire. Go for big flashy fire or lightning magic, you know? Most young sorcerers do."

"Eh... That stuff's not for me. Gus says it's dangerous." I agreed with him, too, especially when a mistake could lead to me blowing myself up. Risky power that you can't control isn't power. It's just a hazard. Maybe my previous life's memories also influenced me here.

"It's great to see you're taking it in. A flaming arrow or something would've been no trouble for me, anyway. I could've just dodged it and closed in on you."

"Y-You could?"

"You bet I could. If I really wasn't kidding around, I could even deal with that web-grease combo," Blood said casually. "Not that it'd be easy."

I couldn't even imagine how he'd go about that. "Um, how?"

"As the web fell towards me, I'd forcibly wind it around the stick in my hands, and then I'd just have to run through and out of the grease area, focusing hard on keeping my balance."

One heck of a direct solution. "Wait, you were going easy on me?"

"Of course I was. You're a kid. If you lose all the time, you'll start thinking you don't have a chance, and that sucks all the fight out of you. It's important to get familiar with winning. And don't get me wrong, I *was* fighting serious, just not giving it *everything*. When an adult like me can't handle an attack from a kid without going all out, if you ask me, that's basically a loss right there."

I had to admit he had a point. No adult could brag about beating a child in a contest of physical strength, and if they had to summon all their power to get there, for all intents and purposes, that'd be a defeat in more ways than one.

"Will, listen. Old Gus is a Grand Sorcerer. They used to exalt him. Called him the Wandering Sage. He slew monsters, he stopped floods, and he rediscovered a number of the old Words personally."

"Huh..."

I'd heard him called a Grand Sorcerer a few times already, but I hadn't fully appreciated how incredible he was.

"That method you were using, of focusing on manipulating the situation on the battlefield and impeding your opponent, instead of blasting them with firepower? That's one of the answers Gus arrived at—the end result of years and years of trial and error. He may be a grumpy old man, but in terms of what he's capable of, he's the best of the best. Make sure you remember what he teaches you. He deserves

that much."

"Yeah. Don't worry. I respect him, you know?"

"All right, then," he nodded.

"Um, you were a really great warrior too, right, Blood?"

"Sure was. I don't wanna brag, but they used to call me the War Ogre." Despite saying he didn't want to brag, he clearly loved to tell me about it. That was very Blood. "Mary had a title, too. She was called Mater's Daughter. Actually, there was a period where the three of... uh."

"What?"

"It's just, if I start talking about that, it's gonna lead someplace heavy."

I could imagine that. Why was my earliest memory of this life *here*, in this ruined city's temple, cut off from human society? Especially given that they'd apparently once been tremendously big names, why were these three living here as the undead? These questions had always plagued me, and it was probably fair to suspect that the current situation wasn't the outcome of a happy ending. Mary and Blood would sometimes let something slip, but they would never speak about it at any greater length.

"Will you tell me someday?"

"You bet. Just like I promised—when you're a bit bigger. And all in the right order." Blood stretched lightly, and took hold of the branch again.

"Right, let's go again! This time, no magic!"

"Whaaaaa?!"

Blood was upon me before I could even protest. I swiped my

branch at him in panic, but he dodged it effortlessly, and the pliant branch he was holding swished towards my face. I shut my eyes reflexively.

"Are you stupid?! Don't shut your eyes!" The tree branch slapped me across the forehead.

"Ow!" I crouched down, clutching my forehead. The branch was flexible and curved like a whip. Even when he wasn't putting much power into it, when it hit you at a reasonable speed, it was still quite painful.

"And crouching down in pain? Even worse. Now look what happens."

He scratched the tops of my feet and pushed me over. If this was an actual battle, I'd have been kicked around like a soccer ball. My organs might even have ruptured.

"Even if you get punched right in the face, don't close your eyes. Replace your reflexes with training. In a contest like this, where a single instant can make the difference between winning and losing, only an amateur would take his own sight away. So when you get hit, put up with it and move in."

"M-Move *in*, even when I'm hurt?" Wouldn't you normally back off and ready yourself for another try? That was what I figured, at least.

"Will, if you step back after taking a hit, what's your opponent gonna think?"

"I don't know..."

"I just got a *great* hit in! And he's wincing and stepping back! It's working! I've got the upper hand! Now's my chance to finish him off! Right?"

Ah...

“Of course he’s gonna press you even harder, trying to finish things then and there. Meanwhile, you’re injured, and at a disadvantage when it comes to defending *or* running. Trying to avoid a bad situation just ended up progressively making things worse. That’s called not thinking things through… hm? Why are you looking at me funny?”

While avoiding risk and keeping your distance, the situation slowly deteriorates into something that can’t be salvaged. I was more than familiar with that concept.

“So… you go forward, and then what?”

“That’s easy,” Blood laughed. “You rush headlong in there and attack like crazy.”

It was an aggressive, brute force approach.

“You’re dead if you step back anyway, so you go for broke. You keep your attacks coming, and bury your sword or spear or fist, whatever you’ve got, in there over and over. The other guy’s thinking ‘I landed a great hit! I’ve won!’ He’s gonna be taken by surprise. If you wail on him right away, you can get in a good hit or two of your own. Then, sure you’re injured, but you’re level again at worst. You might even turn it all around and win on the spot.”

When you take a painful hit, move in. Step forward and give back what you were given.

“Even if he staves off your attacks, you’ll put doubt in his mind. ‘I *thought* I landed a good hit, but… did he not feel it? Did I just make him angry? Maybe that attack isn’t going to work on him?’ And if you can get him thinking stuff like that…” I felt like a grin had spread across Blood’s skull. “*He* will back away from *you*. Switch to defense. Give you breathing room.”

You may be at a disadvantage, but your opponent won’t know that. Don’t be afraid of risk. Take that step into an uncertain future. Snatch the initiative away from the opponent.

“Your instincts when attacking are good, but you get cold feet too easily. We’re gonna have to work on that. Just remember,” Blood flexed his arm. “Get ripped, and you can solve pretty much everything by force.”

All I could see was bone. “Very funny, Blood.”

My comment seemed to shock him, and he looked a bit depressed.

◆

A few months went by. The weather got progressively hotter, and we started having days in a row of scorching sun.

Gus’s lessons meandered from magic and myths to arithmetic, book-keeping, and economics, and sometimes even to law and civil engineering. Blood’s lessons, however, were always extremely straightforward.

“First off, you need to build muscle and stamina. They’re more important than anything else.”

Blood bent his arm, as if to draw attention to his biceps. Of course, there was no muscle there, only his naked humerus.

“Don’t I need to learn technique? You know, moves and stuff?”

“Useless without muscle.”

Instantly dismissed. Was it really like that? I found it difficult to accept such a blunt statement. Perhaps it was the influence of all the manga I’d read in my previous life, where the little guy beat people bigger than himself a surprising amount of the time.

Blood seemed to sense I wasn’t convinced.

“Hmm… Okay, then, Will. Could you knock me over without using magic?” He assumed a firm stance. The sight of that nearly two-meter-tall man of bone in a stable crouch felt incredibly powerful.

There was no way a kid of eight years (give or take) could have done anything.

"No."

"Didn't think so. Our builds are completely different. You can't overcome that without a weapon, even with a master's techniques. Differences in build, weight, muscle—all these translate directly into power. Sure, having a move or two up your sleeve gives you a *chance* to turn things around. That's why everyone makes a big deal out of them. We all love to root for the underdog. But you don't wanna bank on that."

Before I knew it, he had closed the distance on me, and with a nimble flick of the foot, he took my legs out from under me. Just before kissing the grass, I reflexively curled up my body and impacted the ground, breaking my fall with a technique Blood had drilled into me.

He'd sometimes test my falls like this by taking me by surprise. If it wasn't good enough, I'd be put through endless practice again, and spend the next few hours rolling on the grass.

"Okay, great job. Well, uh, this is what reality is like, most of the time. The big guy always has the upper hand. Being big is that much of an advantage, and a strength. Though, I guess, you can't always say that, not when weapons and magic get involved."

Blood explained that wielding a particularly deadly weapon helped to reduce the importance of physique. Certainly, if an adult and a child were to fight either bare handed, with knives, or with guns, the guns would come closest to leveling the playing field.

"Still, that doesn't change the fact that physique and muscle are important. You need to work out a lot, eat large meals, and get bigger."

"Yeah."

Obviously, for your workout to turn into muscle, you have to eat more calories than you burn. If it doesn't turn into muscle, all the exhaustion of the workout counts for nothing. Blood always called that a waste. In my previous life, I'd had an unbalanced diet. I ate very little, at irregular times. This time, I wanted to eat regular meals, and I wanted to eat a lot.

"So, about muscle. What's great about muscle is it's good in any situation. Let's say you've got… I dunno… someone light on their feet, who can throw real sharp, accurate punches."

I imagined a boxer.

"He winds up in a slow, draggy grappling situation. How useful are that fighter's techniques gonna be?"

Even at close range, he could probably punch a little at his opponent's sides, but it'd probably do significantly less damage. I remembered that in boxing, there was an actual technique like that, called the clinch.

"Okay, now let's say that instead you've got a guy who's good in a grapple. He's got throwing techniques and choking techniques. But his opponent's got quick feet, and cleverly keeps his distance, and keeps darting in and punching him. How useful are those techniques gonna be?"

"Hmm…" The techniques didn't seem much help in that situation, either.

"There's plenty of situations where you won't be able to use your techniques to their full potential. But 'having strong muscles' is gonna be useful in pretty much all situations. It's almost never gonna work against you. If you're in a tiring grapple, muscle's gonna let you pin down your opponent. If you're trying to keep your distance, it's gonna give power to your punches. Same thing if you've got a weapon. If you have good muscle strength, you can swing it easily, again and again, and you can keep your opponent's weapon pressed back.

"Your techniques and moves, on the other hand, I'm not saying they're useless, but they're not gonna do anything for you outside the *specific situations you can use them in*. Same thing with weapon skills. You're not necessarily always gonna be carrying your favorite weapon—but your muscles, they're not gonna leave you, not so long as you keep up your training."

His analysis was very realistic, and what he was trying to tell me was simple. Muscle strength and physique were the basic parameters, and moves and techniques were nothing more than a bonus, added on top if and only if the situation permitted it.

"So it should be clear which one's more important to do first. First the muscle, then later the moves. Got it?"

"Yeah, got it. You've really thought all this through. I didn't expect that..."

"You thought I was an idiot, didn't you? Come on over here. Blood's got a present for you."

I let out a fake scream and ran off, and Blood chased after me, laughing. Even when we played around like this, it was an opportunity for Blood to help me train my body and teach me all kinds of things.

Like how to throw stones. Not barehanded, like skipping stones over water. Something more useful in a battle situation.

Down the hill, on the opposite side to the city, past a field with rows of gravestones, was a dense forest. Blood and I were moving through it in a low crouch, each of us holding a long rope that we'd made by braiding together many long blades of grass. At one end of the rope was a finger-sized loop to prevent it from slipping, and in the middle, we had woven a pouch just big enough to fit a ping pong ball.

It was a weapon called a sling. I remembered from my previous life that it had been used by people like the Old Testament's David and the Irish hero Cú Chulainn. It existed in Japan, too, where it was called

the inji-uchi.

There was a good-sized gathering of wild birds near the edge of the forest.

I put my middle finger into the rope's loop, found a suitable-looking stone, and put it into the pouch. Then I lightly pressed the other end of the rope between my index finger and my thumb. After swinging the sling around a couple times to build up speed, I released my fingers with precise timing, freeing the stone held in the pouch. While the rope stayed attached to me thanks to the loop around my finger, the stone whipped through the air, straight toward the bevy of quail pecking at something just outside the forest. It hit one directly in the side. An instant later, there was a tremendous flapping of wings, and the birds all flew off at once.

"Okay! Great job! Check it!" Blood called out.

I glanced over at him to see him launch his own stone into the middle of the escaping flock. One of them dropped from the sky. I ran the ten meters to the quail I had taken down while wondering how I was ever going to get that good.

The quail was twitching; there was still life in it. It was struggling unsuccessfully to get away from me, and I thought its wing might have been broken. It looked so pitiful that, for a moment, I couldn't help but feel sorry for it...

"Will, don't let it suffer! Break its damned neck already!"

Spurred on by his voice, I held the quail down with the thick cloth I'd prepared. I could feel it fighting through the cloth. After stopping it from resisting with its beak and claws, I applied full pressure. I felt the horrible physicality of its neck breaking, and the quail went instantly and completely limp.

A short distance away, Blood was recovering his own bird. It must have died on impact, because I never saw him finish it off.

My quail's big, round eyes had now lost their light completely. As Blood made his way over to me, I put my hands together as Mary had taught me, and prayed for the bird to rest in peace.

"Used to killing yet?"

"Not really."

Hunting and killing animals—this, too, was part of Blood's lessons. But killing weighed heavily on me. I couldn't get used to it. I couldn't kill without emotion, without hesitation. I wondered if my memories from my previous life were holding me back.

"I don't want to kill." Was I just being a baby?

"Hm? You think I do?"

"Huh?"

Blood gave a light shrug. "Look, if I let myself think about it too long, I don't wanna kill, either. Of course I resist the idea of killing, whether it's a person or a bird. But you've gotta understand—"

Blood paused there, and poked my chest with a fingertip. "If I need to, I can put that aside and kill by reflex. That's the way of a warrior, and that's what I'm trying to teach you. 'Cause on the field of battle, that's a matter of life and death."

Then, he took the quail's dead body out of my hands. He tied its legs together with the other's, and hung them over his shoulder.

"Okay. Let's bring down a few more."

"Yeah."

I could feel so much care in Blood's words and actions. Once again, I thought, *What an amazing person he is.*

◆

The birds we killed were, of course, destined for the dinner table. I came back after being worked into the ground by Blood and Gus to find Mary already done with setting out the food.

The quail, feathers plucked and innards removed, had been rubbed with salt and herbs from the garden beside the temple. Then they were roasted and set onto a plate. They were still steaming hot, and fat was dripping off them. My mouth watered as the delicious smell of cooked meat permeated the room. In addition, there was a soup with all kinds of vegetables in it, and thick, beautifully colored multigrain bread. I couldn't wait.

Mary laughed softly. "Don't worry, the food isn't going anywhere. Say grace before you eat."

"Okay!" It was Mary's policy that I should always sit down properly and pray before eating. I put my hands together as I always did, and spoke the words that I had been taught. "Mater our Earth-Mother, gods of good virtue, bless this food, which by thy merciful love we are about to receive, and let it sustain us in body and mind."

I was living on a regular schedule in my new life, waking up in the morning, working out with Blood, learning from Gus, and eating the food Mary made for me. It was a great departure from my past life, in which I woke up whenever, ate whatever, and sat in my room forever in front of my monitor. My biological clock became disrupted, and my messed-up lifestyle sent my health into a slow decline.

Only now, having been reborn, did I finally understand how great a mistake that was. A weakened body led to a weakened mind. I wasn't about to let it happen again.

"For the grace of the gods, we are truly thankful."

The quail we had captured were rich in flavor and just chewy enough. The fat made them truly delicious. There was a lot of bone and not much meat, but it was so good, I didn't care. Too engrossed to talk, I endlessly picked the meat off the bones.

Every so often, I went for the bread, whose simple taste perfectly cleansed my palate of the meat's strong flavor. Sometimes I mopped up the juices from the meat on my plate with it, which tasted great as well. The soup, too, was salted just enough, and felt like it warmed every part of my exhausted body. It truly was a blissful dinner.

"This is really delicious, Mary."

Another little laugh. "I'm glad you're enjoying it."

A mystery remained, however. A big mystery.

Mary, Gus, and Blood were all undead. They didn't eat. Couldn't eat. Therefore, there was neither a need for them to produce food, nor to keep any in storage. In fact, I hadn't seen any sign that they'd cultivated any large fields. Even the small garden had apparently been restored after my arrival, and while it contained vegetables and herbs, no grains were growing there.

The ruins of the city to which this temple belonged were clearly cut off from human society, so there wasn't anywhere you could buy things. Other than things like salt and honey, which didn't spoil in the first place, any food that had been in the ruins wouldn't have just rotted by now, but would have become nothing more than a dry powder or stain on the floor.

All of which raised the question: Where had this bread come from? Where did they get the grains? The kiln?

Of course, I thought of the possibility that they could have made the food with magic. I'd already proven that grease could be made, so if you said "bread" or "pork" in the Words of Creation, perhaps the mana would assume that form?

After some investigation, the answer was "no." You could, Gus told me, make something resembling food, and it would make you feel full if you ate it, but it was beyond human ability to create nutritious food with magic.

I found Gus's quote about it, "No man can fill his stomach by swallowing his own Words," to be pretty amusing. But I felt the real heart of the issue was we didn't fully understand the Words of Creation, and didn't have enough information about the creatures of this world. Proteins, vitamins, and the other details of what constituted nutritional value were still undiscovered here, so there hadn't been any progress on analyzing the Words relating to those things. As a result, attempting to create bread would only give birth to the ultimate diet product, which looked like bread, but contained zero calories.

This explanation seemed to make a lot of sense to me, anyway. I'd heard that putting the ancient language of magecraft to medical use, which of course involved fiddling with the complicated human body, was a difficult field in which little progress had been made. That seemed to support my theory.

Getting back on topic, my point was this. The fact that there was enough food for me to have something to eat every day was, by itself, abnormal. And yet, the fact of the matter was that some kind of food *was* always here, every single day. Which meant that there must be some other factor I hadn't considered.

"Hey, Mary. This bread... Where do you get it from?"

"That's a secret."

So many mysteries.

◆

It was simply baffling. No matter how I thought about it, I could reach no other conclusion.

Their three histories were baffling, the origin of the food was baffling, and above all, I myself was an enigma. I'd once made the simplistic guess that I might have been an abandoned child, but even that was now looking suspicious, and for one reason. I never saw any smoke.

The thought had come to me recently that at this level of civilization, wherever there was a human settlement, there should also be smoke from cooking fires. So I'd been paying extra attention to my surroundings looking for some, but no matter what time of day it was, and no matter what direction I looked in, I couldn't see any such thing.

Of course, I didn't actually know how visible smoke from a cooking fire would be at a distance, but I was able to recall the rough knowledge that there was a method for calculating the distance to the horizon. You were meant to make a right triangle with one side equal to the radius of the Earth, and another equal to the radius of the Earth plus the height of your eyes, and apply Pythagoras's theorem. If I remembered correctly, it came out at four to five kilometers or thereabouts. Of course, whether I could apply that directly to this world or not seemed iffy, but it would be good enough for reference.

Those four or five kilometers would be even longer with a higher viewpoint, which was why ships in search of land had a lookout with good eyesight stand at the top of a mast. Similarly, things higher than the ground beyond the horizon could be seen beyond it. Mountains, for instance—and smoke.

So if a child whose eyesight wasn't bad were to look for a tall column of smoke from the top of a hill, he should be able to see at least a few dozen kilometers. But there was no smoke to be seen. In other words, I couldn't find any signs whatsoever of human habitation.

As for how all of this was related to the "abandoned child" theory, it was quite simple. If I was an abandoned child, then there must have been a biological parent or someone else who couldn't continue to raise me. Someone had to be responsible for abandoning me.

I hadn't even been one year old when I became aware of my memories of my past life, and babies' bodies were fragile. If you were going to abandon a baby, you probably wouldn't take them a terribly long way before doing it. There was certainly no need to bother

journeying all the way here, to this ruined city inhabited by the undead, clearly dozens of kilometers away from any human society.

A normal adult male could walk an average of about thirty kilometers per day on a reasonably maintained road. Include the return trip, and that meant that to drop a baby off fifteen kilometers away would take an entire day. Any further than that would require camping out somewhere remote.

This made no sense. If I really had been abandoned, I would have to ask: what the heck kind of parents would waste more than an entire day, even camping out overnight, just to get their baby as far away from them as possible?!

Given this, I was forced to think that maybe the likelihood of me being abandoned was lower than I thought. But then where *had* I come from? I spent some time contemplating other likely possibilities, but I couldn't come up with any good ideas. I surely hadn't simply sprouted from a cabbage patch, so my real parents had to exist somewhere, and must have had some history with this ruined city.

I couldn't be the kid Mary and Blood had before they became undead? Nah, no way. Those three most likely became undead around the same time the city fell into ruin. I was virtually certain of this, because of the occasional mentions they'd drop in daily conversation about what the city was like before.

The city showed signs of deterioration over a considerable stretch of time. It wasn't something that could have happened in just ten or twenty years. The time periods didn't match up. If they became undead fifty or a hundred years ago, it was impossible that their child could have been born just eight years ago.

The only other scenario, that Mary could have had intercourse with Blood and gotten pregnant while both of them were undead, felt... even less plausible. Which meant that any of the three of them were definitely not my real parents, leading me all the way back to my original conclusion: that I had no clue about my own background.

Maybe it made the most sense to think that an irresponsible couple living on the road left me here? But no, that too felt wrong. After all, not a single human traveler had passed through this place for the past seven years. I thought and thought, but no answer came.

Who *was* I?

"Will?"

"Wagh!" I almost jumped. I'd gotten lost in thought.

"Is something the matter? You stopped."

"Sorry, Mary. I was doing some thinking."

Mary didn't scold me. She just smiled gently. I'm sure she would have looked beautiful if she'd still been alive, but now... I couldn't help but feel a modicum of fear from an expression like that. I'd mostly gotten used to the feeling by now, though.

"Some thinking? But don't you think it's hot today? Why don't we get this finished, and then you can think inside, where it's cool."

"Okay." I nodded and swung the grub hoe upward again.

I'd discovered that soil tended to be pretty heavy and hard. Tilling was hard work for a child like me. At first, I couldn't get the hang of the hoe at all, and could only get the blade to penetrate a short distance into the ground. Now, though, it was going in quite deep, given my size.

We were in the temple's vegetable garden. It was summer, so brightly colored tomatoes and eggplants were growing there. The garden had apparently been neglected for a long time, but they had gathered up some wild vegetables and the like, and started maintaining the garden once more for me. Herbs such as thyme, lemon balm, mint, and lavender had been planted at the garden's edges, where they also served as a bug repellent. Their individual strong aromas mixed with the smell of the soil.

An area of the garden had been left unused up until now, and it was this that I was currently helping Mary to plow. She wanted to use it for carrots, which needed to be sown during the summer, and also for autumn's potatoes and onions.

The names, appearances, and planting seasons of all these vegetables and herbs, as well as how to harvest them, were all things I had learned from Mary.

I was receiving my scholarly education from Gus, and learning how to fight from Blood, but I had the feeling that Mary was the person I had learned the most from. How to dress appropriately, how to use the toilet, proper etiquette, classic children's fairy tales, stories from the past, how to grow vegetables, how to maintain farming tools, how to fold cloth, how to wash it, and how to clean a room. And when I hung around Mary, she would explain everything patiently, politely, and properly, from the beginning.

In my past life of conveniences, I led a failure of a lifestyle, and therefore, I had almost no proper knowledge about life, as embarrassing as it was to admit. In that respect, Mary had a firm grasp on things. She was clearly more suited to make it in the world, more so even than Gus and Blood, who were out of touch and a bit too savage (respectively).

She went to bed and got up at regular times, and every day, she would weed the garden, air out the blankets, clean around the temple, and perform a litany of other tasks. And she was educating me to be able to do them, too. If Mary hadn't been here in this temple, I may have turned out to be good-for-nothing again.

However, even Mary had a mystery about her. A few times a day, she isolated herself in the temple's main hall. I'd been told not to go in there during that time. She told me she was praying. While that was going on, Gus and Blood would not-so-subtly hang around me, and make sure not to let me into the hall.

Maybe she really was just praying in silence, and wanted to be able

to concentrate. But there were so many mysteries piling on top of each other, part of me couldn't help but think this had to be related to one of them.

While turning up the ground with my hoe, I decided: I was going to check. There was a chance that I could find a clue toward solving all of these mysteries.

And finding a way to solve the mysteries was the only thing inside my head.

◆

I decided to pretend to be ill.

During my training with Blood, I acted like I wasn't feeling well, and said I wanted to rest for a bit. Perhaps because of how diligently I'd been training before then, Blood believed this without any signs of suspicion, and told me to go rest in my bed.

For a while, he watched over me as I lay there, but before long, he muttered something about going to catch something invigorating, and disappeared in the direction of the forest. I'd figured that Blood's personality wouldn't allow him to loiter beside the bed for long.

I tiptoed out of the room, taking care not to be found by anyone, and secretly headed toward the hall. Trying not to make any sound, I opened the door as slowly as I could, and peered inside. The instant I did, I caught my breath.

Mary was engulfed in flames.

With a silver tray on the floor in front of her, she was kneeling there, in the middle of a band of faint light streaming from the skylight, facing a sculpture of one of the gods, her hands together in a posture of fervent prayer.

She was oblivious to the white flames covering her body and the thick cloud of smoke surrounding her.

My mind went blank.

I ran inside screaming, but Mary didn't show any signs of having noticed me. Her posture absolutely unbroken, as if she had become a stone statue herself, Mary continued praying.

Panic shorted out my brain. Sweat was beading on my face. My ears were pounding. My throat hurt, and only then did I realize how loudly I was shouting. But even from right beside her, it elicited no reaction.

Desperate to do anything, I extended a hand towards her. She was still blanketed in flames. Her body was horribly burned, and had the appearance of red-hot charcoal. I touched her with my palm. It sizzled and burned.

Intense pain almost pulled my hand back by reflex. I suppressed it, internally screaming at my body that I didn't care. I didn't care if I hurt myself. Mary was in danger. She was in danger!

The panic frying my brain paralyzed every other sensation. I shrieked as I shook her over and over. "Blood! Gus! Help! Mary, Maryyyy!"

◆

"How many times did I tell you..." Gus said, scowling at Blood and Mary.

"My fault. I was careless," Blood said, his head lowered in apology to the other two.

"No... I'm the one to blame for keeping it a secret from him for so long." Mary was hanging her head dejectedly. Her body, which had been so badly burned, was now, somehow, completely back to normal.

I was in my room, lying on the simple but functional bed, surrounded by stonework walls. My head was spinning, and my

hands hurt. *Really* hurt. I groaned, hugged the blanket, and tried as hard as I could to put up with the pain.

My memories of the event were a little vague, but I gathered that Gus had heard my screams and come flying in through the wall. Apparently, I'd been shaking Mary as she refused to move, and screaming frantically, not even caring about my burning arms. Gus had torn me away from her immediately, and given me some magically augmented first aid, but as you'd expect, I ended up with burns on the palms of my hands and all up my arms.

I'd heard that full-blown burns hurt a lot, and whoever had said that wasn't kidding. Both my arms were throbbing and intensely painful. Sometimes, people receiving medical treatment for serious burns all over their body beg the people around them just to kill them. I felt like I could understand those people now. I felt like saying it myself.

"Uh, about Will's hands... Think he'll make a full recovery on his own?"

"A tricky question. Fortunately, his fingers didn't stick together, at least. If he got away without some degree of scarring, I for one would be very surprised."

I could hear a frightening conversation going on around me. Scarring? Yeah, I guess so. At the time, my hands had felt like I'd grabbed a lump of burning coal, and on top of that, I hadn't let go. They were currently wrapped in clean cloth, but I could tell that some kind of fluid was oozing out of me and being soaked into it. I was certain that if I unwrapped it, the horror inside would make me want to cover my eyes.

This might even interfere with my ability to properly open my hands or grip things. The thought was honestly scary. But for some reason, I felt strangely calm about it.

"Will... I'm sorry, Will. I should have... I should have just..."

"No. It's my fault for lying and peeking."

The fact that Mary was back to normal probably meant that was a regular occurrence, and she had been keeping it hidden from me so that I wouldn't worry. And I had gone and injured myself, badly enough to leave a scar, trying to help her when she didn't even need it.

"There's nothing for you to be sorry for," I said. "I'm just glad you're okay."

It was reckless behavior, borne of ignorance. I was sure that some people would have called me a fool for it. But all I felt was relief. What I did may have been completely pointless, but the fact remained that Mary was safe. The woman who had so kindly nurtured me in this world since birth was safe.

And as for me, I had managed to take action. I had taken action for Mary's sake, without ever looking back, without ever letting selfishness or self-preservation get in the way. I didn't do what my past self would have done. I didn't let fear get the better of me, and make any kind of excuse to stop in my tracks.

So—

"Don't worry about it so much, okay?" I could smile at Mary from the bottom of my heart.

You have nothing to apologize for, I thought. *I'm so glad you're safe.*

"Will..." Mary was looking at the ground and trembling. I wasn't used to her looking like that, and found it hard to guess what she was thinking. "Thank you, Will... Thank you."

She held my head tightly as I lay flat on the bed. I could smell her smell, like fragrant wood burning. It was soothing and pleasant.

"So." Blood had clearly been waiting for Mary to calm down before

questioning me. “You want to tell me why you went and faked an illness just so you could snoop on her in the middle of her act of worship?”

It was his serious voice. Apparently, I was in for a lecture.

I couldn’t blame him. It’s a bit weird for *me* to say this, I guess, but whatever the circumstances might have been, I’d gotten myself injured doing something I’d been prohibited from, so I deserved to receive a proper scolding for this.

“I’ve always been curious why the three of you are here. And why I’m here—why I’m the only one alive here. And... I thought if I peeked on her worshipping, even though you told me not to... I might find some kind of clue...”

It brought to mind the phenomenon of “reactance” in psychology, and what we in Japan called the “don’t look” taboo, which often appeared in folktales. There are times when something being forbidden is precisely what draws you to it. That being said, I *had* intended to just take a little peek and nothing more. If Mary hadn’t been in the state she was, I wouldn’t have—no, that was just an excuse.

“Didn’t I tell you that I’d talk to you about it one day when you’re bigger?” Blood’s posture changed, as if he was sighing. “Do you think we’re the kind of people to ban you from doing something without a reason? Do you think we’re liars? Will, you’re a smart guy. You *know* that if we’re banning you from doing something, there’s a good reason why, right?”

Yes, absolutely I did. I just lacked patience. There was no other way to put it.

“U-Um, Blood, I don’t think you need to be quite so hard on Will. It was just his child-like curiosity.”

“Mary, you keep quiet for a minute.” He stopped her hesitant attempts to cover for me, and asked me again as he looked down at

me. “Will. Do you have any other reason or excuse?”

“No, I don’t. I’m sorry.”

I had barely finished saying it before Blood raised his bony fist and slammed it powerfully onto my head. The blunt force of the impact shook me. My head swam. Tears welled up in my eyes. I didn’t want to cry, but it happened by reflex.

“Next time, you talk it over with me or Mary or something before you go thinking about doing something like that. I won’t stand for you randomly wandering off without telling us. There’s ruins around here, and… well… it’s just dangerous.”

I nodded meekly. The thought crossed my mind that I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been reprimanded this harshly. It must have been early in my past life. After all, everyone had given up on me by the end. They knew that lecturing me would achieve nothing, and were careful not to get involved.

But here, Blood was making himself the bad guy to help me. By getting angry with me, he was doing what was best for me, while fully accepting the risk that I might develop a fear of him or want to stay away from him as a result. It felt kind of strange to be happy about being scolded.

“Oh, and Will?” Blood unclenched his fist and ruffled my hair. “I’m proud of you for flying in there and helping Mary. That injury is a badge of honor.”

I could feel the corners of my mouth curving upwards. “I am your apprentice…”

“This little guy… C’mere, you!”

Mary had a relieved smile on her face as she watched us laughing and playing together. Gus shrugged his shoulders and sighed.

Once things had settled down a bit, Gus made a suggestion.

“Incidentally, Mary. Perhaps it’s time we told Will about the worship? I’ll admit that it’s difficult to reveal things about our histories to this boy. Say the wrong thing, and he’ll connect the dots and have the full picture drawn on his own. That said, I would prefer not to have to endure this more than once.”

“Yeah, I’m… Gotta say, I’m with Gus. Feels safest.”

“Yes, all right,” Mary nodded. “This has taught me that keeping too many things secret can actually be more dangerous.”

Gus turned to me with a solemn look on his face. “Will. This… may disturb you a little.”

Disturb me?

“It’s about your food. Mary has been using that act of worship to summon it all this time, and she burns during the act.”

Wait, what?

“You must have seen the silver tray? When her act of worship is over, the food appears upon that tray.”

“Is this… a joke?”

“Do you honestly think I would joke about this?”

Wait. Slow down. This is too much to take in.

“T-Tell me more,” I said, barely managing to get the words out. Gus explained for me.

The art of “benediction,” sometimes called “divine protection” or simply “miracles,” was a method for borrowing the supernatural powers of the gods, who had lost their bodies in battle in the age of myth, disappearing beyond this dimension. Gus had touched upon benediction very briefly in one of his lessons, when he’d talked about the “protection” that the gods gave to their minions. But this was the

first time he had called it by name.

Benediction was the art of manifesting those gods' powers into the world through one's own body. It was the glorious work of the gods, which could heal illness and injury, create food and drink such as holy bread and wine, and carry out other feats that could not be performed by means of the ancient language of magic. The gods could deliver revelations to the people blessed with their divine protection, helping them in risky situations. When mastered, benediction could even bring the gods themselves down into one's own earthly body.

However, it also imposed greater restrictions upon the user than magic, which used the Words of Creation. Since benediction involved borrowing the power of a god, it couldn't be used unless the user and the god were on good terms. It required strong devotion, and the kind of spiritual nature that could find favor with that god. It also couldn't be used to do anything the god disapproved of. For instance, benediction would not allow you to use highly aggressive attacks against the minions of another benevolent god, and if you were wicked and unrepentant, the god would withdraw benediction entirely.

So that was benediction, a mystic art that could stand shoulder-to-shoulder with magic, and with its own advantages and disadvantages. As for why hadn't I heard about it before that point…

"I never told you," Gus explained, "and I hid all the books relating to it. If you had heard about it and learned about it, you would have guessed that Mary could use it. You're clever like that."

Mary was devout and virtuous, and now that I knew about benediction, she seemed exactly the kind of person to use it. Gus was right. I probably would have guessed.

"Before long, you would have read my books and so on, connected the dots as you do, and discovered that Mary was bursting into flames. Then, you would have said that you didn't want her making

food for you if it meant her turning into a ball of fire. And I am sure that your mind would not have been changed, not even by us telling you that we are high-level undead, and our bodies recover easily from such a minor thing as being burned."

"Well, yeah, I wouldn't like it, but... why does she set on fire in the first place?!"

"Well, uh..."

"Because I became undead," Mary said. "Because I betrayed Mater our Earth-Mother."

"Mary..."

Her eyes were lowered, and her head, too. Her expression was one of deep sorrow.

"We became undead by entering into a contract with the unhallowed god of immortality, Stagnate," she continued. "The god of undeath is a foe to Mater our Earth-Mother. The tainted undead burn at the slightest touch of her divine energy."

I remembered the sculpture in the temple. Mater, the Earth-Mother, was the woman with the loving smile, who was holding a baby in her arms, and standing in front of a background of growing rice plants.

"What I did was beyond forgiveness. I betrayed her, and this is my punishment."

Then why did she keep praying? "For me?"

Was she praying like that just to make bread for me to eat every day? Becoming consumed by flame every time? If that was the case...

"I... I'll work in the fields more! I'll hunt! So—"

Mary smiled gently. "It's not like that, Will." The soft embrace of

her voice put my fears at ease. “Offering regular prayers to Mater has been a routine of mine since well before I met you.”

She wasn’t lying. Mary couldn’t lie with a smile like this, with a voice like that. Seven years spent with her had taught me that.

“Mater our Earth-Mother is the guardian deity of children. After meeting you, I also began to pray for a little food from her, but my habit of praying itself is no different now than it ever was.”

“Mary speaks the truth,” Gus said. “I guarantee it myself.”

“I told her a few times that maybe she should pack it in now, but she won’t have it,” Blood added, making an expression that I thought looked a little displeased.

Gus, too, gently nodded.

“Why?” I asked, confused. Not even my past memories were helping me to make sense of this. If what they were saying was true, then before I was around, Mary had been inflaming herself every day in return for absolutely nothing. “Doesn’t it hurt?”

“It does. I’d cry from the pain, if I still could.” She smiled.

Her reason was simple. Even after betraying her, even if pain was her only reward—

“I still revere Mater.”

To be able to smile through all this… She’s beautiful, I thought.

Mary was a mummy, and looked like a dead tree, or a monk who’d starved to death. Anyone’s first surface impression of her could only be to find her horrifying or grotesque. But to my eyes, she looked absolutely beautiful.

She had betrayed the one she revered—probably not willingly—and was now rejected by her, roasted by flame every time she tried to

come close. Undeterred, she kept trying again and again, and was rewarded every time with terrible pain.

With my lack of religious faith and flimsy life experience, both in this life and my previous one, I couldn't begin to understand her suffering, and could only imagine how difficult it must be for her. All I knew was that it had to be hard. It had to be painful. It wouldn't have been any surprise if undirected feelings of hatred and resentment had built up within her. They would have in me. At least, the old me. I was sure of that.

But Mary accepted her suffering calmly. I had never once seen her speak badly of anyone or show hatred toward anyone. That was what made her look so beautiful to me.

"Even if my prayers aren't accepted... Will..." She added my name softly. "I still believe that prayer has meaning."

I wondered if that was true. I hoped that it was.

"And even though Mater doesn't speak a word to me... since I met you, she has been blessing me with holy bread." Mater the Earth-Mother was holding a baby in her sculpture, and Mary had mentioned that she was the guardian deity of children, too.

"Even if I cannot receive her forgiveness... just that little bit of assistance has been a great salvation for me. That's all thanks to you, Will!" she added in a mischievous tone. "I'm really sorry for keeping quiet about it. I hope you'll still eat the bread I give you."

My arms were covered in burns, and Mary was regularly being set ablaze. That was more than enough to make that bread impossible to swallow. But I felt... I could still manage it.

"Yeah... I will. But can you do something for me?"

"What is it?"

"Let me pray with you from now on."

If at all possible, I wanted to understand Mary even a little more. How things looked to her—and how things felt to her.


Chapter Two

A solemn silence that seemed as if it would reject even a single cough had spread through the chilly hall.

I folded my legs into the lotus position, and rested the backs of my hands on my knees. I rocked my body a little to adjust my posture. Then I sat up absolutely straight, as if my spine was a pole connecting the earth to the heavens, and drew in my chin.

I quietly closed my eyes to the temple's large hall.

My sight had been shut off. My senses of sound, touch, smell, and taste were also receiving very little stimulation.

I breathed out slowly, and breathed in none too deeply. I counted that cycle as "one."

One, two, three, four, five... I concentrated solely on counting. Whenever an unnecessary thought entered my mind, I started over from the beginning.

— The state of no-mindedness is not about not thinking. That will lead to a fruitless cycle of thinking about how not to think. You can't achieve it by playing with words and abstract thoughts.

— To achieve no-mindedness, to truly be without mind, is to focus intently on the "now" as it exists. Chase out your recollections of the past and your imaginations of the future. Think only of the now that exists before you.

— Cast yourself down before God. Not your past self, nor your future self. Your present self, small and insignificant, as you exist, here in this moment. There are no hidden tricks to it. Just do that and that alone, in earnest. Think of the now, focus on it, and cast yourself down. That is all there is to "praying without mind."

Mary's words crossed my mind. I counted breaths, and soon even those were gone.

One, two, three, four, five... Over and over, I simply focused on counting.

I thought of nothing else.

I heard the wind. A bird chirped far away.

I could feel the sensations upon my skin as I sat upon the floor.

Over and over, I counted.

I felt the air being breathed out, the air being breathed in, the sound of my breathing, and the beating of my heart.

Over and over, I counted.

I counted.

Counted.

Deeper.

Forever deeper.

I felt like I was diving into the depths of the blue ocean.

Down.

Down.

Forever down.

How long had I spent “diving”?

The clear, high-pitched ring of a bell brought me back to reality.

I opened my eyelids after a long time of keeping them closed. The scenery of the temple returned. It looked incredibly vivid.

Night had long since fallen, and my surroundings were lit by a

lamp. The sculptures of the gods, lit by wavering flames in the cold darkness, were deeply fantastical and enchanting.

We humans really do get used to things. Once we get used to seeing something, we don't pay as much attention the next time we see it. Get used to hearing something, and we don't pay as much attention the next time we hear it. Touch, smell, and taste all work the same.

It's the way we learn to respond to stimuli efficiently. But on the flip side, it also dulls our sensibilities and causes us to forget our feelings.

That was why I loved these moments of awakening from deep prayer. Everything I saw and heard felt fresh, as if I had just been reborn. It was an exhilarating feeling, as if I had just wiped my body clean of a grime that adhered to all my senses.

I basked in the feeling for a while, and then slowly moved my body out of the lotus position. I had been in the same pose for some time. My body ached all over.

"Well done, Will." Mary had waited for me to move before speaking. She was holding the bell she used to signal the end of worship.

"This concludes the five-day rite of silent prayer."

"Th-Thanks..."

I was thirteen by their reckoning now. Already five years had passed since I had burned my arms.

In fact, I could have had them healed without a trace by further use of benediction, so long as I was prepared for Mary to turn into a torch again. She had offered to do that for me, but I turned her down. It was partly because I didn't think the burns were bad enough to ask something like that of her, and partly because Blood had told me they were a badge of honor.

I received treatment for it, including by Gus's magic, and after much suffering, I was left with discolored skin from the palms of my hands to somewhere up my arms, mostly as expected. They told me I was pretty lucky. I'd actually been steeling myself for the burns to turn into gruesomely swollen scars, so I was left feeling a bit like, "Oh, is that all?" But even now, my badge was still coiled around both of my arms.

Since then, I had shot up in height. I was now at eye level with Mary, and getting pretty close to Gus as well. I still had to look up at Blood, but he complimented me once on how manly I was looking.

When I was reborn into this world after my past life, I hadn't exactly brought a ruler with me. I could only guess at my height in "old figures," but I thought I was probably over 160 cm at this point.

This world mainly used anthropic units of measurement. Like how, if you make a finger gun with your thumb and index finger, the distance between the two is about fifteen centimeters. I couldn't help but convert to metric, though. It must have been the influence of my past life's memories.

Let me return to the present situation.

For the past five days, I had been taking time off my lessons with Gus and Blood to perform the rite of silent prayer. It was a strict religious rite performed in the winter at monasteries for Mater the Earth-Mother. Mary had gone through it herself a number of times while she was alive.

The rite was... quite something.

From sunrise to sunset five days later, you were forbidden to utter a single word, except in the event of an emergency. Communication could only take place through a bell, and other than the time spent sleeping and so on, which was to be kept to a minimum, virtually all the remainder of the time was to be devoted to single-minded prayer.

Get up, pray. Sit down, pray. When your body starts becoming stiff

and painful, get up and walk, and while walking, pray. Once you feel back to form, sit down, pray. When it's time for bed, before bed, pray. There were to be prayers of thanks while eating meals, prayers of dialogue while looking at yourself, prayers of petition to wish for protection, prayers of praise for God.

And after performing that repertoire of every kind of prayer under the sun, the rite was to be concluded with those several long hours of no-mindedness.

When I first heard what I was in for, I, too, was in disbelief. But it's quite terrifying and surprising what feats humans are capable of when they actually make the attempt.

Mary, incidentally, told me that she was physically incapable of praying for such a long length of time without reducing herself to ashes. She assisted me instead. I understood, of course.

I did wonder, for a brief moment, whether I might be blessed with benediction after all this praying, but there were no signs of that happening whatsoever. Judging by that, it seemed that benediction really did require a strong affinity with your god. Mary had told me that many deeply devout believers are never blessed with the art. I figured that was just how it was.

In any event, Mary's teachings on prayer were certainly an ordeal, but...

There was actually worse.

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The rite of silence was the worst that Mary's lessons had to offer, by far. Normally, they were far more tame: how to make shoes, how to sew clothes, how to grow vegetables, how to conduct yourself with decency, and so on. They were... y'know, soothing. Ordinary.

Gus's lessons, on the other hand, had been getting a little out of control recently.

I was grateful for him teaching me, despite his face telling me louder than his words that he really didn't want to bother. The problem was the content, which had become increasingly advanced. It was also far more dense in terms of how much he would teach me at once.

I was seriously overloaded.

He had me committing all kinds of Words to memory, and combining Words to make phrases and sentences. He would make me practice vocalization and pronunciation, so that I could speak them and recite them correctly. He would teach me everything at once, from geometry and arithmetic to rhetoric and argument. There was geographical history, law, astronomy, civil engineering, construction, medicine, economics and business management... and after teaching me all of that, would tell me to have it memorized by the following day.

The following day there would be a test, followed by further cramming, followed by another test, and once every ten days, there would be a review of what we had covered. "Cramming" was too easygoing a word for the quantity offensive he had launched against me.

Honestly, I had begun to wonder whether he was secretly hoping for me to throw in the towel.

Of course, my past life's memories were of use for geometry and arithmetic. I'd been pretty good at math, so for a while, I was using that to give myself some breathing room. However, even that was now becoming difficult, because when Gus judged that I was understanding something, he would skip right over that part like I'd just been moved up a year, and find something extra to teach me as well.

A part of me wished that I'd kept him fooled a little longer. Still, I'd decided to live this life seriously. I wanted to pull out all the stops. Luckily for me, this body was still young, and had a great memory, so

I was somehow still hanging on.

And having been taught so much, I was finally coming to appreciate that not only was Gus's knowledge extremely broad, but unfathomably deep as well.

Blood had once told me that Gus used to be exalted as "The Wandering Sage." I could get the sense that he really had wandered the world and been to all kinds of places, and had learned from both experience and factual knowledge.

This world's civilization was less advanced than my previous life—assuming you discounted the magic bits. Yet whether Gus talked about the anatomy of animals or the procedure for constructing a building, he spoke pragmatically and with clarity. Not a single moment was spent on the kinds of fanciful ideas that the medieval scholars of my old world had indulged in.

Even when Gus talked about demihumans and mythical beasts, which in my past life were nothing more than figments of the imagination, there wasn't the slightest hesitation in his speech. As I listened to him talk about these things after having apparently actually encountered them, I started to realize I was not being smart or clever by constantly doubting their existence. My past life's knowledge could not be applied to this world, and I was beginning to feel stupid for thinking it ever could. After all, the person in front of me was indisputably a ghost.

In any case, Gus's lessons ran on an incredibly tightly packed schedule. I was desperately trying to keep up, but it was questionable how long I would last. Gus, irritable as he was, would have no hesitation in stopping the lesson if I started to whine about it, so I wasn't even permitted to grumble. I simply had to work hard and show I could carry out the immense number of tasks he was setting before me.

It was grueling. I could be forgiven for calling it a little out of control. But Gus's lessons, despite my complaints, were still only

second-worst.

Blood's lessons were out of control even in comparison to Gus's. Not "a little" out of control—seriously big-time crazy.

We'd moved on from our play-fighting, and I'd been practicing with more realistic wooden swords and wooden spears, and learning techniques and form. This much was okay. As an extension of our hunting, I'd learned how to set traps, how to drive prey, how to bring down big game, and how to survive for days in the forest. This, too, made sense. And the regimented training runs and muscle training Blood had begun to impose on me as my body started to take shape were also nothing surprising, and obviously in line with his approach.

The real equipment started coming out: real swords, real spears, and genuine leather armor. I had no idea where he'd gotten these, but it was only natural that you'd keep them hidden and out of a child's reach. He had me run around wearing that stuff, and practice my swings and techniques with it. All this I considered a completely natural part of a warrior's education.

But after that, it started to get crazy. Seriously crazy.

"Okay. So, from today on, I'm gonna start throwing you into real battles."

What?

"Lemme warn you, the guy you'll be fighting is gonna have nothing on his mind except killing you."

What?

"Okay, let's go. I'll supervise, of course, but if there's an accident, you're seriously gonna die. So, uh, try not to end up dead."

WHAT?!

◆

I'll spoil the ending. I had an awful time.

To get into the specifics, Blood gave me a long sword and circular shield, and made me fight to the death against a weak undead he'd captured somewhere.

It was the dry, pitch-black corpse of a monster. It had no nose or ears, one cyclopean eye, and a mouth that opened wide in a disturbing smile shaped like a crescent moon. Its build was not much different from mine. When Blood released it, I was immediately charged, as it swung its chipped and cracked claws.

Oh, yeah. I was terrified.

That might surprise you after hearing about all my training. However, the training and the real thing were worlds apart.

It was horrifying to face an opponent who intended to kill you. How could I describe that horror?

There was a sense of security that came with training. It had restrictions, agreed upon by everyone taking part, so that the risk of accidents or serious injury was reduced as much as possible. If your opponent took on risk and surprised you with a movement you were unable to deal with, you wouldn't end up seriously injured, and you wouldn't die. The same would hold if you tried a risky and bold action of your own.

The cost to pay for the act of taking on risk was low. That was what allowed you to try out all kinds of different behaviors, investigate their pros and cons, and distill them down to the one or two that were really effective. In my past world, too, the martial arts enjoyed great popularity and technical advancement as a result of establishing a safe format for fighting.

But in a real battle, all actions came with risk. If you took a single bad hit, if your foot slipped just once, that alone could be the end of you. Death: the ultimate dead end.

I was now in a real battle, and every action I took had the possibility of leading to some level of risk. My mind went blank, and I started to lose confidence in what I was meant to do.

Of course, I remembered having a previous life, but my intuitive feeling was that this was an exceedingly rare occurrence, and I had no expectation that I was going to get another. Even if I were, it wouldn't have made a jot of difference to the biological aversion to death that was bubbling up within me.

And fatal wounds weren't the only thing I was scared of. If I got my eye gouged out, I wouldn't be able to see anymore. If a tendon were cut, I'd lose movement in that limb. My windpipe could be crushed. I could lose my fingers. I wondered if there was any truth to that rumor I'd heard in my past life, that if you got your nose cut off, mucus would dribble out of the hole in your face.

My enemy's murderous intent forced me to confront all those horrifying possibilities at once.

I got tunnel vision. My heart raced. My breathing grew ragged, my body started shaking, all thought ceased—and as if none of that mattered, I moved to cut my enemy down with a single stroke.

As the undead monster swung its claws down at me, I bashed them away from me with my shield and stepped diagonally forward. As we crossed, I slashed my sword horizontally towards its torso. Assisted by the rotational inertia of my well-trained lower body, my shoulders and arm muscles drove the sword in.

I felt a reassuring resistance as the blade connected.

I put distance between us again. When I looked next, the bone-dry body of the undead creature had been sliced in two, and was crumbling to dust.

Fighting in a real battle was terrifying. I could say without doubt that I'd been scared stiff. My muscles, however, which had been conditioned from a young age, were faithful and brave. They moved

on their own, leaving my cowardly thoughts behind. The best response to any given attack was already imprinted in them as a reflex action.

In my previous world, soldiers and fighters who had undergone a lot of training for battle were sometimes referred to as "killing machines." I now understood how apt that description was. Properly trained warriors could kill their enemies as a mechanical response, setting all their fear and disgust to the side, just as Blood had once told me.

"Phew..."

The monster I'd just cut down was probably a demon, one of the minions of the evil god of dimensions, Dyrhygma. Unless I was mistaken, the demon I'd just fought was one of the lowest-ranked and weakest. I'd gained that knowledge from Gus's natural history lessons, so I was sure it was right.

I was a little surprised, though. Demons were beings from another dimension, and I'd heard that when defeated, they often simply disappeared. I had no idea they could become undead as well. *Maybe that one was special,* I thought, as I stood over the monster I'd cut down and watched it turn to dust.

I'd just killed something that looked like a person. Sure, it was an undead monster, but I still found it strange how emotionless I felt. I wasn't feeling pumped up, panicked, or confused. If another of the same kind of enemy were to charge at me, I was sure I could cut it down in the same way. My lack of hesitancy toward taking a life was probably the result of how proficient all my training had made me.

After I made sure that it had entirely turned to dust, I looked at Blood, whose face appeared stupefied. His skeletal expression was no different from usual, of course, but his mouth was half-open, and he was looking directly at me.

"Blood, I won. What's wrong?"

“Uh… Right. Yeah, good job. Uh, that was okay, considering it was your first battle.” He tried to pass it off like it was nothing, but his voice was a little unconvincing. He seemed pleased.

The impression I was getting was that Blood personally thought what I’d shown off there was very good, but he didn’t want it to go to my head, so he was telling me to take it easy.

Well, well, well. I softly chuckled through my nose. Learning this made me happy. I’d made use of what Blood had taught me. I was feeling very proud of myself. Now, then…

I said at the beginning that I had an awful time. You’re thinking “that wasn’t so bad,” right? Yeah, no. *This* was where it all went wrong.

“H-Hey! Don’t get cocky. It was okay, I said, just okay.”

“Come on, give it up. Just say it, I’m a genius!” Of course, I was joking. I was setting him up to make a joke at my expense. That wasn’t what I got, though.

“Genius, huh. Yeah… Maybe you are.” For some reason, Blood responded to my joke with a relatively serious tone. And then, switching to a cheerful one, he said something absolutely horrifying. “All right, genius, why don’t we move up the schedule and give a harder one a go?!”

Seriously?

◆

The ruined city was always something I’d looked upon from above, from the temple hill. I’d never been allowed to approach it because it was too dangerous, and so I’d never known before now that it also had a complex underground portion.

Before we’d gone inside, Blood had told me that this city had once been inhabited by humans and a race of dwarves.

The dwarves were of short stature, but powerfully built, and excelled in metallurgy, engineering, and construction. Familiar with the earth, they preferred living in caves underground, and this place was no exception. They had constructed a large city of their own below the city here.

In the present day, the underground city below the ruins was a dangerous place, roamed by savage and mindless undead like the one Blood had captured earlier. The reason I'd been forbidden to approach the ruined city was because undead creatures just like that one occasionally wandered out of the underground.

That underground was where I now found myself.

The equipment I'd been given was clothing, shoes, leather armor, a longsword, a dagger, a circular shield, and finally, the pack on my back, which contained bread, dried meat, and a skin full of water. Blood had left me here, deep in the underground city. I was to make it back out of here myself with only the stuff I'd been given.

Deep blackness was spread out before me. It wasn't merely *dark*. I couldn't see my hand in front of my face. This was true blackness, without the slightest trace light, throwing off even my sense of balance.

As you may have noticed, a source of light was not included among the equipment I was given. Blood had carried me here through the pitch darkness. He, of course, no longer had human eyeballs, and seemed to use some other paranormal method for perceiving his surroundings. Of course, I hadn't been able to memorize the path we'd taken to get here. Then, he'd just left, without even giving me a light, leaving me in the middle of this den of the undead. So here I was.

Things were not looking good, to say the least, and I hadn't even started yet. That said, panicking wasn't going to solve anything. Essentially, this was a practical exam. This was, presumably, meant to be a situation I could get myself out of, if I made good use of

everything given to me so far.

I breathed in deeply, and as if expanding my sense of touch outside the limits of my skin, I sensed the surrounding mana, and synchronized with it. Drawing my dagger, I then carefully engraved the Word *Lumen*, which meant "light," into my shield.

The shield lit up, and with its magical light I could see the surrounding area, up to about ten meters, in vivid detail. The light didn't waver like a flame would, and was brighter, too, close to the brightness of a fluorescent lamp from my old world. It would run out in a few hours, but once that happened, it could be made to shine again by drawing the surrounding mana into the engraved Word.

I checked my surroundings with the light. I seemed to be in some kind of small room. There was one entrance, and everywhere my light didn't reach was steeped in darkness. I could hear the low howl of wind blowing through from somewhere.

I had no idea how long escaping was going to take. *Resting will be the problem,* I thought. I had no one here to stand guard for me when I needed it. To rest in circumstances like this required strong nerves and a number of preparations.

You had no problem being alone in your room before, I thought bitterly. For the past ten years, Blood had always been there, and Mary, and Gus.

"Being by yourself makes you so lonely and… anxious," I mumbled. I'd forgotten that.

Blood was probably testing my all-around practical skills: the robust physical strength needed to endure the intense circumstances of a real battle, the flexibility to find the right technique to handle any kind of situation, and the mental fortitude to stay composed in the face of constant loneliness and danger.

Ensuring that I could make use of everything I'd learned from the three of them, even when none of them were around—that was the

point of this exercise.

I was thirteen now, soon to be fourteen. Adulthood was thought to begin at fifteen in this world, so the time for me to stand on my own two feet was near.

I wanted them to see me perform at my best. I wanted the three of them to know that the things they'd taught me were coming to fruition, that it had been worth their time to teach me. If possible, I wanted them to feel proud that I was their apprentice.

Resolved to make full use of my capabilities, I walked into the maze.

◆

Using my shield, I deflected the spiked tail swinging at me from the edges of my vision.

"Tacere, os!" Without faltering, I spoke the Words to enforce silence. The jaw of the skeletal monster in front of me locked shut, and the Words it was trying to issue were interrupted.

Not intending to miss my chance, I stepped in toward it, but a storm of wild swings of its short spear forced me to a very sudden stop, followed by a retreat. I glared into the congealed blackness in its eye sockets, and it seemed to glare back.

I was in a wide, open area of the city underground. The thing in front of me was a skeleton that had once belonged to a demon. To summarize its appearance in a few words, it was was a blend of human and crocodile.

It was about two meters tall, and its skull reminded me of a dinosaur. It had a thick spine to match its physique, with a dramatic series of bony projections running down its length, and its spindly, bizarrely long tail had spikes on the end. It was gripping a short metal spear, untouched by rust, in its human-like hands.

I remembered learning about this demon from Gus. It was called a vraskus.

I'd been told that a bite of its jaws could crush metal armor, while the strikes of its tail were like those of an assassin, coming from unexpected angles. It was relatively high-ranked, being proficient in the use of all kinds of weapons, and even capable of wielding the Words of Creation.

Its tough scales, rubbery skin, and thick muscles were said to frustrate its opponents to the same degree as a warrior's full set of armor. Fortunately, since it was now a skeleton, that protection had been lost. I felt a little lucky.

Gus had told me during his lessons that if you sent ten warriors to fight this demon, you'd end up with nothing more than ten dead bodies. He might have been exaggerating, though. After all, this guy was really sluggish compared to Blood.

I waited for the right moment, and closed in as fast as I could. As it thrust its short spear forward, I deflected it with my shield. I heard the shield and spear scrape against each other. I drew right up close. The vraskus came at me with jaws that could no longer use magic, trying to bite me instead. I'd been anticipating that, too. I ducked low and rolled forward to avoid it, leaped up, and thrust the point of my longsword in somewhere around its tailbone. I immediately twisted it hard. The tail was swinging at me again from a blind spot. I destroyed the part connecting it to the rest of its body, and felt it lose strength and collapse.

The vraskus stalled for an instant in apparent surprise.

I wasn't going to let up. I raised my round shield, and attempted a shield bash.

This should go without saying, but ordinarily, a boy of 160 cm would never be able to shake a huge beast two meters tall just by tackling it. But my opponent was no more than bones, and the loss of its long tail had upset his balance. I slammed my body and shield into

it with all the strength I could muster. There was a forcible impact, and the next instant, the vraskus was down on the ground.

I stepped down on the grip of the spear.

But the vraskus was quick to think and act. It released the spear immediately and sprang at me with outstretched arms, trying to bite me.

Just as I thought it would.

I already had my sword gripped in both hands, held high over my head, waiting to intercept its attack.

"Y-Yaaaaaaghhh!" As the vraskus dived for my windpipe, I smashed my sword down onto its skull with all of my energy. Fragments of bone flew everywhere, and the huge skeleton collapsed onto the floor facedown.

The broken tip of my sword flipped rapidly through the air. It clanged against the floor and spun to a stop in the corner of the room.

"Ah..."

The vraskus had started turning to dust, but I was more concerned with the state of the trusty longsword I had never given a name. As if in exchange for felling that strong foe, it was now impressively broken.

I felt my blood run cold.

This... was bad.

The undead were prowling this place, and I was here with no main weapon. This was *very* bad.

I'd certainly been shaken up, but I was soon distracted. My eye caught the short spear the vraskus had been holding. It wasn't turning to dust. I picked it up and had a look. It didn't look demonic.

If anything, this was a dwarven spear.

I hummed thoughtfully. Maybe this was the work of the dwarves that used to live here?

But in that case, how could it have lasted so many years without rusting? Wondering this, I inspected it more closely, and noticed that Words of Creation had been engraved on it in numerous places. According to Gus, in the era of the warring gods, the gods engraved all kinds of Signs onto all kinds of items, and created a great many divine swords and legendary treasures. The dwarves had in part inherited these skills, and possessed a secret technique for imbuing their weapons with the Words.

Then this rust-free spear was a magical weapon, made by the dwarves who had peopled this land.

As a general rule, these kinds of weapons were extremely durable, and could have an effect even on specters like Gus, who couldn't be touched by normal physical attacks. There were even some that had powerful additional effects such as spouting fire or stunning the opponent with a shock wave. The only problem was, I had no way of determining that here. I was afraid to swing around a spear whose magical effects I didn't know.

But being without a main weapon was scarier still.

Given that the vraskus had been swinging it around perfectly fine, I figured that whatever these Words were, they probably weren't harmful to the user. I decided to have Gus evaluate it later, and borrow its strength for the time being.

I grabbed the shaft, and practiced some jabs and thrusts to get a feel for it. It felt wonderfully easy to use, as if it was clinging to my hand.

"Right."

Let's see if I can't do something with this, I thought, and no sooner

had I put my foot forward when a shivering chill ran up my spine.

I spun around. Gus was there. He was staring at me, and there was murder in his eyes.

◆

"Gus? That… is you, right?" I couldn't help but check. His aura was that foreboding.

I knew Gus as a stubborn and slightly eccentric old ghost who was intelligent and knew everything, and had a hooked nose and unfriendly eyes. Unlike Blood and Mary, he kept a little distance in his interactions with me, but if I asked him repeatedly to teach me, and had a serious attitude about it, he was conscientious enough not to dismiss me out of hand.

That was the usual Gus. I believed that deep down, he was a very good-natured and kind person. But he wasn't like that now. There was a clearly murderous intent in his piercing stare, and his hands, held in a firm stance, felt full of mana, likely sufficient to use magic of considerable power.

The back of my neck shivered, as if someone had blown a cold breath on it.

Gus said nothing.



He was like an entirely different person. Just a menacing look and a threatening pose made him *this* frightening?

It didn't look to me like this was some kind of illusion or disguise. It was definitely Gus. But what had made him so deathly angry? Why was he even here at all?

"Ah..."

— I'll supervise, of course, but if there's an accident, you're seriously gonna die. So, uh, try not to end up dead.

I remembered Blood's words.

Saying, "I'll supervise, but there's the danger of accidental death," meant that I probably wouldn't die unless said accident really occurred. In other words, no matter how arduous the lesson was, it was still a lesson. Unless I bumped straight into an enemy unprepared, somehow died instantly, or made some horrendous mistake, I could expect help to come if the situation became more than I could handle.

How would they get that help to me? If anyone was to be tasked with helping me here, in this city underground, surely it would be Gus, who, as a specter, could pass through walls. The job of tailing me would be impossible for Mary, and no doubt very difficult even for Blood. Gus had almost certainly been constantly watching me as I wandered around this underground city, battled, and searched for the exit. Which had to mean...

"This is... part of the lesson?" I asked, with trepidation in my voice. Maybe this was another part of the lesson, where Gus would be my opponent. I wanted to believe that it was.

My instinct was blaring all its warning sirens at full volume, screaming at me that I was wrong.

"It is, right? Are you going to tell me what I'm su—"

He started drawing a Word in midair in place of an answer. I could tell by looking at it. That was an attack Word.

Magic for killing someone.

The instant I recognized it, I turned on my heel and chose to run. I didn't have a clue what was going on. But I could sense it. I needed to run, as fast as possible! While being wary of what was behind me, I ran as fast as I could toward the room's exit.

"*Expergisci,*" Gus said, spinning a Word from his lips in a bone-chilling tone.

Near the exit I was just about to run through, the pile of rubble shifted and stood, taking the form of a nearly three-meter-tall giant that scraped the ceiling.

"Wh—?!" It was a golem, made with the power of magic! Gus had engraved a complex Sign into the rubble ahead of time, and had now incanted the Word to awaken it.

The character he'd drawn with his finger was for show. He'd drawn it to make me choose to flee. Which meant... that Gus had already sectioned off this place, and turned it into his own meticulously prepared kill zone.

By the time I realized that, the golem's fist was already closing in on me. There was no way I could fully block the overwhelming mass of that fist with my little, circular shield.

Waiting until the last possible moment, I shifted my body and dodged the blow. Then, as if to counter, I thrust forward with the magical spear I'd just obtained. I was aiming for its stomach—specifically, the Sign that was sustaining it.

The point of the spear sank into the rubble golem like a skewer into meat. I swept it sideways, and scraped off the Sign. The golem turned back into individual chunks of stone debris and crashed to the ground—but barely a moment later, something grazed the side of my face

and shot past it, making a hard impact with the wall and shattering there.

I immediately leaped to the side. The exit receded.

Barely an instant after I wondered what had just been shot at me, several more pieces were flying my way. Rubble! I looked back at Gus to see a large Word drawn in midair, around the circumference of which were floating countless tiny pieces of rock.

He fired them at me one after the other, like bullets from a handgun. This magic was Stone Blast, and what's more, a very advanced version!

"Uhh—Wahh—Ahh—?!" I rolled across the floor, trying to avoid them.

I couldn't block all of those fine fragments of rubble with my shield. They hit me in places and stung like fire. Fighting to control my breathing, I prepared to speak the Word of Negation for the next pellets that had just been cast at me, but then—

"*Cadere Araneum*."

I felt a chill of fear. I was familiar with this magic. It was the Word of Web-making. I had used it in my training with Blood, so I knew firsthand how dreadful this magic could be.

I quickly flung a Word of Negation upwards. The web vanished. I put up my shield and tried to make a dash for the exit, but slipped right over on the grease that had run under my feet without any warning.

What— What was going on? He was casting this magic way too fast. Even Gus shouldn't be able to chain spells one after another as fast as this! I turned my eyes to him, and realized the truth. He was performing verbal incantations and written inscriptions in parallel.

"Double casting!" I knew it was possible in theory, but making even

the slightest mistake while using the Words could lead to the caster's own destruction. To speak and write different Words at the same time, while also correctly allocating the mana for each—I could tell without even trying it. It wasn't simple.

"Khhh—!" I madly rolled around, avoiding yet another rubble barrage. I tried to escape out of the greased area, but down came another web.

Paralysis. Weakening. Slowdown. Cloud of Sleep. An endless number of brutal enfeebling techniques overwhelmed me.

If I stopped moving for even a second, I would fall victim to the hail of rubble. Using the Words of Negation and my own body movements, I somehow avoided taking any lethal hits. I made a number of unsightly attempts to escape, but all to no avail. I was desperately trying to manage, but I was slowly but surely being cornered...

Expressionless, but presumably tired of my resistance, Gus spread his hands apart.

"What?"

The Signs being drawn in the air glinted with mana. Two of them—different ones for each hand.

He was still incanting Words nonstop from his mouth.

Triple casting.

"No... way..."

There was no more hope. Simple mental calculation told me that this proved Gus was capable of unleashing a whole additional person's worth of firepower. There was no possibility of escape. I couldn't get away. I was going to be killed.

Gus was looking down on me mercilessly, preparing to activate his

magic without the slightest hesitation. He was serious. He was really going to kill me.

Why? Why?

"Gus..." I was going to be killed by the parent who had raised me, without even knowing why.

No, I thought.

No, no no no.

I don't want to die. I don't want to die! My eyes filled with tears. Thoughts raced through my mind.

I don't want to die. I have to run. But I can't run. I'll never be able to get away.

I don't want to die.

I don't want to die.

If I don't want to die...

What do I have to do to not die?

This spear has Words engraved on it. It works on specters.

Use it like a javelin. Throw it at him. Impale him. My own voice whispered calmly to me inside my head.

I might be an instant faster right now. If I impale Gus... If I strike him just right... If I kill him, I can live.

He was the one who tried to kill me. He's getting what he deserves. So—

Impale him. Just impale him. Impale him. Impale him.

KILL HIM!

As I listened to the insane screaming echoing inside my head, I forced a smile, and, with tense hands… I cast the spear aside.

The sound of it rolling away echoed awfully loudly. Surprised, Gus stopped activating his magic.

"Gus? Hey, Gus?" What was I meant to say? I didn't know. But there was something I did know. "If you have to kill me, that means… you must have some good reason why, right?"

He would never do it otherwise. Even now that things had come to this, I could still believe that.

I loved him. I really loved him.

"Gus? Old Gus?" I spread my arms. I tilted my head back, and exposed my throat, to make it an easy target. "It's okay. You don't have to give me a 'chance to fight back.'"

He swallowed, and seemed like he wanted to reply, but choked on his words. When was the last time I saw Gus this surprised? It might not have been since I answered that question about words when I was young.

"I get it," I said.

If Gus had been serious, this whole farce would have been completely unnecessary. I was the only living being in this space underground. All he needed to do was blast *Ignis* around enough, and he could have killed me, and only me, by depriving me of oxygen and poisoning me with carbon monoxide. Even more simply, he could have just used a shock magic to collapse this large room's ceiling. Since Gus was a specter and could pass through walls, he could also pass through a collapsing ceiling. Again, I would be the only fatality.

Yet Gus had tried to kill me with a drawn-out method like Stone Blast. As if he was giving me a chance to fight back.

"I get it… I understand what you're doing, but…"

I could tell that this was the best compromise Gus could afford to give me. But even then—

"I don't want to kill you, Gus..."

Tears spilled from my eyes. Of course I didn't want to die. I was scared—very scared. The memory of having died once already didn't change that in the slightest. But even so—

"I'd rather die than hurt you, Gus..."

Something welled up inside of me, expanding like a balloon, and I started to hiccup uncontrollably. I felt so uncool.

I'd wanted to accept death. It wasn't like I hadn't gone through it before.

"If this is important to you," I hiccupped again, "that's all I care about."

Gus was still just lingering there in silence, not casting anything. I smiled awkwardly at him.

"You can kill me. I'm not afraid to die." Forcing my lips into a tight smile, I tried to act as stoic as I could. I couldn't let my death be unsightly. I was Gus's apprentice.

"J-Just try not to make it hurt too much... please..."

Slowly... Gus approached me. I clenched my quivering hands. He reached out, and held a palm over my head. I closed my eyes tightly, and the next thing I heard—

"Ahh, sorry, boy! I went a bit too far, didn't I?! Hah hah hah!" Gus spoke and laughed in a loud, exaggerated voice, and pretended to stroke my head with his translucent hand.

"Huh...?" I was shocked.

"It looks like I win! I did have the terrain advantage, though. Come

on, pick yourself up. I know, I spooked you, but it's not all bad. You got some valuable experience in what a battle with a mage is like, didn't you?"

This *couldn't* have been a lesson, and that wasn't what was shocking me. No—it was because Gus was trying to *pretend* that this had all been a lesson.

His voice was the proof. He was never normally this loud or voluble. Why? Had emotion gotten the better of him? Was that possible, for someone of Gus's caliber? No way. But then... why?

"Gus..."

"Now, now, we can talk later! You defeated a vraskus and even obtained a spear. Blood will be over the moon! Now let's not dawdle any longer in this vexatious place. Come along, Will!" Gus was being incredibly verbose.

"Oh, I know!" he said, far too brightly. "I bet you were impressed by that double and triple casting! Now, tricks like that are bad manners, but in the heat of battle, you're better served knowing them. I'll teach you things like that as well from now on. How does that sound? Come on, cheer up, won't you? Please?"

My face must have looked awful at that point in time, but right now, even Gus looked like he might have been about to cry.

There were definitely mysteries surrounding this city, the three, and my background. Blood would probably tell me everything before I was fifteen.

The day for light to be shed on all these mysteries was fast approaching.

◆

The days that followed the Gus incident were no different than the days that had come before. Even after I made it to the exit with Gus

and reunited with Blood, I didn't breathe a single word to him about our fight. I trusted Gus, and if he wasn't going to disclose it to Blood, there must be worthy reason why.

Of course, that meant I was hiding something, so I might have acted a little strangely. But I *had* been thrown into a den of the undead, and had only just come back from that altogether crazy training, having spent half a day there. A little bit of strange behavior was easily misinterpreted by Blood and Mary as the effects of fear and tension which hadn't yet worn off.

To add to that, as it turned out, a vraskus skeleton actually spelled quite a bit of trouble. As Gus reported to Blood how my training had gone, and got to the part where I had to fight a vraskus, Blood gave a hum of understanding and tried to cheer me up, saying it was no wonder Gus had needed to jump in and help me. He didn't sound like he'd even considered the possibility that I might have won by myself.

Gus told him that I beat it on my own, and Blood's jaw dropped. Literally. His entire bottom jaw fell off and dropped to the ground. The sight of Blood in a fluster trying to fit his jawbone back on was pretty surreal.

Was a vraskus really that much of a problem? It had seemed several times less powerful than Blood to me, but maybe it was weak compared to what they were usually like for some reason. Yet as far as I'd been taught, the abilities and skills of the undead never changed from how they'd been in life.

"Umm, how difficult an opponent is a vraskus to you, Blood?"

"Hm? Me?" he replied, folding his arms behind his head. "I could just charge straight in there and lop its head off."

Huh. Then a vraskus wasn't very strong after all. Blood had just been underestimating me slightly, or thinking I wouldn't be able to achieve my full potential in an actual battle.

"Then I still have a long way to go. I can't rest easy just 'cause I

beat a vraskus." If you get full of yourself every time you get the slightest bit stronger, you're just setting yourself up for a fall. I had to rein it in.

Blood and Gus both made strange faces after hearing that comment, and mumbled, "Yeah," and "Indeed," and other indistinct things I couldn't make out.

Hm. I felt like I was laboring under some huge misunderstanding.

With my confusion unresolved, the conversation moved on to the spoils of battle. I'd spotted old coins and ornaments underground, but due to the hassle of carrying them, the only thing I'd brought back was that single short spear. It was my first battle trophy, and the three of them showed great interest in it. We all looked at it together, and spent a while discussing its various aspects.

The blade of the spear was straight, double-edged, and reasonably long. Together with the shaft, it made for a spear that was longer than I was tall.

The curved point of the blade was long, and there was a straight temper line dividing the blade from the rest of the metal. The steel shone with a cold and brilliant light. The base of the blade, where it joined the shaft, was pinched inwards on both sides. Blood liked the look, calling it quite seductive.

The shaft was a tasteful dark brown. According to Mary, it was made of walnut. A bronze ring with a Word engraved in it was set at the base of the blade.

Overall, it was a functional spear, seemingly of dwarven make. However, the fact that all the nonessential elements had been pared away gave it a beauty and impact of its own.

The dark color of the handle contrasted impressively with the steel blade, gleaming a bright white as it reflected the light. When I thought about how this was *my* weapon I started getting a little excited, which was unusual for me. So much so that I couldn't help

myself from grabbing it and taking it to the garden to practice swings and form.

It's a fact of life, as embarrassing as it is to admit, that all men long to have something of their very own that they can obsess over, be it a weapon, a car, or whatever else. I was sure that any male would be able to understand this feeling.

Gus looked at the spear in close detail with me, while re-explaining what to look for. After careful inspection, we found that this spear was known as Pale Moon. The blade and the shaft had both been endowed with magical effects through the Words of Creation.

On the blade, there were Words to augment its ability to penetrate and sever, and Words to protect it against wear and destruction. In addition, a Word based on *Lumen* was engraved there, making the blade serve also as a source of illumination with adjustable range and brightness. It didn't seem like it could shine brightly enough to blind an enemy, but it was certainly enough for lighting my way through the dark. No need for a torch, then.

The handle, meanwhile, in addition to the same Words for strength and quality retention, was engraved with Words pertaining to the contraction and expansion of matter. It appeared that its length could be adjusted, to a limited extent, over the span of a few minutes, while still preserving the material's hardness and toughness. It couldn't suddenly be extended in the middle of a fight, but it could be used as a pike if the situation called for it. As a short spear, it could be carried into small spaces.

They weren't flashy effects like fire or shock waves, but each was undeniably useful. I could think of endless ways to use this thing.

This was amazing. It really was amazing. It was a real magic weapon! And it was mine! I got even more carried away, testing out a whole different range of lengths, seeing what they felt like to swing, and polishing the spear repeatedly even though it wasn't dirty. The three—Blood and Gus in particular—watched me with very warm

eyes.

◆

The days after that passed peacefully.

Blood's lessons now sometimes involved descents to the underground city, but I'd gotten used to it. Sometimes with Pale Moon and sometimes with a longsword, I experienced battle after battle against undead demons. Even when I encountered demons on the same level as a vraskus, they still caused me less trouble than in my first fight.

Eventually, not only did I end up memorizing the structure of the underground city, but nothing down there was a match for me anymore, so Blood started giving *me* handicaps. For example: I was to enter the underground city with only clothing and a dagger, acquire weapons and armor while there by stealing them from the undead, and return after taking down a certain number. That was pretty hard, but it didn't take me all that long before I managed to get the hang of that as well.

Incidentally, though I picked up a number of well-preserved weapons and ornaments, none of them were able to outshine Pale Moon. Nevertheless, I thought it was a very useful experience to try out all kinds of different equipment. There were poor-quality weapons where I favored quantity instead, equipment with names, long weapons, short ones, and everything in-between.

Just as Gus had promised, he taught me the secret tricks to the double and triple use of magic.

Even in my previous world, writing different letters with your left and right hands was an impressive trick, and I also remembered seeing street performances where the performer would play an instrument while doing something else at the same time. Multicasting magic was similar to those tricks. Just like Blood's martial arts, the trick was probably to train your body to remember useful combinations so you could pull them off without thinking.

Gus and I settled on a few practical combinations together. I practiced them to build up my muscle memory. But double casting aside, triple casting was simply far too difficult, and I couldn't entirely pull it off yet. It must have taken Gus many long years of practice to get that good. I wanted to catch up to him someday.

His lectures changed, too. There was no more relentless cramming.

"This will suffice for your scholarly education." In our usual classroom, Gus nodded at me with a smile on his face. "It's time you learned something different."

"Something different?" I asked, and Gus nodded.

"Go down to the underground city with Blood and gather up some coins," he said, in a serious tone. "I'm going to teach you something important." I sat up straight and nodded.

I had no idea what Gus was planning to use the coins for, but if he was speaking this seriously about it, I had no doubt that it really did have to be a matter of some importance.

After a while, Blood and I returned with the coins.

"Ah, good. I've been waiting for you." Gus was carrying dice, a bowl, and... what looked like playing pieces and a board.

"Oh! It's been a while. Up for a game, old man?!" Blood said, in a really cheerful voice. "Hey, Will, you've never played before, right?!"

I didn't answer.

"No big deal, I guess, only takes once to get the idea... Will?"

"Um. Gus?" I said.

"Yes?" Gus replied.

"Isn't this... you know... gambling?"

"'Gambling' is such a crude term. Have a little elegance. Let's call it an intellectual game."

"It *is* gambling!"

"All right, all right, there's no need to lose your temper."

"Yes, there is! I thought you had something really important to teach me! Why *gambling?!"*

"Oh, I daresay you would be surprised by what intellectual games have to offer." And that finally started Gus on his train of sophistry. "When you become an elite sorcerer, a modest familiarity with intellectual games is to be expected. Games of this sort are occasionally used for duels between sorcerers. Magic is dangerous in many ways, after all. If you get into a dispute with a sorcerer you detest, and have a physical battle, it is not uncommon for both sides to destroy each other, which is a result that serves no one. Which is why, in the case of a dispute, one will on occasion draw up a contract, and resolve the conflict through an intellectual game, so as to..."

Memories of card-game manga from my previous life flashed through my mind. But thinking about it, games being used as the format to settle a duel wasn't just a manga thing. There were real, historical examples as well. So maybe, even in this world, it was a good idea to learn how to—

"Oh no, you're not getting me like that!" I shook my head rapidly. "Gambling is gambling! Mary would be so angry!"

"Oho... Will, my boy..." Gus grinned. "You are scared, I see."

"What?"

"No, no, no. There's no need to hide it. It's only natural that you would be intimidated by the prospect of directly competing against me, the exalted Wandering Sage, in an intellectual game." His smile was a mocking one. "Yes, and *Mary* will be *angry,* after all. No one could blame you for running away! For *fleeing!* Yes, run, boy, run. I

will have my fun with Blood." He even added a sneering cackle onto the end.

"Oh, that's it." I couldn't help but respond to his provocation.

So, I proceeded to respond to his provocation.

As you know, gambling is addictive. So much so that pathological gambling was an actual recognized disorder in my previous world.

Gambling stimulates the brain. Panic and anger if you lose, but pleasure and satisfaction if you win. Eventually, the brain becomes desensitized to these stimuli, and the person seeks out stronger stimulation, becoming more and more hooked. There was plenty of literature written about this in my previous world, and I hardly needed to quote it to say that countless people had fallen to the allure of these devilish games.

Why am I telling you all this? To illustrate a simple point:

"Double six! Looks like I take this one, Old Gus!"

"Tch! You always did have good instincts..."

"Okay, next game! Let's play again!"

The devil was not so easily eluded.

The game involved moving pieces across a board using dice, in a similar way to backgammon.

"Okay, let's go again. Hold up, though, before we start. Will, there's a trick to this. Let me teach you. See, there's this thing called an unlucky streak."

"Pure fantasy!" Gus scoffed. "There are only results and probabilities. Play logically for long enough, and ultimately—"

"Yeah? And who's the one being slowly bled dry here?"

Blood currently had a big pile of gold coins in front of him. He had taken a lot of minor losses, but never missed when it mattered. Watching him made me want to believe in instinct and streaks of luck.

I remained silent, my eyes on the sizable mountain of silver coins I had amassed by making safe decisions and avoiding big showdowns with Blood. I was currently second.

Gus made a guttural sound of frustration. He was, of course, last. Even though he talked about the importance of theory and probability, whenever a big clash arose between him and Blood, his obstinate personality led him to discard all that and try to outdo him.

I wanted to play well and maintain second place, and if possible, find just the right opportunity to snatch first. So, strategically speaking, my next move should be—

A loud bang interrupted my thoughts. The door was open, and Mary was standing there.

All three of us opened our mouths and made an "ah" sound at the same time.

For a moment, she said nothing. She had her eyes cast downward, and a gentle smile on her face. It appeared to be the same expression she always had, but for some reason, I couldn't stop trembling.

"You three, sit here." Her calm voice made me break into a copious, cold sweat.

"I, ah, well," Gus started.

"Mary, I can explain—"

"It was Gus's idea—"

We all waved our hands before us as we tried to defend ourselves.

"Sit here."

Not one of us could disobey Mary's smile. Her lecture was long and severe, and taught me something very important: getting hooked on gambling is a bad idea!

◆

Although Gus's gambling parlor operation was not to be repeated, it did show the large ways in which his lessons were changing. In comparison, Blood's didn't change much.

"Hfff!" I exhaled. I was bare-chested, gripping a tree branch, and doing pull-ups. Slowly, to make my back muscles work, I pulled my body up.

With one hand.

"Hfff!"

"Man, your back's gotten pretty thick."

Blood's training was a constant. Train your body, train your technique, practice your skills—hunting, tree climbing, rock climbing, swimming, gathering food—and while doing that, gradually build your knowledge of how to identify the different fish and plants you encounter.

The training never changed. My body, however, was slowly changing to cope with it. I did pull-ups with both hands at first, then with weights, then one-handed. Push-ups, too, I did with a weight on my back, or while in a handstand.

I'd developed visible abs, I was building a muscular chest, and my arms and thighs were getting thicker and stronger. Bit by bit, I was changing into the muscled warrior that Blood had once been.

"Okay, that'll do," Blood said, after I'd run through my basic training routine for the day.

“So what are we doing today?” I asked. “Sparring?”

“Nah, I’ve got a little something else in mind today. We’re gonna look for a beehive. Go splash water on yourself and wash the sweat off, put plenty of layers on, and come back here with a cloth.”

I nodded. I splashed cold water on myself, washed off the sweat, put a lot of clothes on, and returned to Blood.

When I got back, Blood was peering into a small jar. He seemed to be grinning.

“Hm? What’s that?”

“Have a look.”

I peered inside. There was the richly sweet smell of forest grapes, and at the same time, my nose was filled by a second, very distinctive smell. I could see bubbles rising in the liquid inside.

“Okay, listen, Will. What I did was, I got this pot to boiling temperature, and I put in the juice of pressed forest grapes…”

“You’re making alcohol?”

“Oh, you do know!”

“So the reason you’re looking for a beehive—”

“Yup. We’re gonna shove honey in here and sweeten it up.”

If a certain type of fungus gets into a liquid containing sugar, it starts breaking the sugar down and producing alcohol. Of course, the more sugar you add, the higher the alcohol concentration, and the harder the drink.

“A man’s gotta be able to handle his booze,” he said.

“Are you sure Mary won’t get angry?”

“Come on. She doesn’t need to know, right? It’ll be our secret!” His will-o’-the-wisps were twinkling, and he looked like he was really having fun. It was too hard to turn him down.

I was on board without much convincing, and the two of us ran through the forest looking for a bees’ nest. We laughed loudly together as we smoked it out. It was no trouble to get the honey, and we added it to the jar.

I tried some bee larvae on Blood’s suggestion. They were surprisingly tasty. It hit me how much rougher and less fussy I’d become, compared to my previous life.

We left it for a number of days, and after checking that it had properly fermented and become alcohol, we sat in secret opposite each other and enjoyed a drink together. Having said that, Blood had no throat or tongue, of course. No sooner had he poured it into his mouth than it was dripping onto the ground.

“Oh, that’s good. That’s damn good,” he said with relish. I was sure he couldn’t taste it, and couldn’t get drunk, either. Yet Blood looked like he was loving it, and seemed to be having a lot of fun.

“Yeah.” This drink, shared with Blood, tasted wonderful to me as well.

With nothing much to snack on, we poured cup after cup, and got drunk while gazing at the moon. It wasn’t long before a really nice, light, floaty feeling filled my head, and we were laughing like idiots at the smallest little jokes. We got more and more excitable, and when it got to the point where we were acting like a pair of total drunkards…

“You wanna show me you’ve got guts?” Blood slurred.

“Yeah?”

“Let’s go peep on Mary getting undressed.”

“Ooh, gutsy!”

“I am gutsy, aren’t I?”

“Hahaha!” We both laughed our heads off. How did this end up happening?

Obviously, I knew in my head that this was not something we should be doing. I feel sure that even as dulled as my brain was, it was still correctly asking me, *What’s even fun about this in the first place?!*

“Ahahahah!”

“Ahahahah!”

It’s just that it was pointless asking that question to a drunk.

We moved quickly. The temple’s corridors were wobbling. No, wait, that was me.

We judged our timing, and swiftly moved to the door of Mary’s room. I could hear the rustle of fabric. Blood and I peeked through the gap, and saw that Mary was just taking off her loose robe.

Blood and I both were capable of moving around very quietly and expertly when we wanted to. Peeping on someone was easy for us… or would have been when we were sober.

“Ah—”

“You—idiot!”

I wobbled, staggered, and brought us both crashing to the ground.

Mary shrieked. “Wh-Who’s there?!”

We tried to run, but weren’t fast enough. She was able to find something close at hand to wear, and in no time at all, she had put it on, darted out, and caught us both.

“Will?! Blood?! What in the world—ugh, you reek of alcohol!”

I rarely saw Mary this flustered.

“Um, I… this isn’t…!”

“Heheh, thought we’d take a li’l peek at you getting changed.”

“Wh—Wh—Wh—?!”

If she’d been alive, her face would surely have gone bright red. The way Mary was losing her composure in embarrassment was actually adorable, and I felt my heart leap for just a moment.

“What are you two *doing?!*”

A red handprint was left on my cheek. As for the main culprit, Blood, Mary socked him so hard that his skull spun in circles. Then she got on top of him, pinned him down, and punched him repeatedly.

Not only had we gotten completely plastered, we’d peeped on a lady in a state of undress. The punishment fit the crime. Frankly, we’d gotten off lightly.

And when I woke up the following morning, for some reason, I’d had a wet dream. Yes, for the first time.

My voice was breaking around this time, so it wasn’t surprising, but to think my awakening to sex was Mary getting undressed. My *awakening to sex* was *Mary getting undressed*. And to make matters worse, Blood found out, and he doubled over laughing while pointing a finger at me. I kicked him.

And, as I washed my soiled loincloth, I made him swear to me that we’d take this secret with us to the grave.

No more booze. Seriously, no more.

◆

Focusing on my “episodes” with Blood and Gus may give you the

impression that I was a mischief maker of the highest order. But I was basically a good kid. I... thought I was, anyway. Probably. Most likely.

"Mary, I weeded the field. Also, I put the washing out."

"Thank you, Will."

"Also, I dusted the gods' statues and laid down some flowers."

"Oh, my goodness."

As proof, recently, I'd gotten to the point where I wasn't just helping Mary with the chores, I was beating her to them. Surprisingly, that was much more difficult than it sounded. I couldn't wait around for directions. I had to have a total grasp of her procedure, think about what was needed, and carry it out before she could.

Mary was quick. She told me that the trick to not letting chores get on top of you was to take care of things immediately the moment you noticed them. The cleaning tools and the farm tools were kept within easy reach at all times, and if she noticed a little bit of dust or a weed, she dealt with it then and there, and got it out of the way.

To do things before she could, I had to constantly be on the lookout, and I couldn't let myself get lazy, either. Always thinking about reducing Mary's workload as I went about my business taught me more, in a way, than even the lessons being given to me by Blood and Gus. At least in terms of how it impacted my regular life, it was far more important than strengthening my muscles.

If I'd at least done some housework in my previous life, I could have been *slightly* less of a burden on my family. Now that I was living in this world, I never wanted to make the same mistakes again.

"Thank you very much, Will. Well, now I have some time on my hands. I know, why don't I cut your hair today?"

“Ah, good idea.”

My hair had grown quite long without me really noticing it. When was the last time Mary cut it for me?

She was good at haircutting. Gus, incidentally, never once offered, and the one time I asked Blood to do it could be summed up with the word “appalling.”

“Okay, ready. Thanks, Mary.”

My voice had finally stopped changing recently. I’d grown much taller, and my shoulders had gotten broader, too. I’d overtaken both Mary and Gus in height, and although I still couldn’t stand shoulder to shoulder with Blood, the difference in our physiques had narrowed quite a bit. I could practice unarmed combat with him now.

It was a refreshingly cool autumn morning. Mary chopped away at my hair, showing no hesitation with the well-sharpened scissors.

“I can see your Adam’s apple sticking out now. You might start growing a beard soon.”

“Yeah. Maybe I’ll get Blood to teach me how to use a razor. I wonder if he remembers.”

Mary let out a little laugh. “I wonder. I expect he hasn’t used one for a long time.”

Electric razors were so common in my previous world. I wondered how many young people had ever shaved their beards with a straight razor. I couldn’t do it either, of course. I’d have to learn.

Then again, cutting yourself with a razor looked painful. If the customs of the outside world would allow it, maybe it wouldn’t be so bad to let it grow…

“Come to think of it, what did Blood’s face look like?”

Gus looked like he always had. Mary was just sapped of moisture, and still had her abundant blonde hair and her gentle eyes, so her, I could at least imagine. Blood was the most difficult.

Mary stopped snipping and looked into the distance wistfully.

"Blood looked quite different from you. I'm sure you can tell from his skeletal structure. His arms and neck were thick, and he had broad shoulders. He had a wild face... an indomitable face, full of confidence. His hair trailed in the wind like a lion's mane. He had sharp, piercing eyes. Perhaps he looked a bit too tough to call good-looking?"

I imagined burly muscles overlaid on Blood's familiar skeleton. I stretched skin over them, and added hair. A piercing stare, wild and brawny, a lion of a man.

"Whoa, I can see him."

"You can, can't you? He was pretty cool," Mary laughed, a little shyly. Maybe they really did have something together.

I couldn't really tell, because neither of them would ever relax their self-restraint as adults in front of me. Even with my previous life's memories, I obviously didn't know much about the subtleties of this kind of thing.

Mary resumed snipping, and once again pieces of my hair started falling to the floor.

Her hands were moving as though this was second nature to her. From time to time, she would peer at me from different angles to check how it was looking.

"All done," she said after a while, and showed me a hand mirror.

A young man with a clean-cut and cheerful countenance looked back at me from inside the mirror. He had slightly messy chestnut-brown hair, and I got an impression of meekness from his deep blue-

green eyes. From just his face he'd look like a pampered rich kid, but with the muscular body, he was more like a young warrior from a good family instead.

Marie chuckled. "I think you're pretty good-looking, don't you?"

"I don't think so. I'd have preferred a face like Blood's." This world seemed to be dangerous, so I thought a strong-looking, intimidating face with presence would probably be more useful. And on a more personal level, I just wanted to be like him. "It's a bit of a shame we don't look much alike."

"Two Bloods might be one too many," Marie said, laughing. "But I think you really are looking a lot more grown—oh, yes."

"Hm?"

"It's going to be time for your adulthood rite soon, remember," she said, as she removed the cloth from my neck and brushed up the hair on the floor. "You need to think hard about your guardian deity, and decide on your oath."

Crap. I'd totally forgotten.

◆

This world had many gods. Major gods, minor gods—all different, and all respected by someone.

Every individual person had their own "guardian deity," the god that person had the most faith in. I was told that until a child became an adult, he was considered to be under the protection of his parents' guardian deities. The adulthood rite was about parting with that protection: determining your own guardian deity, making an oath, and wishing for protection yourself.

And it was held that people should live and die in a manner with which their own guardian deity would be pleased. It sounds restrictive, but it was apparently possible to perform the rite again at a

later time to change your guardian deity, if your attitude or circumstances changed.

Also, it was normal for people to worship other gods than their guardian deity when the situation called for it. For instance, just about everyone would make an offering to Whirl, the god of wind, before setting out on a journey. It didn't seem to be a very strict type of polytheism.

Their perspective on life and death was based around reincarnation.

When a person died, they would be summoned beyond this dimension, to the place of the gods they believed in, where they would be judged on their actions in life. If the god received them favorably, repose would be given in the pleasant fields. If not, penitence would be demanded in the wilderness of suffering. And after a certain period, they would be reborn again. After countless such rebirths, after the soul had been refined to the highest degree, that person would ascend the ladder to godhood. The highest of heroes and saints would surpass the dimension of humans, and become gods.

I found this hard to understand in concrete terms. In the polytheistic worlds of Japan and ancient Rome, truly exceptional individuals were worshipped after their deaths as gods. Was the goal to become something like that?

The temple's hall was magnificent as usual. So much time had passed since I first awoke here on that day. Through the course of growing up and learning about this world, I'd come to know the names of each and every one of the gods depicted in these statues. These were the most famous of the gods, who had existed in this world since long ago.

The imposing man with an air of gravitas, in the prime of life, bearing a sword in the shape of lightning in his right hand, and a set of scales in the other—

This was the god of justice and lightning, Volt. He was the leader of the virtuous gods. God of gods and guardian of humans, he

commanded the blessed rains, as well as the lightning that was his divine judgment. Many put their faith in him, from the ruling classes to the common people. His brother, the evil god Illtreat, had command over tyranny, and the two of them often fought fierce battles.

The woman with the loving smile, who was holding a baby in her arms, and standing in front of a background of rice plants growing out of the earth—

Mater the Earth-Mother. She was the god to whom Mary showed devotion, and governed the gifts of the earth and the raising of children. She was also said to be wife to Volt. Blessings made to her commonly related to farming and child-rearing, and people in rural areas in particular put deep faith in her, along with Volt.

The moustachioed man of short, beefy stature, with roaring flames at his back, hands gripping a hammer and tongs—

This was the god of fire and technology, Blaze. He was also said to be the forefather of the dwarves, and I often saw reliefs of him in the dwarven city underground. In addition to receiving the devotion of craftsmen, he was seemingly also popular with warriors, just as Volt was, for his advocacy of the merits of a fiery temper and ceaseless training. Incidentally, Blood had taken Blaze as his guardian deity.

The young person smiling amiably, holding a glass of wine and a number of gold coins, and surrounded by what seemed to be pictographs representing the blowing wind—

The god of wind and exchange, Whirl. Progenitor of the halflings, a bright and cheery race of little people, Whirl was a trickster with command over commerce, exchange, freedom, good luck, and other such things, and had the devotion of merchants, gamblers, and travelers. Small shrines dedicated to Whirl could often be found at the roadside.

The fine young woman clad in thin cloth, submerged up to her waist in a clear stream, holding a bow in one hand, and reaching out

with her other to what might have been a fairy—

The god of water and greenery, Rhea Silvia. She was a capricious goddess, who was also said to be the foremother of the elves. She ruled over the seas, the rivers, the forests, and all their blessings, and also had domain over hunting and elementals. Hunters, fishermen, lumberjacks—many of her followers had occupations with ties to nature. The view of her as a capricious god may have arisen from her connection with natural disasters. Incidentally, although I had never seen them, elementals and fairies existed in this world, too, and there was a special, specific system of mystical techniques for borrowing their power.

The one-eyed old man who radiated intelligence, standing in front of some kind of inscription, holding a cane and an open book in his hands—

This was the god that Gus had once talked to me about who had created our letters. The god of knowledge, Enlight. He was a god who had many followers among intellectuals. It was said that his single eye perceived what could be seen, while his missing eye perceived what could not. Gus's guardian deity was in fact not Enlight, god of knowledge, but Whirl, god of wind. According to Gus, "It is far better to travel with money than to be surrounded by books in an ivory tower."

These six gods were the ones worshipped in a particularly large number of regions. The legends said that these gods had a Ragnarok-style battle with the evil gods, which ended in mutual defeat, and now both sides were healing their wounds beyond this dimension. However, I'd also been told that from time to time, they would send something called an Echo into this world, like a body split off from their own, to help guide people. These Echoes of the gods, both good and bad, made sporadic appearances in the epics I had been told through story and poetry.

The scale of everything I'd been told was on another level. I was planning to live a normal life. I doubted that I'd ever have anything

to do with any of that stuff. As these thoughts went through my mind, I took a look at the sculpture with the lantern that had once inexplicably fascinated me.

The god of unknown gender, standing in front of no background, with a long-handled lantern in their hand. The child of the god of lightning, Volt, and the Earth-Mother, Mater. The god of the flame, whose domain was the endless cycle of transmigration. Gracefeel.

Gracefeel was a god resembling the Grim Reaper, with control over souls and reincarnation. They were said to appear before the souls of the dead, and show them the way with their lantern, guiding them to the fields of the gods, and to the next life. Little had been told about Gracefeel. Their gender was unknown, their appearance undescribed. They were extremely reticent, even for a god. They rarely offered revelations, and the unique arts they bestowed through benediction were scarcely useful.

A priest of Mater the Earth-Mother, for example, could use benediction to make the land fertile, to see a baby delivered safely for mother and child, or to give health to growing children. The god of lightning, Volt, offered benediction to judge the truthfulness of the target's words. High-level priests could pray for rain to fall on land that was suffering a drought.

Gracefeel's benediction, on the other hand, was reasonably lacking in practical use, and included things like granting repose and guidance to the souls of the dead.

In this world, the gods were able to exert actual influence on reality. I had personally grown up eating porridge and bread that had actually been made through benediction, so I wasn't about to doubt it. If one day benediction suddenly awoke within you, that would be a life-changing event. You would suddenly be able to heal wounds and perform all manner of other miraculous feats, and would become the talk of everyone around you. It would be like winning the lottery. Because of that, many people factored practical considerations, such as the benediction they would receive, into their choice of guardian

deity. As a result, Gracefeel was not that popular.

It was very natural for people to think that way. If you could only receive a single lottery ticket, of course you'd want it to be the one with the biggest jackpot. The devotion the gods amassed in this way translated directly into their power, and the more power the gods gained, the more people would follow them. This has kind of started sounding like a lecture on wealth inequality, hasn't it?

In any case, that was Gracefeel: a second-string god, whose name would always come after the big six. Maybe the reason Gracefeel fascinated me so much was that I still had my memories from my previous life. I couldn't help but feel a curious bond with them, given that their domain was samsara and the eternal flux of all things.

I looked around the temple. I was due to turn fifteen at this year's winter solstice. I would make an oath to one of these gods, name them as my guardian deity... and then, in spring, I would probably leave this temple. The living had to return to the living. All three of them were thinking it, as if it was obvious.

I looked at my hands in silence. These hands were different now. The discoloration pattern from those burns, traveling up my arms, was still there. There were small cuts and dirt on the palms, from helping out Mary with chores and garden work. Ink stains, from my studying with Gus. Blisters, from my training with Blood. They weren't the hands I'd had when I was young. They weren't the unhealthy hands I'd had when I was the old me. They were hands that had been put to something.

I really had been taught so much. So many different things. Mary told me before that she didn't know what things were like out there, just that it was very likely dangerous. Gus and Blood, too, said nothing about outside society. I still didn't even know why I was here. But there was at least something I could say for sure.

These hands, which had been indelibly shaped by so many teachings, were full of the kindness the three of them had shown me.

No matter how dangerous it was out there, no matter how harsh a place it was for an outsider of unknown origin, the three of them had taught me enough that I'd be able to survive.

One day... I wanted to come back here. If possible, with friends, or a family. And I'd introduce them to Blood, and Mary, and Gus. *This is the house I grew up in,* I could say, *and this is my dad, and my mom, and my grandpa.*

What would the three of them say when they saw me back? Would they be pleased to see my friends and family? What could I bring them as a gift?

My imagination was filled with that simple happiness.

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"Which god would the three of you recommend, if you had to name one?" I'd decided it was worth at least asking the three of them for their thoughts on a guardian deity.

Blood was first to answer. "Unless you've got some actual idea for how you wanna turn out, I'd just make some harmless oath to Volt."

"Oh, that's a good suggestion," Mary agreed. "A wide range of people have faith in Volt, and he has the most social trustworthiness, too."

"Hmm, Indeed." Even Gus was on board. "A wise decision... A rarity for you, Blood."

"Bug off."

Gus gave a single disdainful snort in response.

"Now, now, you two. Stop that."

Blood grumbled, clearly dissatisfied.

Coughing to clear the air, Gus continued. "Whirl is also not a bad

choice for a guardian deity, but a number of Whirl's followers are gamblers or thieves. I would certainly agree that Volt is a step up in the aspect of social trust. He seems the better choice."

The three of them settled very quickly on Volt, god of gods, and ruler of justice and lightning.

"I'm surprised you all agreed so easily."

"You can hardly go wrong with Volt," Gus stated plainly. "That's the simple truth. And it's not as though you can't change it later."

Blood nodded. "It'd be a different story if you had dreams of becoming, I dunno, a craftsman or a scholar, but how can you dream like that when you don't even know what the world's like out there?"

"The best thing is for you to keep your options open," Mary said thoughtfully, "so I would say that Volt is best, followed perhaps by Mater our Earth-Mother."

All this talk about there being "no need to narrow your options at this stage" and "choosing something so you're prepared, no matter what you choose in the future" was making me feel like I was choosing a career path.

Pick a high school with an ordinary curriculum—it can't do you wrong. Like that.

"Okay, I'll keep that in mind. And what kind of thing is good for the oath? In the 'Berkeley Tale of Valor' you told me before, he swore upon Volt's lightning sword to vanquish all evil."

"Yeah…" Blood sounded worried. "That's a legendary epic. Don't go getting all starry-eyed and making an oath like that, you hear me? A strong oath makes it easier to receive protection, but you end up letting yourself in for one hell of a rough fate. Become a hero or die, basically."

"I'm sure the gods find idiots like that much more willing to get

themselves into trouble," Gus said.

So there were beliefs like that connected to these oaths as well. It remained to be seen how much truth there was in the stuff about "rough fates," but I had no intention of making such a difficult oath anyway. I wasn't going to puff up my own importance and think I was special just because I had memories from a previous life, and I had no aspirations of becoming a "hero."

"Yes, a normal person's oath would be something like..." Mary pondered for a moment. "'I swear to live my life doing as little evil as possible,' perhaps."

Gus listed off a few more. "'I will show consideration for my neighbor,' 'I will speak no lies,' 'I will treasure my family'... and such."

Treasure my family... that one sounded nice. Summing up the examples I had heard so far, I said, "So basically, I just need to swear something like 'I will live a proper life and not do anything bad'?"

"Roughly, yes," Gus said. "That being said, sometimes one makes an oath that is suited to the personality of his individual god."

"Umm, like?"

"Uhh, so what I did was," Blood said, "I swore to Blaze to train every day and get stronger. Blaze values discipline and a honed craft."

"My vow to Mater was a little more abstract," Mary followed up. "I swore to live true to her will."

Yes, that suited the two of them perfectly.

"As for me," Gus said, "all this about guardian deities and oaths and such looked like a hassle. I chose Whirl because it seemed the most relaxed option, and I swore to do what I wanted and have fun with life."

Old Gus was definitely rock 'n' roll.

That about wrapped up the discussion. Mary went to the lake to do the washing, and Blood to the forest for firewood. Autumn was already ending. Not to moralize like an old fable, but preparing for winter was important.

As for me, I was taking a lesson with Gus. I practiced double casting over and over, raising my proficiency. Gus's lessons had now become very hands-on.

"Listen, now, this is important. When attempting to use magic in a situation where your opponent can attack you before the count of five, never waste time thinking. Cast a spell by reflex, something you have trained your body to memorize in advance. You'll find that most of the world's sorcerers are overly theoretical. They always think first. A good number of them are incapable of what I'm telling you."

Gus told me there were countless people who had died this way, shot or cut down while vacillating over what to use. Some even destroyed themselves by deciding to use a Word they weren't familiar with and screwing it up.

That said, it wasn't surprising. The majority of sorcerers were city scholars or handymen. People like me and Gus, who studied magic while envisaging how it would be used in battle, were by far the minority.

"Intelligent strategy is for when you have time to consider it. In a sudden encounter, don't waste time thinking up terrible plans. Press the enemy hard with magic you're familiar with. Complex chains of magic risk total failure if a single link breaks. The simpler the spell, the more resilient."

Gus's thoughts on battle tactics were very similar to Blood's teachings. Maybe this was just what happened when your skills were shaped by actual battles.

"And Will, you will particularly benefit from identifying when it's appropriate to rely on the Words and when it is not. Because you have the option of fighting with the techniques Blood drilled into

you."

I didn't know if it was the presence of mana, or if this world was just made that way, but you could achieve greater results with training in this world than you ever could in my previous one. The physical abilities of a proper warrior in top form were a little bit monstrous.

I mean, take Blood. When he wasn't running in a lower gear for the sake of my training, he could bend with ease the thick steel poles I used for swinging practice, and he could run with the speed and acuity of a swallow in flight. It was a bit scary to think that my own physical abilities were beginning to follow suit. A little bit further and I'd be superhuman.

Magic, on the other hand, carried the risk of self-destruction if you made a mistake in writing or pronunciation. Because of this, the area within about ten meters of the opponent was inescapably the exclusive domain of the warrior.

Gus, however, did know several "bad-mannered, underhanded tricks" for such a situation. I wondered just how many people this guy had taken down from within warrior range.

"Of course, the best outcome is for there not to be a fight in the first place, but if things do get heated, judge correctly."

I nodded.

"Oh, something else," Gus said. "I've been dabbling in astronomy the last few years, and I found out when we can expect the next winter solstice."

My eyes opened wide upon hearing that. Had he been looking into that especially for my fifteenth?

"Say... Will. I have a request."

"A request?"

“Mm,” he nodded. “Blood will probably ask you for a one-on-one battle, to be held on the day before the winter solstice, or thereabouts. An all-out battle, with nothing held back, and Mary standing by to offer healing and regeneration through benediction.”

His words didn’t surprise me. I’d been thinking for a while that Blood was likely to suggest something like that. And I was ready to take him up on it.

“Will…” Gus’s expression was heavy. “Could you… lose that battle, in a way that Blood won’t find out?” The words he forced out of his mouth were full of anguish.

“Why?”

The time I was almost killed by Gus came to mind. Back then, too, there was some unknown thought behind Gus’s actions. Without ever telling me, he had ruminated over some circumstances I didn’t know, and come to a conclusion that led to him trying to kill me. And then, for some reason, he stopped.

“Why do this?”

“It’s important.”

“No.” Not that.

“Not me, *you!* Why do you keep leaving me out of the loop?!” Without even realizing it, I was yelling at him in anger.

“I know you’re not an idiot! I know you wouldn’t trample over someone’s feelings without a reason!” I tried to grab him by the collar, but my hands swiped the air.

I glared up at him as he floated above me. “I’m capable of doing what you ask if you’d actually explain things to me! I’d lose on purpose for you! I’d offer my life for you, like I did back then! So why won’t you ever tell me anything?! Am I that untrustworthy to you?! Am I that insignificant to you?!” The words I’d been keeping bottled

inside my heart poured out as if a dam had burst.

Gus still had a pained look on his face, and it didn't change as he spoke. "Sorry, Will… I can't. Sorry."

I lowered my head and clenched my fists. I had to wrench the next words out of me.

"I see." So that was how it was.

"Then… Then don't expect me to help you." I verbally pushed him away. I couldn't lose such an important fight on purpose without even knowing why. "What you just said… I'll pretend I didn't hear it."

This was going to be my last chance to challenge Blood at his full potential, without any restrictions getting in the way. As a warrior myself, I wanted to give it everything I had, and I was sure that Blood was thinking the same thing. To lose that on purpose, without even knowing why… It was just impossible.

But I wouldn't tell on him to anyone. I didn't hear anything. Simple as that.

That was my final word, and neither Gus nor I said anything more.

A few days later, Blood informed me about my final exam.


Chapter Three

A gust of icy wind rushed across the temple hill, adding an unpleasant bite to the brisk winter air. The ruined houses by the lake stood stock-still, doing their best to endure the cold air rushing through. Thin clouds covered the sky, not letting much sunlight through, even though it was noon. Even when I looked up at the sky, I felt no warmth from it.

Months had passed, and the day of my showdown with Blood was finally here. Tomorrow, I would become an adult. And in spring, I would probably leave this temple, and travel on my own.

I did some thorough stretches and practice swings with my training sword, which weighed twice as much as my usual weapon. Diagonal slash down the shoulder. Across. Close in and thrust. The sound of the blade tip slicing the air echoed.

I heard Gus's words in the back of my mind. I put extra effort into focusing and erased them. My body started warming up, and gradually transitioned to a state where I could unleash my full potential.

"Okay." After I finished my warm-up, I set my practice sword aside, and checked my equipment.

I had my longsword and a circular shield: a wooden board in a metal frame, covered with leather. I had a dagger for use in close combat on my belt. I'd be wearing soft leather armor on top of thick under armor, and for the vulnerable areas of my body, I had metal: a throat plate, a breastplate, gauntlets, and greaves. And to finish up, I had a simple curved helmet. That was the complete list of equipment I'd be using today. I always ended up looking like a heavily armored knight after putting all of this on.

"Will, let me help you with that," Mary said. This kind of heavy equipment was an incredible pain to equip and check on your own. Mary tied up the strings and fastened the clasps on the armor with practiced hands.

Today would probably be the last time I wore this much armor. In spring, I'd be going on my travels. I couldn't walk around towns and mountains constantly wearing a full set of armor like a video game character. And since I had no idea how long I was going to be on the road, being well-prepared and well-supplied was going to be a higher priority than wearing too much armor.

But none of that mattered today. I was going to be facing Blood at his most serious. I had Mary's benediction, but it wouldn't be any help if one of Blood's blows killed me instantly.

If I wanted the kind of protection that would save me from immediate death even if Blood hit me dead-on with his most powerful blow, I'd need to search out the most masterfully crafted dwarven items from the city, and face him with an absolutely flawless defense. But this was a contest. A test of skills. Not a fight to the death.

"Hey, Will. You ready?" Blood asked. As a handicap to help me, he wasn't wearing any armor.

He had a sword belt wrapped around his waist, to which was attached a single-handed sword in a black scabbard. But that weapon wasn't going to be the star of the show. In his hands, he was holding a long, obnoxiously long, two-handed broadsword. That was Blood's proper weapon.

I scanned the area. Just the hill, dry grass, and Mary and Blood. There was no sign of Gus.

"Anytime," I said. "Let's do this." I shook my head sharply a few times to remove Gus from my thoughts. I told myself to focus. I had to keep my mind on the battle.

"Okay. Let's go over it one last time before we start. No magic. Nothing instantly fatal. Other than that, it's anything goes. If something happens, Mary will deal with it. Winner's decided on the call of 'Yield' or when one of us is physically unable to continue battle."

As he casually ran through the explanation, Blood stepped back, and held his broadsword at the ready. I'd been told that when Mary got serious, she could repair a limb even if it was crushed or cut off, so these conditions were absolutely merciless.

"Be sure you don't die," Blood warned. His low voice sent shivers through me. And so my final exam began.

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It was like a storm. The immense weight of the thick steel blade came at me from every direction at unfathomable speed.

I knew it was useless to attempt to block it. Even a single direct hit would break my sword in half and smash my shield to pieces. And I didn't want to imagine what would happen if I attempted to block it with any of my armor. Wherever it hit, I was sure it would lead to me being permanently sprawled on the ground in a matter of seconds. I desperately tried to avoid taking more than a glancing blow, bashing the side of the broadsword as it came at me, diverting it away from me with my shield, dodging, circling around, trying to hold out.

I'd sort of seen it coming, but all this I was wearing, all my pieces of armor, really were *only* there so I didn't die on the spot! The strength and technique of the undead matched what they'd been in life, and Blood had both to spare. He was demonstrating monumental strength as well as the technique necessary to transfer it into his weapon's blows.

My previous world's knowledge said that a Japanese sword wouldn't let you cut through a samurai in full armor, and you couldn't cut through a Western suit of armor with a Western sword, either. If something like that was possible, all those elaborate styles of Japanese armor would never have developed.

But these attacks of Blood's—I grunted as I narrowly avoided another—were different. He made sure to pack everything he had into the swings threatening to cut me down: his overwhelming physical size, the centrifugal force of his staggeringly long favorite weapon,

and the power originating from the disciplined muscles he'd had in life. Even if he couldn't cut right through me, the force alone would definitely knock me down.

Get ripped, and you can solve pretty much everything by force. It was the perfect embodiment of what Blood had always told me.

I made a desperate-sounding noise halfway between a sharp breath and a grunt as I quickly stepped back. My longsword had pretty good reach, but the reach of his broadsword was greater still.

He had total control of this fight right now, swinging at me again and again from outside my range. And being undead, Blood never got tired, so outlasting him would be impossible. This *sucked.* It wasn't as if I hadn't prepared any strategies to deal with his way of fighting, but if things continued like this, I couldn't see myself getting a chance to use any of them.

I cursed at Blood in my mind. *Do you really need the win this badly?! Act like an adult!*

I opened up a big distance between us and invited the attack. As he came at me, I pulled the dagger from my belt and threw it at him in one swift motion.

"Aha," Blood said. He held his broadsword flat, like a shield, to deflect the incoming dagger. The dagger clashed off the sword, but I was flying at Blood after it, almost on top of him—

"Whoa!" I slammed on my emergency brakes and leaped backward. I had no other choice.

Blood had held onto the end of the sword's hilt with one hand, and with the other, he had grabbed the blunted part at the base of the blade, and swept the sword at my shins like it was a polearm.

He chuckled. "Thought you just had to get close?" His will-o'-the-wisps swayed slowly in his sockets. I felt as if a grin had crept across his skull.

Now that I thought about it, I had a faint memory of reading that two-handed broadswords and Japanese nodachi could be used in that kind of way. “It’s not gonna be that easy, I guess… ugh, this is a nightmare.”

Now that I knew that he could hold it with his hands apart and use it like a polearm, that meant that not just shin-sweeps but also short, rapid thrusts were a possibility. If I got too carelessly close, I risked him using techniques one might use with a staff against me.

It wasn’t simply power. Blood had absolutely mastered the handling of this long, massive weapon. Despite the immense weight of this destructive weapon, his incredible muscular strength was allowing him to keep his distance and chain together swing after swing at breathtaking pace. He was rapid, skillful, and precise. If I got close to him, he would change his grip and handle me at close range. In short, he was desperately strong, and equally so in all ways.

Power, technique, and weaponry—he hadn’t become reliant on any one of these three at the expense of the other two. He had virtually perfected all three. He had no weakness I could take advantage of. No wonder he was called the War Ogre. I really felt like that was what I was facing.

I’d just have to gamble. I steeled myself.

“Oh?” As if he could tell what I was thinking, Blood held his broadsword above his head, ready for a downward strike. His stance was a clear and confident statement that he was going to crush me no matter what I tried.

If I blocked it with my sword, my sword would break. If I blocked it with my shield, my shield would break. If I blocked it with my armor, my armor would break.

I needed something better than half-hearted little tricks, or he’d just change grip and fend me off. How could I survive that strike, and get him within range of my sword? There was only one answer.

Screaming a war cry to fire myself up, I charged in. His response: a switch from the overhead stance to one with the sword held vertically near his shoulder—and into a horizontal slash at my stomach! It was a strike like the full swing of a baseball bat.

A downward swing risked the enemy using their shield to throw the blow off course. A horizontal slash to the neck allowed the enemy to duck, and a slash to the knees enabled them to possibly jump over it. All of these options would leave Blood open to being charged. But the horizontal slash to the stomach left me with only two options: jump back or block.

Leaping backward would save me but put me back to square one. Blocking would mean I'd be crushed by Blood's sheer physical strength. This move was a logical choice that fit Blood perfectly. Which was why I could see it coming.

If I blocked it with my shield, my shield would break. If I blocked it with my armor, my armor would break. So, as Blood made a short sound of surprise, I *slid my shield down the blade to slow the strike, and blocked the rest with my armor*.

The broadsword exploded into my shield with enough force to crush it entirely out of shape, and then made a second impact on my breastplate. I groaned as it connected. Whether or not I could endure this was a gamble.

But it was a gamble I won. Roaring again, while Blood was shocked, I charged forward. Crouching low, I bashed him up and away from me with my shield's remains. His feet left the ground.

I knew that a mysterious force was at work in the undead. Their power and ability to stand firm were preserved the same as they were in life. That was why Blood could swing about his broadsword, and why he could stand firm without being swayed by the broadsword's huge mass.

But what about his weight? If you simply tried to lift Blood into the air, would he be as heavy as he was in life? No. I had proven that with the vraskus. Becoming a skeleton reduced your weight. That had to be a clue to how I could defeat Blood, who was exceptional as a warrior.

The weight of all a human's bones, including spinal fluid, is less than ten percent of their total body weight. Even if Blood had been a huge man weighing well over a hundred kilos before he died, now, he could only weigh around ten at the most. Even including the weight of his weapons, he couldn't weigh more than fifty. I roared louder than ever before. As Blood lost his balance, I thrust my longsword into him with all my strength. I was aiming for his spine. All I needed was one hit—

"Will." A gently spoken word reached my ear.

An instant later, my longsword was caught and trapped between his ribs.

"Wh—"

As soon as Blood, holding his massive broadsword, had fully caught my longsword's blade between his ribs, he twisted his body and pulled it away from me. It was the rib-cage equivalent of catching an incoming blade with your hands, only possible because Blood was a skeleton.

Taken by surprise, I didn't manage to let go of my longsword's hilt in time, and before I realized it, my arm was being twisted with the full mass of the broadsword, and I was pulled to the ground, slamming against it. The shock of the impact knocked the wind out of me.

"You fought pretty good." I tried to get up as fast as I could, but a blade was already resting right against my neck.

It was Blood's spare single-handed sword, the one that had been

hanging from his belt. The blade was matte black, and a crimson design ran vividly along its length. Was this a magic sword? I almost felt like calling it a demon sword. Though it wasn't really the time for it, I admired the sword's beauty, in spite of its sinister look.

"I yield," I said quietly, declaring my surrender.

Gus obviously had a number of different thoughts going through his head, but I didn't even get to the stage of deliberately losing or not. Even after putting together a plan, even after giving everything I had... it pained me to admit it, but in a plain and simple test of sword skills, I just couldn't beat Blood.

"Good job," Blood said. "Damn, that was rough. Not having muscles is a real drawback." The match settled, Blood sheathed his sword.

As usual, I didn't know how to start responding to that comment, but I got what he meant. Just as I was about to say something, a bone-chilling voice filled the air. "Blood?"

"Ack! Mary..."

"'Ack?' That's not a very nice way to respond to me."

Mary had both her hands on her hips and was glaring at Blood, her expression clearly indicating how angry she was. Being a mummy, Mary didn't have any eyeballs. It made her look extra scary.

"I told you not to use that move anymore, didn't I?"

That move? Anymore?

"U-Uh... what was this again?"

"Don't you play dumb with me! That move where you catch your opponent's weapon in your rib cage!"

"Yeah, but... it's not like I have organs anymore."

"*What?!*" I shouted, incredulous. "Blood, you did that while you were *alive?!*"

"Yes, he did!" Mary was inconsolably angry. "Can you believe this man?!"

I shook my head. He was truly unbelievable.

I'd been thinking that move was only something an undead being could perform, but I suddenly remembered that the undead never advanced. With very few exceptions, all the attacks and so on that they could use conformed to what they knew in their previous life. In other words, he wouldn't have been able to pull off an insane stunt like that unless he had experience with it from before he died.

"He was facing a demon who had a rapier with the Word *Penetratus* inscribed on it."

"Yeah, he was an agile little pest, and good with his weapon. He slipped right by me and looked like he was going for Mary, so naturally I—"

"*Naturally?!*"

Naturally, he allowed himself to get stabbed in the torso, caught the demon's weapon in his ribs, twisted him to the floor and lopped his head off? No person in their right mind could call that a natural course of action. Only the War Ogre could do something like that.

"H-He's lucky he survived…"

"He would have been dead without my benediction!"

"Yeah, and I trusted you! That's why I did it!"

Wow, the strategies a team can use. And he did it in the first place to protect Mary.

"Excuse me! I thought you had died on the spot! I was actually

worried! Now did I or didn't I ask you never to do it again?!" It was rare to see Mary snap at anyone like this. I understood where Blood was coming from, but I could understand Mary's feelings, too.

Come on, Blood. Of course she was going to be angry.

I put on a smile and chuckled dryly. There was no better way to respond to this situation. From there, I watched Blood get chewed out for a while. I may not have had much experience with relationships, but I wasn't stupid. There was a saying about grabbing a dog by the ears, after all.

Blood loudly pretended to clear his throat. "Uhh, anyway. Will, even though you couldn't beat me, you'll have no troubles if you're this good. Even though you couldn't beat me. Even though you couldn't beat me!"

"Stop saying that! You're so annoying!"

Gods dammit! How the hell was I supposed to predict that twisted maneuver?! I put together a proper strategy in advance—how to deal with the huge power of his broadsword, how to exploit his low weight, all that stuff—and I nailed it all, just to have it turned around on me at the last second!

Blood laughed loudly. "Wanna tell me how you're feeling right now?"

"Gaaahhhh! I'm gonna face you head-on and *destroy* you next time!"

And then I'll say, "Well? Well? How are you feeling right now?" Right to your stupid face!

He was still laughing. "That's the spirit, that's the spirit, Willie, my boy…"

"All right, that's enough!" Mary said. She slapped him upside the head.

"Ow!"

Yeah, take that. Serves you right!

"Both of you! Please, will you be more serious?!" She got angry at me, too. "Go on! On with it!"

"All right, all right, I hear you..." Blood said grudgingly. "So, uh, yeah. If I had some killer move or secret tech to pass down, I coulda taught it to you right about now."

"You don't?"

"Nope," he said plainly, and shrugged. "You and me have different ways of fighting. I'm not trying to turn you into a copy of me. So the moves that are useful to me ain't gonna be the ones useful for you. And anyway, like I said before, moves are situational. You can't bank on just one." He spoke confidently and calmly. I could feel the air of a battle-forged warrior about him.

"What matters is the basics. Remember all the stuff I've taught you, and be ready to use it any time." He bumped his fist against my breastplate and held it there. Mary smiled as she watched us. "Me and Mary... We've taught you everything important you need to know."

His skeletal fist had no warmth. But I was sure I could feel something warm emanating from it, filling up my chest.

So I gathered a little bit of courage and replied, with pride and a smile on my face. "Thanks, Dad. Thanks, Mom!"

Blood laughed loudly. "'Dad'? Never really thought about it. I guess I am."

"Yes, I believe you are," Mary said. Her giggle was quiet and ladylike.

I started to feel kind of embarrassed, and unconsciously scratched the side of my face with my finger. The three of us laughed together

for a short while.

I felt a sense of belonging. The thought that I'd have to leave them in spring was incredibly hard to come to terms with.

"Okay, what about this," Blood said, after our laughter had settled. "I can't teach you any ultimate moves, but, uh, what about something to mark your independence?"

I looked at him, perplexed.

"I'm giving you this."

He undid his sword belt, and presented me with the magic sword he'd used to settle our match: that sinister, bewitching, matte black single-handed sword. "This is the strongest demonblade I have in my possession."

The strongest? Of all the ones he owned? But... I mean...

"I didn't even win..."

"I said it's to mark your independence. Go on, pull it out." He pushed it into my hands, belt and all.

I hesitantly wrapped the belt around me, and with some level of trepidation, drew the single-handed broadsword from its scabbard. It was a matte black and double-edged. The weight was distributed toward the end of the blade, which was a little thicker and wider than the rest of it. I thought it would probably cut well. The decorative elements of the sword gave it a kind of forbidding impression, and the crimson pattern running down the blade had a beguiling beauty to it.

"Its name is Overeater. It's one of the very best demonblades. It'll cut down whatever you swing it at, even the Echoes of the gods, so long as you can strike true. The Words inscribed on it are very difficult to figure out, but I can sum up the effect in one sentence," Blood spoke, matter-of-factly. "As you cut down living beings with this sword, it recovers your life force. The more you cut, the more you

recover."

Huh? "Wait, what? Did I mishear that?"

"I'll say it again. As you cut down living beings with this sword, it recovers your life force. The more you cut, the more you recover. You didn't mishear. If you're in a melee, you can just let your mind wander and swing this thing around aimlessly. You'll still be the last man standing."

Realizing the implications of this, I went pale.

"You're smart. I'm sure you already get it, but... I don't want you pulling out this thing unless you have to. Don't lean on it," Blood continued, in the same dispassionate tone.

"It'll make you feel strong, but this ain't the type of sword that's meant to fortify the wielder's spirit. If you lean on it, sooner or later you're gonna become dependent on it. You'll get cavalier about your sword skills, and they'll become a shadow of what they are right now. It'll go right to your head, and sooner or later you'll fight someone who's just plain better, or someone will poison you, or you'll get surrounded by archers at a distance, and back you'll go for another spin 'round fate's eternal wheel. That's what makes this a true demonblade.

"As for me, I'm undead. I've got no life force in the first place, so this thing does jack all for me. It's just dead weight. So I'm giving it to you. Despite all the stuff I've said, I'm sure you'll be fine with it. You can tell what it's useful for."

Mary nodded in agreement. Both of them had faith in me and believed I could handle this terrifying thing. My old memories flashed through my mind, and my heart ached a little. Was I really as great a person as they believed I was?

"Now, then. When a warrior hands down his demonblade, custom dictates he tells its story! And I'm not gonna be the guy who breaks an ancient tradition. So let's talk about this sword!" Blood's voice

brightened, as if to erase the gloomy atmosphere that had briefly cast shadows over us. “And, of course, the history that surrounds it. Our history. Your history. The history you’ve been longing to hear.”

I couldn’t believe I was finally going to find out. It had been on my mind for so long.

“Blood…” I said, at a loss for words.

Blood looked at Mary. She nodded, smiling. “You’re your own man now, Will,” she said.

“I promised you I’d tell you when you got bigger,” Blood went on. “And you’re more than big enough now, in body and heart. It’s gonna take a while, but I’ll tell you everything. This is the story of the king among kings of the demons who tried to conquer this continent: the High King of the Eternals. It’s the story of the deaths of many heroes. It’s the story of our defeat. It’s the story of how we died—”

A rush of icy-cold wind blew past us through the graveyard at the base of the hill.

“—and it’s the reason why you grew up here.”

◆

Though numerous titles existed to refer to that king of demons, there was no one who knew his true name. He was called the Undying Bladefiend, the King Among Kings. The Purest Evil, the Inexhaustible Darkness, the Rider of Warstorms, the Cackler…

The High King of the Eternals.

Two hundred years ago, the continent of Southmark, which had been enjoying long-standing peace, was invaded by a demon king who went by that title, and who commanded an army of innumerable demons.

“It was global pandemonium stirred up by the demon kings of the

Abyss," Mary said. "They had designs upon this plane, and they had been biding their time, awaiting their chance."

"High-ranked demons you really don't wanna see often. Kings, Generals, all those guys—they all came crawling out of the woodwork."

The demon kings had conspired together to launch one hell of a riot. To give an idea of the sense of scale, the vraskus, who I had defeated before, was classified as a Commander. General was the next rank up, and King was the rank above that.

Based on my experience with the vraskus, I thought I could possibly handle one General surrounded by Soldiers, if I were prepared to accept significant risk. Against a King, though, I probably stood no chance, not without making some completely unrealistic assumptions like fighting one-on-one.

If those kinds of demons had poured out like an army of ants, well, it wasn't hard to understand just how terrible that would be. Society wasn't entirely made up of people like me who'd undergone combat training. And dispatching a group of Soldiers took time and physical energy, even if you did have that experience.

"On top of that," Blood continued, "those Generals and Kings that spilled out into our world conducted a number of grand rituals to their god, the god of dimensions. They offered that god huge amounts of flesh and blood. You probably learned geography from Gus, but, uh… my advice is, don't go thinking it's still the same today. Wouldn't surprise me if there were massive holes blasted in the land and now it's sea, or if the sea dried up and now it's land."

"As if they'd been waiting for all of this to begin," Mary said, "the minions of the god of tyranny, Illtreat, and the god of undeath, Stagnate, also became active all over the world. The good gods expended a lot of energy to oppose them. There were many such battles, which raged fiercely enough to change the map forever. Information became quite confused and chaotic. The different regions

completely lost contact with one another."

I found it a little difficult to imagine chaos on that scale. Anyway, basically, the world became a confusing mess.

"So… thanks to that, we're pretty much clueless about what the other continents were like back then," Blood said. "The only stuff we know is about the High King, who was the main one going berserk in Southmark."

"He had some pretty worrying nicknames," I said.

"Yeah. Don't get me started. That guy was so screwed in the head, I wanna add a few more. He didn't look like much—just a brat with cruel-looking eyes. But…"

But?

"First off, when his blood was spilled, it'd turn into Soldier demons. When his flesh was sliced off, it'd turn into Commander demons. He could keep on making them forever."

"Again, are my ears playing tricks on me?"

"I could say it all again if you want."

"Hax…"

"Hax?"

"I mean… he's a cheater!" He could just keep multiplying his forces infinitely? What kind of a bad joke was that?!

"Nothing but blades could hurt him, either. Blast him with magic or shoot him with arrows, he wouldn't take so much as a scratch. And not only *that*," Blood sighed, "but his favorite sword was Overeater here."

I blinked.

“You get the point. He was insane. He was constantly cackling as he cut down his enemies and got cut himself, multiplying his army as he did.”

“I’m speechless.” What a freaking cheater.

Mary took over. “The reason that he came to be called the High King, meaning the King Among Kings, was because of his performance in battle, which was outstanding even among the King-ranked demons. It was far above and beyond the norm.”

Her voice dropped to a mumble. “Many cities were consumed by the demon hordes. This was one of them. It was an important hub for lake transportation, but even with the combined determination of the humans and the dwarves to protect it, it was barely a few days before it fell.”

She gazed over the ruined city with distant eyes. “And it was this city where the High King remained, producing demons. They took control of all of the nearby water transportation. Vessels full of Soldier and Commander demons used the water routes to invade settlements in various places. It was day after day, night after night of bloodshed and arson. Because there were so many refugees, the cities which were still safe had to deal with internal struggles. Sometimes they couldn’t take them all, and had to turn people away. There were riots. The rioters were slaughtered in droves…”

I felt sick just listening to it.

“No one could kill him. The collapse of Southmark was thought inevitable. And not only that, but the High King’s reach would easily extend across the strait and intervening sea separating Southmark from the continent of Grassland to the north. Everyone had almost accepted it,” Mary smiled, “when Gus—the Wandering Sage Augustus—declared that now was the time to strike, and put forward his plan to destroy the High King.”

My eyes opened wide. “Now was the time? Wait a second. The High King is surrounded by an infinite horde, he can’t be killed by arrows

or magic, and the only thing that works on him, the sword, causes demons to be born from his spilled flesh and blood. And he has a demonblade that heals him when he counterattacks back."

"Yes."

"Destroy him… How? In the first place, who'd even be capable of killing—hm." I stopped mid-sentence. A light bulb was flickering inside my head. I felt like I almost had something.

I thought it over. A demon army. Arrows and magic don't work, only swords. Blood and flesh become demons. Demonblade. City. Underground city. Blood's battle techniques. Mary's benediction. Gus's strategy…

"Aha." An idea shot through my brain like an electric current. "I've got it."

Yeah. Yeah, this was it. There was a chance this way. He could be killed, if it was done correctly.

"Whaddaya mean, you've *got it?"*

"Have you really figured it out?"

"Yeah. Probably." I touched my hand to Overeater, which was hanging from the sword belt around my waist. In theory, this should work. It should be possible to kill him this way. "Gus probably planned to have an elite team infiltrate the city through the underground."

This city had a complex underground quarter filled with dwarves. There were likely secret passages there, too, though I lacked the talent to find any. If they could get inside through one of those, it was possible that they could slip by the demon forces and strike directly at the center.

"And he'd probably use some locating magic to pinpoint the location of the High King beforehand. That'd probably be really easy

for Gus." I got the sense that Mary and Blood were surprised. It looked like I was right so far. "And then—"

My chin in my hand, I went over the idea that had flashed into my mind one more time. The question was how to kill him. Arrows deflected off him, magic couldn't scratch him. He could be slashed with a sword, but demons would well out from him infinitely, and if you took a single hit from his demonblade, all the wounds inflicted on him would be healed. There was probably only one way to do something about that.

"Steal his demonblade during the fight."

I'd been told that Overeater recovered your own life force when you cut your opponent. Judging by the name, it probably sucked life force from them or something. The point was, the whole problem started because the opponent had that sword.

The enemy could only be damaged by slashing, and that blade let him keep hitting you while recovering his wounds and generating an endless stream of little guys. There was no way to win. But the demonblade, which was one of the premises of this "unwinnable" situation, was just an object like any other, and could be handed over or stolen. It wasn't one of the abilities inherent to the High King. It wasn't something he'd been born with.

"Once you stole his demonblade, the High King's own peculiarities would be his undoing." The more you cut him, the more little guys would spring out ready to heal you. And hadn't Blood told me that in a melee, you could just swing this sword around brainlessly and be the last man standing?

You'd be able to keep slashing at the High King, using the weaklings flowing out of him as a source of healing. The High King, on the other hand, wouldn't be able to recover anymore, having lost the demonblade, which was his healing item.

"If it came down to an endurance contest, the High King should be the one who'd give up first..." I muttered thoughts incessantly. "As for

how to steal it… First, Gus would clear out the guys around him with a large-scale magic spell. The High King can't be hurt by magic, so that's perfect for us."

We'd just need to get him into a one-on-one battle, even temporarily. "Then Blood, you'd go in for the attack. Mary would heal both you and the High King with benediction. That would stop any more demons from appearing." If his flesh and blood would turn into demons, then healing the wounds themselves should stop that. The aim of this first phase wouldn't be to injure him—it would just be to steal his weapon.

"We'd probably need some help stopping the demons coming in at us from the outside. A few dozen… Actually, maybe a hundred or so?" These people, too, would probably be pretty talented elites, but the numbers I imagined surrounding them couldn't be underestimated. Our forces would presumably be gradually whittled down.

"Then you, Blood, you'd use your rib-cage trick, or grapple with him, or cut his fingers or hands off, basically whatever you have to do to get the demonblade from him. This part definitely worked."

"Hey, hold it," Blood said. "How can you be so sure?"

"The fact that you have the demonblade in the first place proves you managed to steal it from him, right?" Silence from Blood. I thought I was right. "And that'd be checkmate."

The High King's abilities were so unfair he was basically cheating, but theoretically, he could be killed this way. There was no way Gus would've overlooked an opportunity like that. He'd have gathered a team of elites together somehow, and pulled through.

"The High King… died, I guess. But there'd still have been hordes of demons left over. Enough to crush our small squad…" And everyone died. Basically, a mutual defeat. What a sad conclusion. But even so, the continent was saved—

"No, Will," Blood interrupted.

What?

"You really are a genius. I'm surer now than ever. But your conclusion," Blood said bitterly, "is wrong." Blood looked disgusted with himself.

"We... *I*... couldn't kill the High King." His words were filled with deep despair and resignation.

◆

"You... couldn't kill him?"

Blood's head was cast down, toward the floor. Mary nodded in answer to my question.

"Will, you imagine things correctly. All your guesses have been astonishingly accurate in describing exactly the strategy Gus decided on. Just as you imagined, Gus clawed back the possibility of killing the High King, making use of every factor visible to him. And in fact, his plan *was* successful," Mary said calmly.

"But..." Her voice sounded distant, as though she was gazing at something without substance far away. "But the High King had more to give beyond the factors visible to Gus. He was a monster beyond even Gus's expectations."

Now I really was lost for words. I didn't even have it in me to call him a cheater again. What *was* this guy?

"The High King tore away his childish appearance, and revealed his true nature, taking the form of a hideous and grotesque warrior. And, um... well..." Mary faltered, as if it was hard for her to say the rest.

Blood finished for her. "When the High King got serious, he was a better swordsman than me." He was looking into the distance. I wondered if he was remembering his fight with the High King.

He spoke again. "Nothing worked. I'd fought big guys like that a

bunch of times before, but this was the first time in my life that I just could do *nothing.*"

It was beyond imagination. Blood was no match for him? What level of skill must this guy have had? What would a person need to amass, and how much, to have a hope of reaching such dizzying heights?

"My demonblade was slicing nothing but air, and he was cutting me apart with some lousy demonblade he pulled out with the Word of Dispatch. Meanwhile, farther out, our allies who were acting as our wall from the demons were getting crushed." He spoke of it with a feigned smile, like it was a cheap nightmare. "I can make excuses till the cows come home, you know? He was the boss of the demons. King Among Kings. His body's abilities were like nothing I'd ever seen. The demonblade I stole was a single-handed sword, handled different to the greatsword I always used. And so on. But you know what? I had enough support. I had Gus's magic, Mary's benediction. The High King was injured enough, too, from his kid form."

His opponent could make excuses just as he could. Battles were often like that in the real world, he told me glumly. "And he wasn't a *lot* better. Just a little. Probably just one step higher, that's all. One step further up, to a height I couldn't reach while I was alive."

It probably cut a terrible wound deep into Blood's heart. I'd never heard him sound this depressed before. He was normally so bright.

"I still think about it. What I was lacking, what I could've done…"

Mary lowered her eyes in silence. It looked like nothing she said would be any comfort.

"But it's too late now. You know it like I do. This is as far as my sword will ever reach."

The undead didn't progress.

No matter how much Blood thought about it, no matter how much

he swung his sword, he would never be able to climb that one last step, where the High King stood above him.

Blood fell silent. After a short while, Mary sensed that he didn't want to talk anymore, and continued where he left off. "When it seemed likely that we were going to lose, Gus and I used all the techniques available to us to place a seal on the High King. It was at least something we could do."

That meant they'd *abandoned the possibility of Blood winning*. I knew well that the three of them deeply trusted one another, and had respect for each other's personalities and skills. This was the moment when they should have been most relying on Blood's full potential to do what he was capable of doing. To go ahead with an action that was as good as telling him, "You're incapable?" How must he have felt?

"Fortunately... it succeeded. A miracle from Mater split the ground, and with the High King bound by Gus's arts, he was swallowed into a giant chasm. We sealed him deep beneath the earth."

That was the end of the High King of the demons, who had conquered the majority of this continent.

"We knew that it was nothing but a play for time. Among the demons, there were a lot of sorcerers proficient in the use of the Words, and powerful priests who served the god of dimensions. The people we had in charge of the outer wall had already been taken down, and it was only a matter of time before the demons closed in on us."

And once the three of them were defeated, what then?

"Then all the demons would gather, and they would have all the time in the world to break the seal on the High King. Our desperate, last-ditch attempt would achieve nothing." Her tone was laced with despair and deep regret. "When it came down to it, at the very end, we weren't able to trust in Blood."

No matter how low the probability, they should have kept believing in the chance that Blood's sword would find its mark, until the last possible second. Mary's voice clearly communicated that.

"And then..."

A frosty wind picked up. We'd been talking for so long that I was chilled to the bone.

"And then, as if to mock us..."

A shiver ran through my body.

"An Echo of the god of undeath, Stagnate, appeared before us."

An Echo. An incarnation of a god...

"The evil gods are not a monolithic entity. They all operate under different philosophies, and will cooperate if it's in their interest to do so... and vice versa."

"The High King probably wasn't great for the god of undeath." Blood seemed ready to talk again. "That guy was too strong. Godly Echo or not, the High King with Overeater in his hand could've cut him down and killed him, cackling as he did it."

The High King would conquer the entire continent of Southmark as Dyrhygma's minion, and his greedy fingers would extend to the next. His army, which would only swell as time went on, would probably accomplish the conquest of a second continent, and maybe the entire world. And the demon, the monster capable of this, was one that even the gods struggled for a way to kill.

"If anything, it was good news for the god of undeath that the High King got sealed. So he came to us with a deal."

"What did he say?"

"He said we were skilled, and asked us to become undead and join

his forces. In return, he'd wipe out the horde of demons all over the city. And then we could watch over the seal as undead for as long as we liked."

"The god of undeath, Stagnate, was once allied with the forces of good. He strayed from that path when he could no longer stand seeing the tragedies of life and death. His desire is to create an eternally stagnated world without tragedy, by turning talented souls of all kinds into the undying. He scouted us out," Mary said, voice positive.

"We got picked on, more like," Blood corrected her, shrugging. "We were basically forced. He told us to choose, but like hell we had a choice. We accepted his 'offer.'"

Mary had told me once that they were "traitors to the forces of good," and that she had betrayed Mater the Earth-Mother, the very god she had faith in. That referred to the contract made at that very moment.

"And so we became undead. I'd had my flesh cut up by the High King, and became a skeleton, nothing but bones. Mary became a mummy, probably 'cause she got roasted by Mater's flames as she became undead. And Gus became a ghost. I guess he had no attachment to his old man body anymore. We all got to keep our intelligence from when we were alive. Top-of-the-line undead, we are," Blood said, not sounding the least bit happy about it. "Then he wiped the city clean. There was no way the lower demons could resist the authority of a god. Their bodies got reshaped, and they all got turned into undead. Not the way they normally go, that's for sure."

Which explained why undead demons were roaming this city even now. It was all linking up. The reasons behind everything I'd seen up until now were becoming clear at last.

"And as for us, we became the protectors of the High King's seal, with these undying bodies."

They explained to me that, for a time, the city was periodically

visited by underlings of the High King attempting to break the seal, but the three of them repelled those demons in every instance. The three of them never tired, never slept, and unless they were completely destroyed, even their wounds would heal on their own. Now that they were perfect immortal beings, who didn't even have to fear sunlight, no one was a match for them.

"And that began our next two hundred years," said Mary. "We buried our allies, who had taken on the High King with us. Gus set up a magical early-warning network covering the city. And then, we simply stayed here, continually protecting the seal."

"Wasn't like we had much else to do. We were bound to this place by contract. We could only go so far from the city, and we couldn't even check what was going on outside using magic. Did all the human habitats of Southmark get destroyed? What happened to Grassland to the north? We were stuck here not knowing jack. A few times, we even said to each other that humanity might've gone extinct. And then one day..."

"One day...?"

"You came, Will. Or, properly speaking, a bunch of demons came, and brought you with them."

Oh, so that was it.

"I get it now." All the information connected in my head. "So, I was a human sacrifice, meant to break the seal on the High King."

That was why a baby was here, in these faraway ruins, miles from human civilization.

I laughed brightly. "No wonder you couldn't tell me! It must have been way too hard to tell me I was originally meant to be a *sacrifice for a demon* when I was just a kid."

The atmosphere around Blood and Mary softened when they saw how I was taking it. "Yes. Blood may be crass, but even he knew to

restrain himself on this topic."

"Oh, crass, am I?" They were back to their normal selves.

"After we dispatched the demons, we had a little bit of a debate with Gus over what to do with you, Will. In the end, we decided to take care of you and raise you."

Maybe the reason Gus treated me brusquely was because of the argument they'd had then.

"And the fact that the demons were able to bring you here means..."

"That somewhere, somewhere pretty close, there's gotta be a place where humans are living."

Babies were weak and frail. Even though demons could use magic, there was still a limit on how far they could have transported me.

"We don't know what things are like out there. The situation could be quite grim..."

"But we figured, okay, so we'll just give you the strength you need to get through a situation like that. I think we did pretty good."

And that brought me right up to the present moment. I finally understood how I'd gotten to where I was. The mysteries were solved, and the past and the present were connected with a single straight thread.

From here on, I was going to be heading to peopled lands that had likely suffered and survived a time of tempestuous upheaval. I'd use the strength the three of them had entrusted me with to embark on my new life. And one day, I decided, I'd return to this city. I would bring my new family and friends with me, and introduce them to Mary, Blood, and Gus.

Maybe we could even rebuild this city again. One day...

"Forget about us, and have fun living with the living, okay, bud?"

"Will, be happy, and don't forget to pray and be good."

Huh?

"I couldn't have wished for a better disciple. Even in today's exam… I mean, content-wise, you beat me hands down. You're a whiz kid and a smart-ass, and I love you, my son. Keep on getting strong." Blood ruffled my hair roughly.

"I was happy that we could be a real family, if only for a short time. Will, my darling boy. Never forget that your mother loves you." Mary held me gently.

"Huh? Wait…" Wait. Why? You guys—

"You're… speaking like we're never going to see each other again…"

Just then, the sky was suddenly covered by thick, dark clouds. The way they moved was unlike any cloud I'd ever seen. The wind began to spiral noisily above the hill.

A laugh echoed through the air. It was a disturbing laugh, obscured by noise, echoed and overlapping itself many times. Something jet-black, like pure darkness, belched out of thin air. That unsettling black smoke, like you might expect to spout from a volcano, started to coalesce into a human form.

It was the form of a young man. He was slender, his proportions unnaturally perfect. His skin was pale as could be, as if no blood ran through it at all, and his eyes were dark and lifeless.

"Satisfied with your farewells, heroes?"

The mere sight of him, the mere sound of his voice, caused me to freeze up like something was holding my soul in an iron grip.

"Yeah."

“Please, go ahead. We’re ready.” Blood and Mary dropped their gazes, neither of them seeming to offer any resistance.

I felt as if my entire body had turned to ice. I couldn’t do a thing. My soul understood that the being in front of me was a being of absolute power that humans were helpless to resist.

“At long last, you two have *lost your attachment.*”

I had no idea what was going on. But I had to move.

“In accordance with our contract…”

I had to move.

“I hereby claim…”

Blood and Mary… I had to…

“…your souls…”

Why couldn’t I move? Move, move! Move! Please… mo—

“…as my own.”

My brain froze. I watched in horror.

“*Vastare!*”



There was a deep boom. A shock wave directed at the pale man sent earth and sand flying.

"Hmph."

That whole area of the hill was ravaged. It briefly rained dirt and sand.

But it hadn't hit him. The man had spontaneously changed location, and was now standing ten meters from his previous spot, that single, dismissive grunt his only comment.

It hadn't been me. I hadn't managed to move. I was still frozen there, trembling.

"Will, take Blood and Mary and get out of here." A person's semi-translucent, spectral back was in front of me. It was a sight I'd seen so many times before.

Crotchety, miserly, offensive... And he nearly killed me once, too.

"Don't worry." Mana swirled in a thick vortex around him. His hands were open and spread wide apart, in preparation to cast heavy magic. He spoke decisively. "I'll take him down."

My beloved grandfather, Gus— the sage Augustus had arrived.

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A nostalgic memory came back to me.

It was a faint memory, from my previous life—childhood, I thought. I was reading a children's story in the library.

I was a quick learner as a child. I read through books one after another, even the ones with difficult vocabulary, meant for people of high school age. My parents must have been pleased with this, as they often took me to the library.

The library was a very big place for me as a child, and covered wall-to-wall in books everywhere I looked. It was a dizzying experience. I searched out all kinds of books from the shelves of the kids' reading corner. I devoured them as quickly as I could get my hands on them.

Among them was my favorite book. It was an old and tattered fantasy novel. It had sorcerers in it. At this point, I could no longer remember what that book had been called. But the old sorcerer with his arms spread wide—him, I remembered, and he was very cool.

"*Ligatur, nodus, obligatio...*" A colossal amount of mana converged and darted at high speed. Words flew at the pale man like shooting stars.

"Ha ha ha! Were you not a wise man? Knowing all, you still resist?"

The man, emitting an unhallowed and unearthly aura, mocked Gus. Then, in the blink of an eye, he crumbled into a black mist.

"*...conciliat, sequitur!"* Gus was alert.

As the thick cloud of mist dispersed to avoid being bound, leaving numerous trails of darkness behind it, the Words spread out in all directions, as though they had been yanked backwards. It looked like nothing special, but Gus had just performed an extremely high-level technique, fluidly appending the appropriate Words to react to his opponent's sudden change. This was very difficult to do in the middle of battle without stumbling.

Even in ordinary language, the impression of a sentence could be completely changed at times by adding one or two words to the end. Like a poem crafted with technical skill, or a novel studded with foreshadowing and plot twists, Words, when chained together, sometimes changed like a blossoming flower.

The man, who had once again regained his shape from the black mist was now surrounded by layer upon layer of cages and chains made of fluctuating mana. It was a strong and multilayered magical

formation of binding and sealing.

"Hmm..."

It looked as though the now-restrained man of mist felt nothing in particular about being bound. Without the slightest loss of composure, he looked at the cage-shaped masses of mana surrounding him, and tiresomely cast a Word at them.

"*Vastare.*"

The Word of Destruction created a vortex of violent devastation even greater than the one Gus had cast. It looked certain to shred the cages to pieces, but by that time, Gus had finished inscribing his Signs.

His right's Word of Guardianship obstructed the vortex. His left's Word of Erasure wiped it out. And by that time, the chain of Words he'd deployed *were themselves inscribing another Word.* The restraining power of the cages was strengthened further.

"...!"

Quadruple casting.

I was standing beside Blood and Mary, still frozen, my eyes bugging out. The two of them were collapsed on the ground, almost entirely drained of strength.

Gus spread open his hands in a way I could have called elegant, and glared fixedly at the pale man, in determination. "*Pallida mors aequo pulsat pede...*"

Upon recognizing the lengthy Word being recited, the man's face twisted for the first time.

"You dare...!"

The man uttered Words in quick succession. The air shuddered. The

surrounding ground cracked and swelled upwards. A barrage of magic was thrown at the restraints, each impact blasting against them with the force of a bomb. But the Words held fast.

This incantation—

"*...pauperum tabernas regumque turres!*"

This incantation, being strengthened by Signs on both sides, was a ritual spell intended to be cast by a team of several people working in tandem. It was one of the ultimate magics, which was virtually impossible to perform on your own.

"*Damnatio memoriae!*"

It was a colorless, invisible pulse of destruction. As it traveled, it tore to shreds the connections between all of Creation's Words, dividing them apart. Matter, phenomena, souls—it rendered them all meaningless, and returned them to mana. The ultimate destructive magic, the Word of Entity Obliteration, gouged through a large part of the hill.

A conspicuous blank space was left where that part of the hill had once been, as if a humongous creature had taken a full bite out of it. Strong winds blew about the hill, as if to fill in the void that had suddenly formed.

No one spoke. Even after perfectly connecting with the Word of Entity Obliteration, Gus hadn't dropped his guard. He remained alert to his surroundings, and carried out checks with a number of Words.

After a while—perhaps he had at last satisfied himself of his opponent's obliteration—Gus relaxed his posture. "Blood, Mary, your souls have not been taken, I hope?"

"Yeah... Still here."

"W-We're okay, somehow."

Gus let out a sigh. “Then do something for Will, would you? I can’t touch him.”

Gus glanced over at me. I’d never seen him look at me so kindly.

“I’m sorry you had to go through that,” he said softly. “You must have been terrified.”

I hadn’t realized until he said it that my body was still stiff with tension. Mary gently held my hand. Blood rubbed my back clumsily.

A small sound escaped my throat. I suddenly realized that I’d hardly been breathing, and even now, my breath was held in suspense. I gasped, and let my lungs have the oxygen they were demanding, my breaths quick and deep.

A cold sweat started to cover my entire body. Next came violent trembling. My eyes brimmed with tears. I was so scared. So scared! So, so scared! I’d never known anything so terrifying.

I’d felt as if I’d gotten reasonably strong. Even if I wasn’t as good a fighter as Blood, as good a sorcerer as Gus, as strong in spirit as Mary, I still felt proud of myself for working hard and for the results I’d achieved. But when that man of black mist stood in front of me, I couldn’t even move. I became absolutely convinced that there was *no way* I could beat him.

“So you were right all along,” Blood said to Gus. “Sorry I kept blowing you off when you brought it up.”

“I was hoping we could last until Will set out,” Mary concurred in a repentant mumble.

“It was what you decided,” Gus shrugged. “I’m not so unreasonable that I’ll criticize the mindset behind your choices.” It was a gentle, considerate voice.

“Besides which,” he continued, “it went surprisingly well, after all, didn’t it?”

“Yeah,” said Blood. “Gotta say, you were cool.”

“Thank you so much,” said Mary. “Honestly. You do so much...”

“No more than you.” Gus exchanged pleasant smiles with the two. It felt as though some kind of rift had been closed between them.

Then, Gus turned to face me. “Will. Oh, Will. What a fine mess you found yourself in. Not to worry, though,” he laughed. His expression was bright, as though he had been freed of a worry that had burdened him for years. “So. I would say we owe you an explanation. Not that it requires much of one.”

“Yeah. Now that this has happened, I guess we can’t keep it buried any longer.”

“I think it would be best to tell him. Ah... Shall we go inside first? Will must be cold. I’ll make some herbal tea.”

“Sounds good,” Blood said with a laugh. He headed for the temple ahead of the rest of us.

Gus shook his head and turned to me as we followed him. “All right. Let’s have a talk around the fireplace. It’s time we stopped our worrying and relaxed.”

After seeing Gus with such an uncharacteristic smile on his face, I started to feel happy as well. The knot of tension untied at last. I thought about sitting in front of the warm fireplace, with a cup of herbal tea warming my hands, listening to them talk. Yeah, that sounded good. Spending time with all my family around me was something I’d enjoyed my whole life.

“Somehow, everything just worked,” Gus said. I turned to grin back at him.

“ou...t...”

The smile froze on my face. An arm made of black mist was

sticking out of Gus's chest. A groan of pain barely escaped his throat. And before I could do anything... Gus's body was effortlessly torn in two, into top and bottom halves.

"Granp—"

"Blood!" Unlike me, standing there blankly, Blood and Mary acted immediately. As quick as Mary could speak, Blood was in front of her as her guard, and Mary was posed to invoke benediction.

"Ghahaha."

In an instant, the two of them were crushed against the ground. A long wordless groan of pain came from Blood. I could hear the sounds of all his bones cracking and crunching to pieces. He was being compressed by the black mist. A fragment of bone flew off with a sharp snap and hit me in the cheek.

From Mary came the sound of air escaping. The black mist had gouged out her windpipe, and both her arms broke like twigs. She couldn't pray to her god anymore.

"Surprising. I didn't expect you to destroy my splinter..."

The black mist had once again taken the form of a person.

A voice obscured by noise. A slender body, its proportions unnaturally perfect. Skin as pale as could be, as if no blood ran through it at all. Dark and lifeless eyes.

"If I hadn't divided my strength and splintered into two beforehand, that would have caused me lasting interference."

The man turned to Gus's top half, which he was still gripping in one of his hands.

"I praise you, Wandering Sage. You are indeed an exceptional Grand Sorcerer."

His body torn away below the chest, Gus's eyes were locked on the man, and they were bloodshot with fury.

The man laughed it off coolly.

"Sta…g…nate!"

Stag…nate. Stagnate. The god of undeath. An Echo!

"Destroying you would be too much of a waste. I will wait until you lose your attachment."

Having said his piece, the Echo of Stagnate tossed Gus's upper half roughly aside.

"As for you…"

His gaze turned to me. My heart jumped into my throat. My legs started shaking. I wanted to look away, but couldn't even do that.

I saw, clearly, his lips slowly creep up at the corners. He walked toward me. I couldn't move.

Mary and Blood might have noticed him coming towards me. Still half-destroyed, they tried to grab onto his feet, but were pressed down even more strongly. Again, I heard the sound of bones breaking all at once, too many to count or even make out.

He was right in front of me now. In that instant, I sensed my own death. But the words he spoke next with a smile on his face were, unmistakably, words of *praise*.

"Well done. You helped immensely. You have my gratitude."

"For… what?" I somehow managed to string some words together with my quivering lips and tangled tongue.

"These heroes you see before you…"

The god of undeath spread his arms as he spoke, as if he was enjoying this very, very much.

"They became the highest-ranked among undead by entering into a contract with me, on the condition that when their attachment to the High King was lost, they would meet with me again, and become my servants fully."

This man, who emanated an unholy aura, was he... saying that... "I..."

"Yes."

The man laughed. At me?

"Thanks to you, the Sage's attachment has waned, and the War Ogre and the Beloved Daughter have lost their attachment to the High King completely."

The words didn't register. I couldn't process them. I—The reason I —

"Thanks to you, these great heroes will at last become mine."

He looked thrilled.

"Thanks to the *good life you led* as their son."

But I—

When I was reborn, I—

I said to myself I—

I was going to live... this time...

Live right, this time...

"Ha ha ha! Too shocked to speak? Understandable."

I couldn't think.

"But my gratitude wasn't a lie..."

His voice came in through my ears.

"And although inexperienced, you are an apprentice to three great heroes..."

I couldn't understand.

"What would you say... about joining my forces and serving me?"

I couldn't comprehend.

"*I will allow you to remain in harmony with these three forever.*"

"—!"

"Hah hah hah. Interested? I assume so... But forcing an immediate answer would be insipid."

A pause.

"I will give you time to consider with your precious family."

He laughed.

"Appropriately, tomorrow is the winter solstice. When that accursed sun is at its weakest..."

His form crumbled into a black mist.

"After dusk, I will hear your answer."

There was a rush of wind. He disappeared.

Standing there like an idiot, I could only watch him go.


Chapter Four

After the god of undeath departed, I started to carry the three of them, unconscious and battered, to a room inside the temple.

They'd been damaged to the point where they could just barely still function as undead. They hadn't been completely destroyed only because the god of undeath intended to gain control over their souls.

All three of them were high-level undead. They could recover from slight wounds in no time at all, but this was different. They'd been injured far too badly. On top of that, the one who had inflicted those wounds was an Echo of Stagnate, who was the source of their immortal powers. There was no way recovering from that would be easy.

It was impossible to hope that they'd be fully healed by the time tomorrow rolled around. Their wounds were regenerating far too slowly. They would probably still be gravely injured.

First, I carried Mary, whose arms were broken and throat gouged out, by draping her body over my shoulder. She hung there, completely limp. She was thin and painfully light.

Next was Gus. I couldn't touch him, of course, since he was a specter. I used a number of Words to transport him. My voice trembled several times.

Blood was completely broken. I carried his bones back one by one, piece by piece, sorting the parts as I went. I went back and forth between the temple and the hill, over and over, clenching my teeth to fight back tears.

This was my fault. I had robbed Blood and Mary of their attachment.

I now finally understood what had been behind Gus's actions, too. Why he had been against bringing me up, why he had tried to cram so much knowledge into me, why he had tried to kill me, and why he had told me to lose on purpose.

Neither Blood nor Mary could abandon me. It wasn't in their natures. But if they raised me, they might lose their attachment. So Gus was dead set against it. He didn't get his way, though, and they brought me up anyway. And I worked hard, because of my previous life's memories, to be a good kid who learned fast. Blood and Mary really took to me.

The reason Gus forced so much cramming onto me must have been to try to break me. He figured that the weight of all the ridiculous tasks he was piling on me would be too much for me, and would stop me from wanting to study. But even then I kept pushing on, and he could tell that Blood and Mary's attachment to the High King was being lost, and their focus was shifting to me instead.

So he decided to just go for it and kill me. The reason he used Create Golem and Stone Blast at that time was to make it look like an accident. After all, there was plenty of fallen rubble lying around in the underground city already.

I didn't think he was horrible for choosing to do that. He had to weigh two things against each other: the possibility that the souls of his two friends would be eternal slaves to an evil god, and the life of a child who had been picked up just ten-odd years before. It wasn't crazy of him to choose the former.

Despite all that, Gus was probably still conflicted. He definitely hadn't *wanted* to kill me. Not only that, but from what I knew of Gus, he would definitely have realized the possibility that Blood and Mary would be so devastated by my death that they'd lose their attachment even faster. In the end, the problem lay with the other two's hearts. Gus himself would have known that it wasn't the kind of issue where you could choose the right answer by logic. That was why he gave me the chance to strike back. He was leaving the outcome in the hands of fate.

How much must he have suffered when I refused to fight? How much must he have agonized over that decision? What was he feeling when he chose to let me live?

He told me to lose on purpose for the same reason. It was because, if I won, Blood would feel that he had achieved everything he set out to do, and it would make him lose his attachment.

Even though Gus expected me to fight against his request, he said nothing to me about the reason for it. He must have been dying to tell me what I was doing to Blood and Mary, that I was on the verge of dooming them both. But he said nothing.

And when things at last turned fatal, Gus had already resolved to fight the god's Echo alone. To protect me, Blood, and Mary, he fought that terrifying being on his own.

I had the feeling that Blood and Mary had made peace with it—that they would lose their attachment if they raised me, that they might meet their end and leave Gus on his own. Their choice to raise me was made in full knowledge of all of that.

They could have chosen to abandon me. They could even have chosen to bring me up any old way, without really caring. But no, they fully embraced raising me. They didn't shirk from it. I could imagine the many arguments they must have had with Gus. Blood, looking awkward, but refusing to budge. Mary, looking apologetic and guilty as she stood up for me.

I'd been living a carefree life, oblivious to everything. Just sitting on my butt, leeching off Gus's internal agony and Blood and Mary's self-sacrifice. I sniffed. What had I been doing? Getting so giddy over how I was going to "live right"... Naïvely believing them completely when they said they'd explain someday. Building up hopes of going to the outside world.

Tears came to my eyes as a vague memory of my prior life resurfaced. The sound of a motor. A handcart trundled by, carrying a white coffin. A cold, mechanical sound accompanied the slow, inexorable closing of the incinerator door.

The deaths of my parents in my past life... I caused them constant trouble. They died before I could give anything back.

Tears flooded down my cheeks. My knees hit the cold floor in front of them all as they lay there unresponsive. A burning feeling of frustration clawed my heart from the inside. I curled up on the floor in pain.

"I'm... sorry." *This time?* This time, my ass. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry..." Again, they were dying because of me. I still caused them trouble and gave nothing back, as hopeless as I ever was. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry... Forgive me... Oh, gods..."

Now I knew. I really was scum. Reborn or not, I was still hopelessly incompetent scum.

This time, my ass. *You're just the same now as before,* I told myself. Unable to do anything when it really matters. Curled up in a dark room, your chest burning with emotion you don't know what to do with. Repeating apologies that won't reach anyone. You've been reborn, and you're still no goddamn different.

◆

"Hey..."

The voice caused me to awaken with a jolt. I remembered curling up, crying, moaning, saying "sorry" again and again... and not much past that. I wasn't even sure whether I'd passed out or fallen asleep.

"Wow, you look like crap," said Blood, who was still broken everywhere. His jaw rattled with laughter.

"Oh... Dear me, you're right." Mary's voice sounded hoarse; her throat was still mostly destroyed.

Gus, who had only his top half, shrugged his shoulders.

"That's not good for you, Will," Mary croaked. "It's the middle of winter. You mustn't sleep on the floor."

"Yes," said Gus. "Go and make yourself some herbal tea or

something. I daresay that you haven't eaten a thing since yesterday."

"Yeah, you can't go doing that. Eat your fill. Everything else can wait."

Everyone was acting just like normal. It was tempting to believe it had all been a dream.

Touched by their warmth, the burning emotions inside my chest scratched and clawed to get out. Something rose up inside me. I was finding it hard to breathe. My eyes blurred.

"I'm sorry..." I involuntarily shifted my gaze to the floor. I couldn't look up at them.

"Will. No," Blood spoke firmly. "This is our fault, not yours, for doing something so stupid in the first place. It caught up with us. That's it."

"We've existed too long, in defiance of the eternal cycle. We have to pay the price."

I still couldn't bring myself to look at them as they spoke.

"So, let's see, Grandpa Gus," Blood said. "You outright ignored the contract, then tried to beat the hell out of him when he came to collect. And *then,* you failed! What a guy. Never change."

"Hmph. A contract you're forced into by someone preying on your weaknesses is nothing I call a contract. He deserved to be sent packing at the last second. That said, I didn't expect him to have split his Echo in two. My intention was to blast him away so thoroughly that he wouldn't be able to show his face in this dimension for another decade."

Mary's laugh was muffled. "It's awful to say, but I must admit I did get a little enjoyment out of seeing his pallid face being blown away." The other two burst out laughing at this remark, which was unusually brash for Mary.

"Yes," she said contemplatively, "if we could bring the god of undeath down with us, I wouldn't be too unhappy with that."

"Yeah. What d'you all say, wanna gang up on him and teach him a lesson? I figured I was never gonna beat a god, and I did sign up for the contract, so I kinda resigned myself to it. But we did blow him up once. Who knows, might work."

"Mm, that's the spirit. I can't say whether I could cast it in this state, but what if I used the Word of Entity Obliteration with no restraint at all, wiping him and us off the face of this world at the same time?"

"Hey, that sounds awesome! We just disintegrate and cease to exist, souls and all. That's exactly what we were looking for!"

"Gus, I think that's a wonderful plan." The atmosphere about them was refreshingly positive. This had probably been how they talked to each other while they were alive. But it was obvious that it was just empty bravado.

Gus had won once, barely, through a sneak attack and a barrage of seals his opponent hadn't anticipated. But I doubted there'd be a second time. The three of them were seriously wounded.

"So—Will," Blood said, turning the discussion to me. "You're an adult now. Independent. Get out there already and explore the world."

"I'm sorry that we can't hold a coming-of-age party or ceremony for you."

"If you want a present, all the knowledge we gave you over the years will have to suffice."

My heart ached.

"Go wild out there, get some people under you, and get up to a ton of mischief."

“B-Blood! Don’t give him bad advice!” she said, putting emphasis on every word.

Gus laughed loudly. “Well, you have to turn somewhat of a blind eye to these things. Boys will be boys, and men will be men.”

“Once he starts down a slippery slope like that, he won’t be able to kick the habit, you know!”

My heart ached. That burning emotion was scratching furiously at my chest from the inside.

“Getting in a bit of trouble’s all part of learning. Right, old man?”

“Indeed. I wouldn’t worry. The boy will be fine.”

“Yeah, Will’s gonna do great.”

“I’m not saying I don’t have faith in him…”

My heart… ached. So badly that I couldn’t bear it anymore.

“You’ve got it all wrong…” It’s not like that. You don’t understand. “I’m not the kind of person you’re all hoping for me to be!” As if I were spitting blood, I forced the words out with a trembling voice.

Spurred on by Blood, I poured out everything I’d been keeping bottled inside me, becoming a soggy mess of negative emotions: self-reproach, shame, grief.

I told them that I had memories of a previous life. That there, I had been an unsalvageable, hopeless person.

That when I’d been reborn, I’d resolved to do it right this time. That I hadn’t been able to realize anything, and had been making them suffer while I lived comfortably. That in the end, I hadn’t given them anything back.

I verbalized everything that was in my chest, like a criminal confessing to his crimes. They quietly listened.

"I don't even remember whether I cried when my mom and dad died, after causing them all that trouble..."

That's right. Back then, what *was* in my mind? Someone like me who couldn't even pull *that* out of the hazy fog was just...

"Scum." Scum, who got flush with the idea of being able to start over in a new environment. "I'm just irredeemable scum." The outside world was impossible for a person like me. How could I ever live up to their expectations?

My head was spinning in circles. Suffering, pain, sadness, embarrassment. I couldn't look them in the face.

"Will," Mary called my name.

I timidly raised my head.

"Grit your teeth."

A shock of pain ran through me. It took me a few moments to realize what had happened. Mary had slapped me across the cheek with all her strength. Her arm, which had just been starting to recover, was twisted even more unnaturally than before.

I yelped in horror. "M-Mar—"

"Look at me!" Ignoring her arm, Mary placed a hand firmly around my cheek and turned my head so we could make eye contact. But she had no eyeballs there, just empty sockets.

Mary had lost her eyeballs long ago, and always kept her head turned downward. That wasn't just a reserved and polite expression. It was also so that she wouldn't scare me with her empty eye sockets.

"Will," she said sharply, "as your mother, I forbid you from hurting yourself anymore. You, scum? Don't be so utterly ridiculous. You've always been hardworking and dedicated. No matter how incredibly difficult the tasks Gus set for you, no matter how many times you

were injured while training with Blood, you always did your best, even when you were left to fend for yourself in the mountains and the underground city."

She spoke quietly, but vehemently and with authority. Not once in my life had I seen Mary speak so strongly.

"Take a look at what you've accomplished! Who gives a fig about your old memories? I understand that the god of undeath shook you up, but get over it! You should not be letting it affect you like this!"

I suddenly felt as if I'd taken a hard knock to the head.

"You don't remember whether you cried when your old parents died? *Of course* you did! Look how sorry you're feeling just for having a hazy memory! Look how much you're crying for us right now! How in the world would a person like you not have cried?!"

I felt my heart being firmly shaken. I started regaining feeling in a part of me where there had only been numbness before. I thought I'd cried myself dry, but the tears started to well up in my eyes again. Something warm was starting to flicker and glow inside my frozen heart.

"Will! William! Stop that brooding and shape up! Well?! I'm waiting!"

Pushed on by her voice, I sobbed one final time, straightened my back, looked straight at her, and answered, "Okay," in the most confident voice I could muster. The feeling of hopelessness that had been itching away inside my chest had disappeared completely. I felt a lot better.

Over Mary's shoulder, Blood and Gus were laughing off the awkward situation.

"See what being a wet blanket gets you?" Blood said, cackling devilishly.

“Back to form, I see.”

I nodded forcefully. No more hesitation. The unknown, warm light inside my heart was rapidly growing as hot as magma. My brain began picking up speed and putting together logic. I was now thinking very clearly.

I was okay. I was okay now. Mary had protected me. So the way forward was clear.

“I have a request. Please… Let me protect you all.”

Now, I could fight. I was sure of it. And nothing felt as good as determination.

◆

While the sun was up, I had something hot to eat. Steam was still rising from it as I ate. The heat spread around my body, and gave me energy and courage.

I made sure my equipment was in order. He’d told me he’d be coming at night. I adjusted my spear, Pale Moon, to a length of about two meters, and set the light to maximum range and maximum brightness.

I passed my shield over my left arm and attached it to my belt. I’d sharpened the edge, with consideration to potentially hitting him with it.

I put my leather armor on over the top of my thick under armor, and covered the vulnerable areas of my body with the metal armor—throat plate, breastplate, gauntlets, and greaves. I deliberately didn’t wear the helmet, thinking that it might obstruct my vision.

I was going against a god. None of this superficial armor would do anything besides make me feel better, anyway. In place of the helmet, I did at least tie on a headband, thinking that without it, I might get sweat in my eyes or get my forehead cracked by the aftermath of one

of his attacks.

And lastly, I checked my sword belt, from which Overeater hung. This blade, which worked on Echoes, was the key to everything.

All the support that magic and benediction could possibly give me, I'd already had cast upon me and my equipment, with cooperation from Mary and Gus. Thanks to them, my physical abilities and resistance to magic were a third greater than normal. Whether that was to be "a mere third" or "a whole third" remained to be seen.

They'd told me many times not to do this, or to at least fight *with* them instead of on my own. But even if they fought alongside me, I wouldn't be able to rely on them in their current state. I was certain that fighting by myself would be less stressful.

"Secret boss before leaving the first town..." I mumbled to myself, remembering the games of my previous world. "Who the hell designed this?"

But reality was like that from time to time. There would always be occasions when you ran straight into ridiculous opponents before you were properly prepared for them.

It would be nice if you could take gradual steps up from weaklings to more difficult enemies, but life didn't always work out that way. Sometimes, you just immediately ran into a hopelessly, desperately strong opponent. The question was what to do about it.

"Nothing but figure out what's my best chance and give it all I've got, I guess."

You could call it the Japanese kamikaze spirit, but even so, I had learned through being reborn that there were times when pushing forward despite the danger was important.

Is the chance of winning high or low? Is this winnable or not? Is this doable or not? Questions like these often couldn't be answered in real life without actually taking on the challenge. It wasn't like I had

stats to rely on.

It was important to consider the risks I was putting myself under, but I couldn't allow myself to be too afraid of failure. If I tried to remove all risk before acting, I'd be stuck forever hugging my knees, never taking any action at all.

After doing some thorough stretches, I lit a stick of incense in front of the sculptures of the gods, and knelt before them.

"Gods of good virtue, I go now to fight for the father, mother, and grandfather who are dear to me. I will fight a wicked god, all on my own." I put my hands together, and lowered my eyes. "Should you bear witness to this act and know it as good, I beg for your divine protection."

May I not cower. May I not flinch. May my fighting be worthy of what they have taught me.

After that short prayer, I stood up. I opened the temple's large doors. And entirely of my own volition, I stepped forward, into the outside world, and the total darkness of night. A freezing wind was howling noisily across the nighttime hill, and emanating from the graveyard at its foot was a dreadful, unholy aura.

"So. Have you made up your mind?"

You bet I have.

"Stagnate, unholy god..." I began to walk toward him. I gradually picked up speed. My walk became a run, and my run became a sprint. And then, in challenge and defiance, I shouted at a god.

"I will give you nothing!"

◆

I sprinted down the hill, my spear lighting up my surroundings. On the opposite side to the city, where lines of tombstones stood before a

dense forest, was the man with the pale face and stagnant eyes the color of dusk. I hadn't been able to move at all against him the day before.

The pressure I was feeling from him today was no different, but my body was moving unbelievably freely. Mary's scolding, her encouragement, had fired me up so much that I could feel the heat burning inside me.

I openly declared my hostility to the Echo of this wicked and overwhelmingly powerful god, challenging him from the front. This looked foolish, but I had thought hard about the most optimal plan, and this was my conclusion.

He was a splinter of a god, a being that existed on a different plane than us humans. He wasn't the kind of opponent you could do anything about by simply hitting him with a sword or a rock.

There were currently only about three conceivable methods of wounding or annihilating him: borrowing the power of another god; scoring a direct hit with high-level magic, as Gus had done; or striking him with a piece of high-level magic equipment.

The first, the appearance of an Echo of one of the good gods—I had absolutely no expectation of this. I wasn't so full of myself that I thought the good gods, who were probably preoccupied elsewhere, would just conveniently do me the favor of appearing here in answer to my prayer. If I was planning to rely on a power that wasn't under my own control, I should not be fighting, but locked away praying right now.

Next, the second: high-level magic. This one was tricky. I was Gus's apprentice; it wouldn't be beyond me to fire off a magic of the same class as Entity Obliteration if I really tried. But I'd need to take my time meticulously preparing for it to have a reasonable chance of success. Binding him using high-speed multicasting, and then using Entity Obliteration to blast him and the Bindings away at once, was a wild technique that I couldn't possibly learn to imitate in a single day.

That being the case, it made no sense to try using an inferior version of that move on a foe who'd already been hit by it once and would be on his guard for anything similar.

Which brought me to the third: high-level magic equipment. This was the only possibility that looked like it had any chance of working. The demonblade "Overeater" that Blood had given me was up to the task without any doubt. Hitting him with this had more of a chance than sluggishly preparing a large-scale work of magic in front of an enemy who was still wary of it.

I didn't just have to hit him. I had to hit him *with the demonblade,* which was short. Ideally, I'd wanted to trick him or something to get him to lower his guard, and aim for a surprise attack, but I was forced to conclude that would be impossible. Since there were only a limited number of methods to hurt him, the fact that I'd be equipped with an easily drawn sword which could accomplish exactly that would be just the same as declaring myself hostile.

Imagine it. Your enemy tells you he's surrendering. Meanwhile, he's approaching you with a knife blatantly held behind his back. No way would I trust that person. Neither would the god of undeath.

I did have the idea of hiding the demonblade somehow, but imagining that the incarnation of a god, and all his powers of perception, could be deceived by some mediocre trickery was just wishful thinking. If I was prepared to attempt such a risky gamble, it'd be way better to just face up to it instead. Challenge him head-on, fully prepared for battle. So I attempted to appeal to his pride as a higher existence.

"I challenge you to battle! Accept, or be forever known as the god who fled from a mere human boy!"

The ideal situation would be if he fell for this cheap provocation and engaged me in single combat, but my sights were actually set slightly lower. The Echo of Stagnate instead applauded me as I drew closer, as if I had amused him.

“Hah hah hah! Not bad, for a mere boy.”

I couldn’t see him clearly. His flawless features were shrouded by mist.

“Let me guess—you are trying to focus my attention on you so you can restrict my movements.”

He knew exactly what I was planning. Regardless of whether he was going to fight me or not, I wanted to focus his attention on *what to do with me*.

After all, Blood and Mary were behind me, weakened. They already didn’t stand a chance of beating him. If he ignored me and concentrated on collecting them, there would be nothing I could do.

“Very well… I accept. But if you wish to challenge a god…”

A black mist spread from the god of undeath standing at the foot of the hill, squirming and crawling along the ground. It seeped into the ground like oil.

I didn’t know what he was planning, but I had to act first.

“Acceleratio!” I hurriedly incanted a Word off the top of my head and increased my speed further. Combined with the body strengthening effects I already had, the sense of acceleration quickly became overwhelming.

I couldn’t even tell how many meters forward I was bounding now with every step. Like a bullet I hurtled toward to the god of undeath, and arriving at my target, I grasped Overeater and pulled it free, combining the draw and the slash into a single swift—

A blunt strike from the side sent me flying. Knowing it was futile to fight the momentum, I sprang off the ground in the same direction on impact, eventually rolling backwards and leaping to my feet again.

“First prove yourself worthy.”

Tombstones all around toppled over. The ground swelled, and bodies clambered out.

"This... is..."

They were warriors. Skeletal warriors clad in rusted armor, with bits and pieces of them missing.

They were sorcerers. Skeletal sorcerers, with rotten staves in their hands, swaying slightly from side to side as they stood there, their eye sockets empty.

Grave-dirt crumbling from their bodies, more and more of the skeletons climbed to their feet around me.

"I am Stagnate, god of undeath..."

One thing came to mind. The three had come to this place to defeat the High King, and had brought a lot of allies with them.

They eventually managed to seal away the High King, but it came at the cost of their allies, as well as a contract with the god of undeath that they hadn't wanted to enter into. They became protectors of the seal, and buried the bodies of the brave warriors that had died for their cause.

Buried them where? *Here,* of course!

"And commander of undying legions."

The souls inside of them might not be the same, but these were certainly their allies, every one of them the remains of a person who deserved to be called a hero.

The god of undeath cackled quietly, and then broke into a loud laugh.

"Now, young warrior. Here is your chance. Show me your power!"

He was grinning, his arms spread wide in challenge, as if defying me to reach him. The undead corpses of those heroes completely surrounded him. They numbered about a hundred.

He's toying with me. I don't stand a chance. Those words started floating at the back of my mind.

"Ha!" I barked a single laugh. So what? My mouth had almost frozen in fear, but I forced the corners upward into a ferocious grin, as Blood must have done while he was alive.

I held my spear at the ready, cast my eyes over my surroundings, and thought about what my best plan of action was. I was sure that would have been Gus's approach.

I wouldn't give up. I wouldn't allow myself to be shaken. I would believe in possibility until the end, just as I'd learned from Mary.

"Pile in. I'll make sure each and every one of you gets a taste of my steel!"

◆

The situation was not looking the least bit good. I stepped in close to one of the undead and bashed the edge of my shield sideways against him, smashing his brittle ribs and spine to pieces. Backed up against a large gravestone, I yelled out Words, deploying grease and webs to stop another approaching group. Meanwhile, I was swinging my spear down and sweeping it to the sides as if it was a staff, slamming it against several who had gotten too close and smashing their bones.

An undead who looked like a nimble fighter came leaping over the gravestone. The mail he was wearing was a beautiful silver color. I sensed immediately that it was mithril, or something like it. I probably wouldn't be able to cut through it.

So as he was in midair, I lodged my spear's blade in the gap between his fibula and his tibia, the two major bones of the lower leg, and disrupted his posture. He fell to the ground. My movements

flowed forward into a heel kick, crushing his skull into fragments under my foot. By this time, I had thrust the butt of my spear behind me, its heavy metal cap helping to keep more enemies in check.

Someone fired a magic bullet at me from the side. *"Acceleratio!"* I leaped out of its way while applying magic to speed me up.

My jump took me over the large gravestone. I twisted my body in midair like a pole vaulter, seeking out the ones who were pursuing me. *"Cadere Araneum!"* I entangled them in a web, and moved position so I wouldn't get driven into a corner.

"Oh...? Far from pretty, but... this against a hundred heroes..."

The god of undeath was muttering, as if he was impressed. But I was only fighting as I'd learned to fight.

If the hundred undead that appeared had all been high-level undead with intelligence like the three I was so familiar with, I would have been finished. But fortunately, despite being a god, it didn't look as though he was capable of instantly producing undead that were that advanced en masse.

The warrior undead were definitely frighteningly skilled swordsmen, and it wasn't hard to believe they were former greats. But many were missing body parts or armor, and they were at least a couple notches slower than Blood. If I kept control of the situation and took them all on individually, as much of a pain as that would be, I could destroy any of them with no more than three moves.

As for the sorcerer undead, they were almost too weak to take seriously. The intelligence dwelling inside them was too crude. Their aim was way off, and I was moving around at high speed with my body boosted as far as it would go. The only thing I was worried about was a lucky shot. If I kept my usage of magic methodical and centered on binding and obstruction magic as Gus had always taught me, using it for crowd control, and lured them into one-on-one battles, I could crush them easily with the fighting skills I'd learned

from Blood.

But even so, the situation was looking extremely bad. The question wasn't whether I could defeat a hundred or not. It was whether I could fight the god of undeath after having done so. There was no way my stamina was going to hold out if I kept engaging with this shoddy imitation of a 100-Man Melee.

If I became short of breath, the failure rate of my spoken magical incantations would increase. My moves, too, would become less effective as I grew more tired. If I could have absorbed life force from them with Overeater, I might have been able to continue fighting without getting tired, but unfortunately, all my opponents were undead, and had no life force to leech.

What was I going to do? I smashed another one with my spear and tried to think of a solution, but was interrupted.

"Wait."

The undead all stopped moving. The god of undeath placed a hand against his chin and hummed in thought.

"I thought of you as nothing more than an aside to the three heroes, but this is... greater than expected. What is your name?"

He had a smile on his face.

"Will..." I answered warily. I'd have preferred him to take me lightly, but it seemed his estimation of me had been revised upward. As I was beginning to consider the possibility that he was about to crush me more mercilessly than before, he spoke again.

"I see. Will... I want to ask you again to join me."

Those words echoed loudly in my ears.

"I have taken to you. Your excellent skills in combat, your

spiritual fortitude in challenging me alone, all of it is desirable. I would gladly have you as one of the many leaders of my undying legions."

"What do you thi—"

"Ahh... Hold on. You are most likely misunderstanding something. Any person who offers themselves to me entirely is someone with value, and I don't intend to treat them otherwise. That goes for them and for you."

I had to admit I was a little surprised by those words. The image I had of the god of undeath was a grisly one, both from the level of Blood and Mary's resignation, and more simply from the words "souls held prisoner by the wicked god of undeath."

"If you choose to come with me, I will free you of that repugnant thing called death. You will ride on the ship of ghosts to the end of the sea, and arrive at my land, where you will find a paradise without age or disease."

I was still trying to get over my surprise at this unexpected development, but he continued talking at length, undeterred.

"Under my command, there may be times when you cross swords with the forces of the virtuous gods. You will fight formidable enemies, and charge across the battlefield shoulder-to-shoulder with the heroes, saints, and sages of antiquity."

He never faltered once as he spoke of his ideal. It was a powerful, convincing speech, from which a person could believe that things really *were* as he claimed.

"When the battle is over, I will hold a revel. It will be an event of great abandon and merriment, and a chance for you to regale the others with tales of your achievements on the battlefield. And then, the preparations will begin for the next. You must be aware that high-level undead possess

strong souls, and the emotions of joy and happiness?"

I was. I knew that from living with them.

"Will, you can spend an age in harmony with the parents who raised you. There will be no need for farewells or sorrow. And once we attain supremacy over this dimension, that will become eternal..."

He paused, as if to allow me time to reflect on the significance of this.

"That is my purpose. There is too much tragedy in this world. Death is not beautiful; it is mostly accompanied by pain and fear that defies imagining. Love is not rewarded, rather punished, by the suffering of the loved one and a parting by death. Powerful heroes and noble saints are shunned and killed, precisely because of their power, precisely because of their nobility."

— The god of undeath, Stagnate, was once allied with the forces of good. He strayed from that path when he could no longer stand seeing the tragedies of life and death. His desire is to create an eternally stagnated world without tragedy, by turning talented souls of all kinds into the forever undying.

I remembered Mary's words. She had certainly said that to me.

"Do you not think it unfair? This world contains too much tragedy. I would like to put an end to that. I want to make a world that is eternally kind, where the menace of death is no more."

His words had a tenderness to them. He probably wasn't lying. If a world like that could really be created...

If it *could*...

"Come, Will. Make a contract with me, as they did."

He produced a chalice and a dagger from somewhere. The chalice was a dull silver and the dagger was plain, but a strong divinity dwelt within them both. Holding the chalice in position, the god of undeath made a shallow cut into his own wrist. His black blood quietly began to fill the chalice up.

"Drink my blood. Do this, and you can part ways with death."

He offered it to me. I guessed that drinking this blood was what made you undead. I nodded. I placed my spear on the ground and stepped toward the chalice as if in a hypnotic trance. Then, with a single motion, I drew my sword and sliced his wrist off.

His face filled with shock and confusion. Something like a thorny crimson vine snaked from Overeater's black blade and tangled itself into the wound.

I felt strength flowing into me from my right hand, in which the sword was held. My tiredness left me, the small cuts I'd taken healed over, and energy immediately began to course through me. Even before my brain had time to understand that this was what restoring life force felt like, my well-disciplined body was bringing back the blade. During a moment of confusion, the ideal strike was not the neck, but a swipe straight across the largest target—the torso!

The god of undeath groaned in apparent pain. The strike had landed. Direct hit. The crimson thorns tangled into his torso, too. It was working! One last flick—from his armpit up and across to his neck—I was sure that was all I needed—Up—!

Something pulled my pivot leg with frightening force, and I fell over. The ground hit me hard. I could sense him slipping away. I looked at my leg. A blood-soaked snake was wrapped around it. The snake was slithering out of the chalice which had fallen to the ground along with his wrist.

Crap. He was hiding backup in a place like that?!

“Ghh… First the Sage, now you… Treacherous rats…”

I could hear his voice. The snake was squeezing my leg with a strength unimaginable from its thin body. It gazed at me with its emotionless, vertically split pupils, its fangs dripping with the god of undeath’s blood. The snake hissed. The god of undeath replied while groaning in pain.

“You may. Attack!”

At that single word, the snake darted at my neck. I threw up an arm by reflex. The snake coiled around it, and I felt a sharp pain from a gap in my armor. I tried to shake the snake off, but its fangs were sunk firmly into my arm. It had driven its fangs, tinged with the godblood that turned a person into the undead, into my skin. An abnormal chill spread from the wound at a terrifying pace, and I soon felt it in every part of my body.

My body started to stiffen. I tried to struggle, but my body would no longer obey me. My vision grew blurry. My mind clouded over. Something was wrong with my sense of balance—The ground was wobbling, twisting—

I squeaked out half a vowel, and fell over. My vision was swimming, but amid the blur I could see the undead pointing their weapons at me. I scratched weakly at the ground and wriggled imperceptibly.

C-Can’t… let this…

But I couldn’t move. As hard as I tried, I couldn’t move.

But I… have to… protect… them…

My vision grew gradually darker, and I blacked out.

◆

I came to under a starry sky of dancing phosphorescence.

I took a few glances around before realizing. My hands felt… floaty. Like Gus's spectral body… hold on, not "like." That was exactly what this was. I guess I died, then? From an adverse reaction to his blood or something.

Hmm.

This place was starting to feel somehow familiar. Like I'd walked through here before. My eyes glanced toward the ground, and I noticed it. What was below me was dark and reflected the stars, like a vast plane of water, and on its surface there was the large, distorted reflection of a faint light, which was coming from behind me.

I turned to see a figure holding a lantern with a long handle. The figure was wearing a hooded robe that covered its eyes, but I already knew who it was.

"It's very good to see you again, god of the flame." I bowed my head. Memories were starting to come back.

I'd walked under this starry sky before. This "god of the flame" had shown me the way.

"…"

Not much of a talker. If I remembered correctly, not a single word was ever spoken to me before, either. The god of the flame had simply led, and nothing more. But I remembered that walk, that careful walk, always making sure I wasn't falling behind, and how full it was of caring and affection.

Some time passed in silence, and I came to another realization. Those weren't stars that were floating in the darkness. They were worlds. Worlds containing numerous universes, countless stars and infinite planets, moving slowly like stars on a gigantic armillary sphere.

Freed from the shackles of my physical body, my expanded senses perceived everything. Occasionally, two of the worlds would happen

to approach each other, and a faint powder of lights would float from them, and then be absorbed by the other. Though the lights were very faint, I couldn't think of them as fragile. In fact, I even felt strength from them.

"What is that...?"

"The circulation of souls. They pass through worlds, that stagnation not befall all things."

A reply came back. For some reason, I didn't find that surprising. Somehow, I'd felt that the god of the flame would reply to me now.

"Ah... So that must be how I left my world, and how I came to this one."

As I looked up at the starry sky, a puff of lights rose from another world. Weightless yet strong, they twinkled as they drifted to another world. Innumerable worlds drifted like stars in the night sky, and within them, innumerable souls, living, dying, and crossing between. Blinking like heartbeats, circulating like blood. Life being spun like infinite yarn. It was a deeply lonely and beautiful sight.

"How could I have forgotten this view?"

This time, the god gave no answer, and wasn't even making an attempt to lead me anywhere. The figure just stood there, unmoving.

"I ask you."

"Yes?"

"Why did you reject the invitation of the god of undeath?"

The god's question was a surprisingly grounded one. I was expecting to be asked something more abstract, more conceptual.

"Well, I mean... Hmm."

I thought for a bit. Was it going to be all right to phrase it this way?

Maybe it would be better to make it sound less… No. It is what it is.

"I was a shut-in before, in my previous life, as you know. I probably stumbled at something, or something beat the ever-loving hell out of me and my confidence, and I never picked myself back up again. That was no way to live, but I did learn one little thing from going through that."

With silence, the god encouraged me onward.

"There's a pretty big difference between *living* and *being alive*."

At least while my body had been biologically active, I had definitely been *alive*. But if you asked me whether I'd *lived*… I'd have to give that some serious thought.

"In my last life, I was only alive. I didn't have the courage to do anything, and in fact, the thought that I had to be alive for another several decades was crushing me."

I still thought of that as its own special type of Hell. Physical pain, you could endure. Getting yourself absolutely stuck in a dead end you couldn't escape from, and having to *be alive* there for decades? That you felt.

"I could only barely remember it, but that slightest memory was enough. That was why I decided that in this world, I was going to *live*."

That vow I'd made in my youngest days… Even now it was my cornerstone, the defining brick around which I was built.

"In my previous world, I didn't care about dying, so I never lived. And I never lived, so I wasn't afraid to die."

I didn't want pain, so I never actively tried to kill myself, but if there'd been a way of easily dying a painless, sleep-like death, I might have taken it gladly. Death had meant that little to me. Life had meant that little to me, too.

“Devalue one, and the other is also devalued.”

Gus had said it to me when he first taught me about magic.

Make the earth, and the sky is also made. Make the good, and the bad is also made. In that case, surely it also held in reverse. There could be no earth without the sky. There could be no good without the bad. Without either, all would be leveled to a flat plane of nothingness. So…

“I think, if I’m going to live properly, I should die properly, too. No matter how hard or painful it is. Otherwise, I’ll just be going back into that room.”

That was, essentially, where that god of undeath was inviting me. Proposing that it was okay for me to deny death and live forever was exactly the same as proposing that it was okay for me to shut myself in that room forever.

“I don’t care what kind of extra incentives he provides, the answer is thanks, but no thanks.” I shrugged and smiled. “I want to live and die as part of their family.”

The god of the flame nodded in silence. Seemingly, I’d given a satisfactory answer.

“So, um… Am I dead?”

“You are not.”

“Then I’m alive?”

“Barely.”

So things were looking pretty bad. I was probably in a death-like state. That was why I’d ended up wandering into this strange place, with its multiversal armillary sphere of circulating souls.

“Then… Could I ask you to return me there, somehow?”

“What good shall come of returning? You need but remain to die as you wish.”

I got the point. I’ll admit it, I probably wouldn’t win. I couldn’t imagine that I could do anything against the god of undeath, not when the undead god blood was already flowing all around my body, and when he was now wary of me and had started to watch my every move.

In the end, I was me and nothing more. Try as I might, I couldn’t be as cool as one of the heroes in the stories. I could see how it was going to end and it wasn’t going to be impressive: with me being killed as I rolled around pathetically on the ground.

How badly would it hurt? How much would I suffer? I didn’t even want to think about it. The worst case scenario would probably be getting turned into one of the undead, and being thrown into an eternal prison where I was neither dead nor alive.

But…

Even so…

“I want to be able to protect my family. You know?” Summoning up false courage, I smiled an awkward version of a show-off’s smile. No matter how much I embarrassed or sullied myself, at the very least, I wanted to protect my family this time.

Maybe after I woke up, a miracle would occur, and I’d be able to squeeze out a draw. If I could at least weaken him just a little bit, the other three might be able to take some measures against him. Then I could protect my family in at least a small way.

“I decided I was going to return the favor someday.”

Leaving that unaccomplished was worse than being unable to die. It gnawed at me, brought me suffering. So, god, please put me back.

“Please.”

I was kneeling before the god with my head bowed. I hadn't needed to think about it. The god was silent for some time. I waited patiently in that position for an answer.

"**Thou, William, O world-crossing soul, son of Blood and son of Mary.**"

"Yes."

"Knowest thou assuredly the weight of life?"

"Yes."

"And still art thou ready to receive death?"

"Yes."

"Knowest thou assuredly the despair of death?"

"Yes."

"And still wilt thou have compassion on all life that vanisheth away?"

"Yes." I answered without raising my head. "Yes. I've understood that at last, thanks to your grace."

From being in this special place, I was starting to get the picture. Reincarnated souls lost the memory of their previous lives. I, too, had forgotten about this place. It was a necessary measure in order for souls not to be chained to their pasts, for them to establish new selves and new lives. So the reason that I vaguely, just barely remembered my previous life was probably that this god had shown mercy to a pitiful soul full of regret and self-reproach.

"Thank you, merciful god of the flame, who presides over eternal flux."

I didn't know whether I could communicate it as well as I felt it, but I thanked this god from the bottom of my heart.

Thank you for giving me a chance. Thank you for making me Blood and Mary's child. Thank you for making me Gus's grandchild. Thank you so much.

I can never thank you enough.

"Thine heart speaketh clear. Raise thine head, son of man."

I lifted my head at last, and my eyes opened wide.

"Thou, William."

As I looked up, still on my knees, what I saw under the hood of the god of the flame... was the gentle face of a black-haired girl.

"While thou rememberest that readiness, thou art worthy."

Gracefeel's emotionless expression softened at last, and a kind smile rose to her face. A pale white hand was offered before my eyes.

"Arise. Vow to me, and let us go together."

I took her hand.

"Till thy life ends and I lead thee again—"

I went to stand, and at the same time, my consciousness blurred.

"I shall be thy guardian."



◆

I woke again, my mind still clouded. I was lying on my back. I could see the cloudy night sky.

A snake's teeth were sunk into my arm. Immortal god blood was being poured into me through a gap in my gauntlet. My arm hurt. Really hurt. And it felt hot.

Heroes surrounded me, all of them undead, layers upon layers of them, vigilantly pointing their weapons at me.

Beyond them, the god of undeath was laughing, confident of his victory.

There was clearly nothing I could do. It was a checkmate position, an endgame state. But I felt the strong pounding of my heart. It was still beating, still thumping out its regular rhythm.

Okay. Then things were going to be okay. A heat like magma inside my chest was gradually pumping around my body in time to my heartbeats. There wasn't much sensation left in my hands, but I slowly put them together. I'd learned from Mary that this was how you prayed in this world.

"Gracefeel, who presides over eternal flux." New power was circulating around my body, like a refreshing breeze. I knew instantly how it was meant to be used, as if it was second nature. "Please, go forth with me."

I would choose my guardian deity, and make my vow. Today was the winter solstice. A day of celebration, when children flew the nest. The day they were given the protection of the gods.

"Benediction?"

Sensing something strange, the god of undeath's expression twisted. It was not surprise. It was derision toward meaningless resistance.

“Hah. As if being able to use that accomplishes anything. Superficial tricks won’t help you now that my blood has been pumped into your—”

The low growl of a flame igniting interrupted him. White flame erupted from my arm. It wasn’t hot. Instead, I felt that something unholy within my body was being burnt away.

Okay. I could do this.

“Stigmata?”

The badge of honor I’d obtained when I learned about Mary’s prayers—the burns on my arms. My arms had been roasted by the flames of a god.

“Wait, your body—Just how much holy bread have you been eating?!”

Though Mary was one of the undead, she had been praying to Mater for my daily bread every single day. Her constant prayers, and her unbreakable heart, had completely upended the god of undeath’s expectations.

“And I swear this to you, my God.”

— A strong oath makes it easier to receive protection, but you end up letting yourself in for one hell of a rough fate. I remembered Blood’s words, and forced my mouth into a grin. A rough fate? Bring it. If I could beat the hell out of the god of undeath right here and now, that was a small price to pay!

“I dedicate my whole life to you! As your blade I will drive away evil, and as your hands I will bring salvation to those in sorrow!” I randomly thought up a strong oath. Somewhere, I thought I heard the god of the flame—taciturn as ever—let out a small laugh. “This I swear on the flame of Gracefeel, goddess of flux!”

Fires lit up beside me as if in proof. The light from them was a soft,

warm glow.

She didn't just lead souls after death. I was certain that she shone on all things with souls until the moments of our deaths, whether we realized it or not, tirelessly, constantly, and with quiet love and affection.

"So you have gained the protection of Gracefeel."

The god of undeath's expression was contorted.

"A shame... Truly a shame... I would dearly have liked for you to join my forces. But if she has taken you in, then there is no more use trying."

Suddenly, I could sense murder in the air. Up until now, he'd been trying to convince me to join him. But from now on, he would be trying to kill me. Both of us were deadly serious. We had, to my regret, reached the stage I'd been trying to avoid: a straightforward fight to the death.

But now... Now, I did not see myself losing!

"God of undeath, Stagnate! I will defeat you, and honor my vow!"

"Young warrior, perish unfulfilled!"

With the clashing of our cries, the final battle began.

◆

"Kill him!"

The god of undeath was first to act. At his command, the undead heroes thrust out their blades. Enclosing on me from all directions, it was a literal wall of steel. There were no ways to escape it, no openings to strike with a blade.

So as power erupted from the depths of my body, I struck out with it in all directions, letting it erupt as it desired. Space bent slightly

around me, and an invisible and sacred pulse surged from within me, sending voiceless screams echoing around the graveyard.

They were not screams of pain. They were cries of repose, which expressed the joy of release. The skeletons turned to dust, and the wall of steel crumbled like sand. Rusty old weapons and armor fell one after another, creating a cacophony of clattering metal. I wasn't going to risk looking up, but I could sense that a flame had flared into existence at one point in the sky overhead, and had floated into the sky and disappeared.

I'd definitely heard it, a long time ago: Gracefeel's benediction *granted repose and guidance to the souls of the dead.* The blessing's name was Divine Torch.

It was rarely focused upon, because there wasn't much advantage to having a user of benediction, who was a valuable healer, fighting on the front lines directly against undead. But in this situation, it was incredibly powerful.

The god of undeath gathered together wandering souls once more, and started awakening the corpses sleeping in the graveyard. In response, I prayed again to the god of the flame. Another invisible pulse, and all the lost souls in the area were peacefully guided back to the gods.

"Unbelievable… you only just became a priest!"

Either the speed or the range of my blessing must have taken him by surprise. He was right. I had only just become a priest. But I knew how to pray. I'd been praying all along, watching Mary, learning from her. There was no way it could cause me any hesitation now.

"*Acceleratio!*" I turned my brain off and charged straight at him. I wasn't going to use any convoluted plans.

"Khhh…"

I knew from our exchange so far that the god of undeath wasn't

particularly skilled at swordsmanship, or hand-to-hand fighting in general. If he were, I would never have been able to connect twice with my blade, even if I had taken him by surprise. So I didn't play around with gimmicks. I just closed the distance relentlessly. I just needed to get up in his face. Then, I could strike and strike again with my demonblade, and this time, scatter him to the winds before he even had time for a counterattack!

"***Vas...***"

The hairs stood on the back of my neck as I heard him speak. Still accelerating sharply, I kicked hard against the ground and felt the strain on my legs as I leaped directly to the side.

"***...tare!***"

The Word of Destruction, cast with even greater power than Gus could muster. The ground split and exploded. I'd avoided taking a direct hit, but I was disoriented by the cloud of earth and sand that was kicked up, and the lingering effects of that ravaging blast. I stumbled to the ground. The god of undeath had unleashed that magic of destruction at the earth, so close that even he was caught in the blast.

Of course. How had I forgotten? Echoes of the gods could only be harmed by extremely powerful magic or by demonblades. In other words, he had no need to fear the effects of his own magic. The fundamental principle that guided an ordinary person's use of magic didn't apply to him. He couldn't have cared less whether he caught himself in the blast.

I now understood the reason he hadn't developed great skills in swordsmanship or physical combat. If he could use magic this wicked within a swordsman's range, he had no need for sword or fist. If someone got too close, he could just blow them both up with magic. There was only one reason he hadn't done that before now. He'd been trying to convince me to join him.

A secret boss, I'd called him, and he was definitely living up to it. An

Echo of the gods. He wasn't the kind of opponent I could easily snatch victory from just by awakening to a bit of new power. But I still had no intention of losing.

Using magic a little unconventionally was nothing major. Now that I knew about it, I could deal with it. With renewed resolve to crush him here at all costs, I jumped to my feet, while healing all my cuts and minor injuries with the blessing Close Wounds.

The cloud of particulate dust and sand that had been kicked up was still hanging about the area. Silence fell. Where was he going to attack from? In this low visibility, careless movements could leave you open.

As if extending my sense of touch beyond my skin, I searched for mana in operation. If there were any large movements—forewarnings of an attack that could clear out a large area—I would have to jump clear of this place immediately. And if my opponent showed any careless movements to me, I'd jump in close to him and deliver the finishing blow.

As the seconds dragged on, a worrying premonition flashed through my mind. It was a revelation from Gracefeel, warning against my current actions.

I paused in confusion for a moment. The god of undeath was fighting me. Fervently, with clear intent to kill me. The situation looked evenly matched, so if he kept on fighting… No… wait. Wait.

What if… What if he *wasn't* fervently fighting?

"Oh, shoot!" The temple! The temple, hurry! "*Acceleratio!*"

I ran.

I ran and ran and ran.

I dashed up the hill at full tilt.

Everything the god of undeath had said and done *had been a bluff!* His surprise, his fervor, his irritation, they were all a show to make me think he was fully engrossed in our battle! And then he kicked up dirt and sand to stall for time...

"Damn it!"

His goal had been to remove the troublesome piece I'd become from the board of battle, and leave me aside while he went after Blood and Mary!

◆

I sprinted and sprinted. I incanted the Word of Acceleration over and over. I pounded up the withered grass of the hill, running at full speed through the cold air.

I thought I understood, but I really didn't. He was a god who had lived for an unimaginably long time. A being not of this world, beyond human measure.

I thought I had the picture of that being, but it had not been a complete one. If I was to believe his words, perhaps he did view me as someone worthy of a little caution and attention. But that said nothing about how important it was to him now.

He could appear much later to eliminate me or try to change my mind. In ten or twenty years, when I was facing a crisis; thirty or forty, once I developed doubts about whether my choices had led me to the right place; fifty or sixty, once I started to experience the discomforts of old age. Even if I managed to kill the Echo, a human couldn't do anything about the god himself at the end of dimensions. The god of undeath surpassed human reckoning, and had several chances.

The bigger issues for him were Blood, Mary, and Gus. Now that I had obtained the blessing of the god of the flame, I could *return them to samsara.* The heroes he had marked and halfway drawn in would be stolen from him. But he wasn't absolutely sure he could kill me

with his current splinter now that his other half had been destroyed by Gus.

He likely coldly calculated the risk and return, and chose to play the fool. He deliberately hammed it up, like some story's cheesy antagonist, showing me surprise and anger, and making me temporarily forget the risk of being circumvented. It's exactly what I was trying to do at the beginning! I tried to get him to focus on me and forget about them, and instead he was the one who made me forget. If I hadn't had that moment's warning from the god of the flame, everything would have been over for sure. What a horrifyingly cunning opponent.

I continued to run. Only one thought filled my mind.

Don't be too late. Please, don't be too late!

When I made it all the way to the top and the temple came into view, I saw that the main doors had been flung wide open.

"Mary! Blood!"

At the back of the temple... was the god of undeath. He was stretching out his hand toward Mary and Blood, who were covered in wounds. They had probably tried to resist. Gus was sewn to the wall by the black mist, and Blood, standing to protect Mary, was already beginning to crumble.

As soon as I witnessed that scene, I knew. The conclusion was forced upon me. With this much distance... and this little time... I was never going to make it. None of the three were in any condition to deal with him.

The blood drained from my head. Was this really happening? After coming all this way, after even borrowing the power of a god, after finally evening the odds... was it all really going to end with me being careless enough to fall for a conman's trick?

"Hah hah hah!"

The god of undeath extended his hand triumphantly, and it seemed to move toward Blood's skull in slow motion—

But the next instant, that hand was knocked away.

"Huh...?" It wasn't me. Nor was it Gus, Blood, or Mary.

The one who had knocked aside the god of undeath's hand was a woman clothed in soft raiment. She was blocking the way to Mary and Blood, shielding them.

I didn't recognize her. And yet, I definitely felt like I knew her.

Mary's empty eyes opened wide, and her voice trembled with a wordless sound of amazement and disbelief. Impossible tears fell from the corners of her eyes.

The woman turned toward Mary and smiled. A loving smile, a caressing smile. And then the woman's form melted gently into the night air, as though it had been no more than an illusion.

Nothing more was needed. The message couldn't have been clearer.

Mary had always had her forgiveness. She never hated Mary in the first place.

But Mary wasn't looking for forgiveness. Lenient treatment wasn't what Mary wanted. So she watched over Mary, and continued to scold her as she desired. And this continued, and continued, without her ever removing her protection, for two whole centuries, until the time came when Mary could forgive herself.

What mother wouldn't come to the aid of the daughter who loves her in her time of crisis? The god that Mary worshipped with such devotion, Mater, was indeed a great goddess.

Knowing the truth of everything, Mary broke into tears.

The god of undeath froze at the sight of his assured victory slipping

from his grasp.

And with deep gratitude to Mater for this unexpected opportunity, Blood and I sprang into action.

◆

"Gracefeel, god of the flame! Repose and guidance!" I immediately made the decision to use benediction. And I was aiming for *Mary and Blood*.

"Wh—?!"

The god of undeath stared, wide-eyed in a clear state of shock. He surely hadn't anticipated that I would blast one of my moves at the people I was trying to protect. The blessing I was using was Divine Torch: the invisible, sacred pulse that returned souls to the cycle of reincarnation.

"Tch! Stagnate, samsara! Go astray, guidance!"

He knew what I was intending and unleashed an unholy pulse of countervailing nature, nullifying it. He was standing in front of Mary and Blood, guarding them.

It was a strange sight to see, but because I was targeting Mary and Blood, he had no choice *but* to protect them. If I launched attacks at him instead, he would probably attempt to take their two souls in the meantime, trusting that as a splinter of a god, he could survive just long enough to complete the task before getting annihilated.

As far as the gods were concerned, their Echoes were disposable. They required time and effort to bring into the world, but could certainly be replaced. He would gladly trade annihilation for Mary and Blood.

But if I managed to hit them with Divine Torch, that would be an entirely different story. I was certain they wouldn't resist it. They would slip out of his clutches, and return to the eternal wheel.

If that happened, the entire reason he went to the trouble of sending a splinter down to this dimension in the first place would evaporate. It would turn out to have been a complete waste of effort. In order to prevent that from happening, the god of undeath was forced into this strange situation where he had to protect Mary and Blood from me for as long as the focus of my benediction remained on them.

Ironically, his situation was exactly the same as that of a superhero, standing in front of the citizens who need to be protected, in the face of attacks from the villain. His only choice was to put his body in front of them, and protect them from being so much as grazed by my benediction. His attention was divided, distracted with the task of completely negating my moves.

With a breathy grunt, Blood transferred all the strength left in his wounded body into a single downward swing of his favorite two-handed sword. Even if it wasn't as impressive as Overeater, Blood's favorite weapon was itself a demonblade, and one worthy of his skills with a sword. It couldn't be ignored.

The less than a second that the god of undeath spent on a reactionary dodge...

"*Acceleratio!*"

...would be more than enough for me to fly down the length of the temple!

"*V-Vas—*"

He attempted to incant the Word of Destruction.

"*Tacere, os!*"

An instant's silence was forced upon his mouth. It was Gus. He was still sewn to the wall by the black mist, and he was wearing the world's smuggest grin. The power that Gus could wield right now was obviously extremely limited, and yet he had interfered in the best

possible way at the best possible moment.

— Just learn to use small amounts of magic, sensibly and precisely.

I remembered the words he'd taught me all that time ago. This Word of Silence, this glorious and dastardly attack, epitomized Gus far better than the grand magic that was the Word of Entity Obliteration.

My right foot met the ground. I kicked forward again, closing the distance like a bullet. Left foot. Right foot. The walls on either side of me raced backward like arrows in flight.

I was already upon him—

I screamed a war cry, and then—

Impact. Resistance.

Overeater was buried in his chest.

"Gahk—!"

I pulled it out, and slashed again. Then another slash, and another. The god of undeath tried to evade and defend, but at this range, I was in complete control.

"Why, you... Damn you!"

Slash. Slash. Slash. The crimson thorns shooting from the demonblade tormented his body.

"Will... Will, son of Mary and Blood... Will, disciple of Gracefeel!"

He glared at me, his murky eyes full of hate. It wasn't the fake hatred and bloodlust from before. This was true hatred, true bloodlust.

"I will not forget your name! If you will not surrender to

me, I will make sure you never sleep easy again!"

He had marked me out now for sure.

"You sound like a two-bit villain," I said bluntly, and blasted the god of undeath, covered in crimson thorns, with every last bit of purifying power I could draw from the god of the flame.

At last, the formidable Echo of the god of undeath started crumbling away.

If I was afraid to make an enemy of a god, I wouldn't have defied one in the first place.

"I swear on the flame of Gracefeel..." I pointed the tip of my demonblade at the god of undeath as he gradually vanished. "You will not own me. I will live and die as it should be."

That was my personal declaration of hostility, and my final farewell to the disappearing splinter of the god of undeath. The Echo replied to my words with a hate-filled stare, his eyes locked on mine as he turned to dust. I didn't break his gaze until he was gone.

◆

After the god of undeath's Echo was annihilated, I spent a while on alert, half-expecting a third splinter, or further enemies. Once I was finally sure that we'd won, it wasn't joy that filled me, but a sense of relief so overwhelming I slumped down to the temple's floor.

I sat there, the temple around me in terrible shape from the earlier battle, and breathed out a long sigh. He had been a strong opponent, without exaggeration.

Strangely, any awesome feeling of personal accomplishment was entirely missing. Maybe it was because many of the reasons we won were the work of other people.

I wielded the high-level demonblade I'd received from Blood,

Overeater. Gus destroyed his Echo's other splinter early on, which was supposed to be his ace in the hole. The god of the flame protected me as my guardian. And Mary's guardian deity, Mater the Earth-Mother, bought us time just when it was most needed.

That wasn't all. There were all the things that Blood, Mary, and Gus had generously shared with me, which gave me my familiarity with swords, magic, and prayer. Those gifts included something even more important than battle skill, something human, deep at my core.

It took all these things, piled one on top of another, to achieve this narrowest of narrow victories. I could easily have died, and if any one of those elements had been missing, I wouldn't have stood a chance. It was thanks to the protection of my god, and most of all, thanks to those three. I was blessed to have such people around me.

As I thought about how lucky I was, a pair of arms wrapped around me tightly. "Will... Will... I'm so glad you're okay..." The friendly smell of fragrant wood burning enveloped me.

"Good job, Will." A bony hand without any softness messed up my hair.

"Hmph. He's the son of Mary and Blood, blood relation or not. I should certainly hope he could accomplish this much." That choice of wording, belittling even when he offered praise.

"Mary! Blood! Gus!" Their voices moved me to tears.

Finally, I got the sense of what I'd achieved. I remembered something very obvious: defeating a powerful enemy like a hero in a story was never my goal. All I wanted was to protect these three, my precious family. I didn't want to curl into a ball like a coward. That was my only wish, and I risked my life hoping I'd achieve it. And I did.

"I did... I did it..."

I stood up, and fought like I should. I didn't curl up in a ball and

hug my knees. They were all here, all three of them. I protected them.

"Thank the gods... Thank the gods..." My chest tightened with hundreds of different feelings. Tears trickled down my cheeks. "I'm so glad you're all safe..."

I returned Mary's hug, and looked at Blood and Gus. They were smiling. They were all smiling. As if it were contagious, I smiled back through my tears.

"Okay!" Blood dragged out the word and shook a fist in the air enthusiastically. "I think we've got a victory to celebrate, and we owe Will a coming-of-age party, too!"

"Yes. This place needs a lot of tidying up, but I think it can wait for a day or two."

"Indeed. In that case, I have a two-hundred-year-old bottle of dwarven spirits that's been waiting for just such an occasion."

"Firewater?!" Blood said. "Blazing hell, Grandpa Gus, you kept that quiet!"

"What, you suggest I should have wasted this fine drink on a child?"

"Dwarven firewater?" I asked. "Is that good?"

"It most certainly would be," Gus said, "if only I could drink it!"

"Oh, come on, old man. Pretend." Blood sounded exasperated with him. "This is a time for celebration!"

"Yeah. Come on, Gus, drink with us!"

"Will, don't you go drinking too much. You remember what happened the last time. That had better not happen again, do you understand me?"

"Y-Yes!"

“Man, when you stare at people with your eyes wide open like that, your face looks goddamn terrifying.”

Mary laughed softly, not offended. “It’s not as bad as yours.”

Gus burst out laughing. “Very true.”

“Go on then, Grandpa Gus. Show us where you hid the drink.”

As we chatted noisily, and followed behind Gus, Mary and Blood’s knees gave way, and they collapsed to the floor.

◆

For an instant, I didn’t understand what had happened. “Ma…ry? Blood?” The words that came out of my mouth felt very much out of place.

“Ahh… Yup. No good.”

“It seems that way, doesn’t it?”

The two of them attempted to stand several times, but eventually gave up. Their legs would no longer work.

“It’s just how things are, I’m afraid. Our attachment is gone, we refused to sell our souls to the god of undeath, and we remained faithful to the good gods. It would be foolish to think we’d be allowed to remain as undead.”

“Well, yeah. Gotta say, though, I was hoping we’d get cut some slack until the party ended.”

“Gracefeel is already making great allowances for us, you know. It wouldn’t have been at all strange for us to have disappeared immediately.”

I couldn’t understand what they were saying. I didn’t want to understand.

“Uh, so, Will. Me and Mary, this is as far as we go.”

“Y-You’re kidding.” The words spilled reflexively from my mouth. I didn’t want to accept it. “Y-You’re both playing a trick on me.” My voice was shaking. “This is supposed to be a party, don’t be so mean...”

“Will, you’re a clever boy... You understand, don’t you?”

I couldn’t fight it. I knew, in some part of my head, that things were going to turn out this way. And after that look and those gentle words... I knew it was over.

“You said it so suddenly, I wanted you to just... laugh and say it was just a joke... I wanted you to...” My feelings of denial slowly withered and died. I breathed out deeply, and nothing was left inside but a tinge of resignation and a lonely, hollow sadness.

“Sorry, bud.”

“I’m sorry, Will...”

Both of them might have felt the same way.

“Isn’t there anything we can do?”

“There isn’t.” Mary shook her head. “Even if there were, we mustn’t.”

“It was you who said it, Will. It’s that ‘live and die as it should be’ thing. Okay, sure, we wavered on that for a while... Got there in the end, though! Just took the scenic route. Pretty sure a couple centuries still counts as a scenic route. Just about.”

“Besides, parents are meant to die before their children. That’s a law of nature. A law of the earth.” Mary’s words were fitting for a priest of Mater.

“Mm. Yeah. Yeah, you’re right.” That was how things were meant

to be. The god of the flame would probably say the same thing.

But—Even so—

"I know I mustn't say this… but… I can't help it. I'll just say it once, okay? Even after everything you've said, I'm still not happy to see you die."

◆

No. No way. I don't wanna see that happen. I don't *wanna see Mary and Blood die.*

These were forbidden words for me, both as a child standing in front of his dying parents, and as a new priest of the god who presided over souls and samsara. They were words that threatened to undo the pretentious declaration I'd made to the god of undeath.

Yet I couldn't help but say them.

"I want to come back here someday and see you both again. I want to have more fights with you, Blood, and beat you sometimes and be beaten sometimes, and then we'll say stupid crap to each other. I want to do chores with you again, Mary, and maybe you'll tell me how much I've improved. I want you to see my kids, my grandkids, and I want you to teach them all kinds of things, like you taught me." That had been my dream. My sweet reverie, which some part of me had always known would never come true.

"How could you say you're going to disappear now?! You can't go! You can't, I can't take it! How am I meant to go on without you?!" My voice was trembling. My tears spilled out uncontrollably. "Don't go… Please… I don't care if you cheat… Please just stay…"

I knew how pathetic I must have looked to them as they watched me. Crying, screaming, throwing a tantrum. Just like a child. But even so, I had to tell them.

"Mary—"

“Yes, I know.”

They looked at each other and nodded. Then, they both balled their hands into fists, and clonked me on top of the head. It didn’t hurt. It was just a gentle knock.

“No. Now stop acting like a baby.”

“Blood is quite right. Be reasonable.”

After they told me off so gently, I couldn’t contain my unbearable sadness anymore. I cried my eyes out, tears flowing in streams down my cheeks. My face crumpled up, and I could hardly see through the tears. I heaved with sobs, over and over again.

When was the last time I had cried like this? The feelings I was full of wouldn’t even come out as words anymore.

“Hahah, I think that’s the first fatherly thing I’ve done in ages.”

“Will didn’t need a lot of looking after, did he?”

They laughed together.

“Come on, Will.” Blood turned to me. “We’d do anything for you, you know that. But come on. Some things you just don’t do. How are you meant to go on without us? I’ll tell you how: you find a way. Us humans sometimes lose stuff we think we can’t live without. But what you’ll find is, we don’t die so easy, so long as we keep on eating and sleeping. And we find new things that are important to us, as well.”

Blood pulled me close to him, and for the first time since I was a baby, he hugged me. As expected, it was a hug without a hint of warmth, nothing but hard bone and holes that let the cold air in. He ruffled my hair in the exact same way he’d done ever since I was a child. That absolutely uncomfortable feeling drew tears from me again.

“When you get out there, make yourself a lot of good buds, pick up a few pretty chicks, and have some fun.”

“Blood,” Mary said in a drawn-out, admonishing voice, “you mustn’t encourage him to be unfaithful. Will, always be loyal in love and marriage! Good gracious, this man…” Mary tutted at him.

“Oh, and Will,” she continued, “you swore a strong oath to the god of the flame and succeeded in carrying out deicide. These are the acts of a legendary hero. You have a turbulent fate ahead of you.” Mary was sitting perfectly upright as she spoke. Her words were solemn, like a priest delivering a message from the gods. “There will be times when you will suffer a loss. There will be times when you are blamed unjustly. You may be betrayed by those you help, the good you do may be forgotten, and you may lose what you have built up and be left with nothing but enemies to show for it.”

Her serious atmosphere quickly softened. She beckoned me over to her, and held me tight. “Love people anyway. Do good anyway. Don’t be afraid of loss. Create, don’t destroy. Where there is sin, grant forgiveness; where there is despair, hope; where there is sorrow, joy. And protect the weak from all kinds of violence. Just as you defied that immortal god for our sake.”

She probably understood that this would be our final embrace. “Will, William, my son. My darling son, Blood’s darling son.” I could feel her arms trembling as she held me. Mine were as well. “May the protection of the good gods and the spirits of courage always be with you.”

Mary’s face suddenly looked blurred and doubled to me. It wasn’t because of the tears. It was probably her spectral body, separating out from her physical one. I now saw the slender form of a woman standing there, with luxuriant blonde hair and downcast, emerald-green eyes. She had the look of a mother, graceful and kind.

“Listen,” Blood said. “Always move forward and have confidence in the outcome. All a man needs is determination, and he can try

anything. You've got a habit of sinking into deep thought. Don't let it stop you from moving."

Blood's form started looking blurred, like double vision, too. I now saw red hair like a lion. Sharp eyes, befitting a warrior. A well-sculpted, muscular body. He bore the look of a father, wild and jaunty.

I engraved their appearances and the words they'd given me into my heart. I was sure I'd never forget them. They would shine upon my life like Gracefeel's flame.

We stayed like that, in silence, for a while.

Someone behind us cleared his throat. I turned around to see Gus. Four glasses and an expensive-looking bottle of firewater he'd brought from somewhere were levitating in front of him. The sight of him floating there on his own, looking completely out of place, was somehow hilarious. We all cracked up.

After that, we all drank together. The first liquor I'd ever drunk as part of a group of four had a mellow fragrance and strength enough to burn my throat. I would never forget it.

That night, guided by the divine torch that was Gracefeel's lantern, my parents returned to samsara.


Final Chapter

A refreshing wind blew past.

It was dawn, and a thin morning mist hung in the air at the foot of the hill. A city of stone was spread out below us, built up to the edge of a vast lake. It felt medieval, or even older. I could see tall towers and an aqueduct built with a series of beautiful arches.

All of it was aged and in ruins.

Many of the buildings' roofs had collapsed, and the plaster on the walls had fallen off, leaving the buildings in a state of pitiful disrepair. Grass grew through gaps in the streets' stone paving, and green vines and moss clung to the buildings. The city was decaying away among the greenery, as though it were enjoying a quiet doze after all of the activity that must once have taken place here.

The morning sun shone softly over it all.

It was here, on this hill overlooking the city, that I decided to make Mary and Blood's graves. I had so many memories of this temple hill, where you could look over the lake and the city in ruins. That was why I'd decided to bury them here.

I looked over their graves in silence.

I wanted to return here one day. I knew I wouldn't be able to see Mary or Blood again. I knew they'd returned to samsara. But I thought I'd at least like to come to these graves and tell them how I'd grown.

I wanted to show them my friends and my family, as had once been my dream. To come back as an adult, the kind of adult they could look at and be reassured, knowing that their child was living a proper life.

"So we'll be apart for a little while." I put my hands together, and prayed in silence for a while. Then, I told the two graves that I'd be on my way.

"All done?"

"Yeah." I nodded. "So, um..." There was no good way to say this. "Gus... Why aren't you dead?"

"That's a fine question to ask an old man in his last years! My grandson wants me dead! Demonspawn!"

"Demonspawn?! Oh, come on, that hurts! I was only thinking about your hoard of treasures and how it'll all be mine when you die!"

"*Aha!* The demonspawn confesses!"

We were just fooling around. A lot of circumstances had put distance between us, so this was the first time in a very long while that I'd been able to fool around with Gus like this.

"Heh heh heh," I cackled, doing my most exaggerated impression of a conniving swindler. "I'm just offering to give a use to dead money that's sitting there doing nothing. Whaddaya say, old man?"

"Hmm, a fine point. Take it, then."

"Uh...?"

Gus's face had suddenly returned to being completely serious, and he pushed a number of bags on me. I looked inside them.

Countless gold and silver coins shone with reflected morning sunlight. There were precious jewels, rings, bracelets, buttons, brooches, pins, and cape fasteners. Even ribbons and sashes with gold and silver thread woven into them.

Huh. Cool. A fortune.

"*HOLY GOD!*" I almost dropped them all in shock, but managed to desperately hold on to them.

"Did you expect less from my fortune? I'll lend it to you at no interest. Make it grow. I did teach you how," Gus said, and grinned.

"B-But… this is… this is…"

"Money that sits there not changing hands is, as you say, dead. I'm not fond of stagnant money. You said it, I believe. Live and die as it should be. Money is the same," Gus shrugged. "Make money work for you. Until it's done its job, make sure it changes hands and doesn't sit stagnant."

That was probably an attitude that Gus prided himself upon.

"I can't be there to see it happen anymore, you see."

"Gus…" I bowed my head to him, and gratefully took the treasure. I prepared myself to say goodbye. This would probably be the last thing I'd ever—

"That said, I won't be going anywhere for at least another ten years."

What?

"Well… I mean… You understand… There is the issue of the High King's seal needing to be protected. If the demons break it, we're done for." Gus gave me a serious look. "So last night, your god came down with a revelation for me, and we had a little discussion. I received permission to loiter here in this city for the next decade or so, until the god of undeath regains his strength."

My mouth flapped like a fish. How had he arranged *this?!* What was Gracefeel thinking?! I saw the need, but… *really?!*

"I seem to have become something akin to a Herald of Gracefeel's now."

Upon closer inspection, the sense of "impurity" I'd always had from Gus was weaker now. He even felt more like a saintly spirit. But then couldn't—

"They told me they didn't want that," Gus said, as if he'd read my

thoughts. “If they were given another decade, they’d become greedy. They’d start clinging to life. After staying one decade, why not another? And another? At least until you died. You see? They knew they’d start thinking that way. That’s why they chose to move on. They were putting on a brave face, but in their hearts, they were bawling just like you.”

Hearing that left me without words. They refused to cheat until the last, despite knowing all the while that there was a way.

“One old codger is more than enough for this greed-inducing position,” Gus shrugged.

I did agree that Gus could probably handle it. He’d carry out his duty as the protector of the seal with ease, and when the tenth year came and it was time for him to go, he would depart this world without a single word of complaint. I was sure of it. Grandpa Gus always was rock ’n’ roll.

“What do we do about the seal after the ten years are up?”

“Apparently, you have ten years to think of something.” Passing the buck entirely, huh. Thanks, god. “She tells me that faith in her has dwindled quite a bit out there. She used up considerable strength just intervening in our troubles.”

“Huh?”

“It seems that the future of the god of the flame is another thing resting upon your efforts.”

I hadn’t even left yet, and I felt like more and more baggage, both tangible and intangible, was being piled on top of me. So this was what a “rough fate” felt like!

“In any event, I’m sure you’ll be needing money. Go on, just take it already.”

“Yeah. It looks like I’ve got a lot to do. Thanks a lot.” I stuffed

treasure into various places on my person, and went over my gear again as a final double-check.

Heavy clothing both top and bottom. Leather gloves, rugged boots. A big backpack with lots of pockets. Belt pouches. One spare pair of boots. Blanket, cooking pan, food with a long shelf life, waterskin, survival knife, hatchet, fountain pen, parchment, rope, one change of clothes, and a thick canvas for camping. Then there were the more minor items: a little firewater to use in place of smelling salts; needles, thread, and cloth of various sizes; a small clump of rock salt. All of these were important.

For armor, I was wearing the mithril mail that one of the corpses of those deceased heroes had been wearing in my fight against the god of undeath. The good thing about this was that it was extremely light. It was strong, and yet it hardly felt like I was wearing armor at all. I put one more layer over the top of the mail in order to hide it.

Then, I put on a hooded cloak, and did it up at the front with one of the cloak fasteners that Gus had given me. I had sewn a talisman with the Word of Guardianship between the layers of cloth comprising the hood, providing my head with some level of protection.

I'd now been marked by the god of undeath, so it was vital to strike a good balance between the weight of my baggage and the strength of my equipment. I started thinking about my old computer games and how useful it would be to have a bag that could hold infinite items. Unfortunately, I had nothing so convenient, so I'd just have to do my best without one.

And finally, my weapons. My spear, Pale Moon; my one-handed sword, Overeater; and my circular shield.

I tied a beautiful ribbon around the base of Pale Moon's blade to personalize it a bit. It was a lower-rank blade than Overeater, but all the same, it was the very first thing I'd ever won in battle, it was useful, and I had a fondness for it.

Overeater, however, was a different story. Despite it playing such an important role in my battle against the god of undeath, I wrapped it in old cloth and handle leather. I felt sort of bad about it, but just as Blood had said, this blade was too strong, its effect too vicious. It was a dangerous object, not to be pulled out, even if I wanted to. It wasn't the kind of thing to use as my main weapon. It was a last resort.

For a while, I considered whether I should take the shield at all, but it had proven modestly useful a number of times, and imagining myself without it scared me. Shields weren't very exciting, but there was a big difference between having one and not. To try to make it less cumbersome, I'd attached a belt to it so I could easily carry it over my shoulder, but it looked like it was going to add quite a lot of weight.

I'd had this traveling kit ready and organized for a long time. I fell silent for a while, remembering how much Mary and Blood had helped me prepare it.

"Will." Gus's voice roused me from my moment of melancholy. "If you're heading out into the world, you're probably going to need a surname. The name 'William' was given to you by them, so I was thinking that your surname could come from me. What do you say?"

"Hm? It's rare to hear you say something like that, Gus. Sure, if you want." I had no particular reason to refuse, so I accepted, thinking of it as his final parting gift.

"Then I believe I will borrow from a custom used by certain tribes of elves and halflings."

Huh? Elves and halflings? Why?

"The custom in these tribes is that one's surname is determined by the names of one's mother and father," Gus said, with a solemn expression. "Maryblood. You are William Maryblood."

I chewed the word over. "Maryblood." William Maryblood. It felt good. Like it was tailor-made for me.

“Take their names with you as you go. I’ve wandered the world enough, after all. Now it’s time you enjoyed it. Just you and your parents.” The man called the Wandering Sage shrugged his shoulders.

“Yeah. Thank you. I like it a lot, that surname.”

I finished my final checks. I wrapped my pouch belt around me, hung my sword from it, loaded my backpack and other baggage onto my back, slung my shield over my shoulder, and took my spear into my hand. I was pretty strong, physically speaking, but the amount I was carrying was more than enough to make me feel the weight.

“Okay. Take care of yourself, Gus. I’ll be back again.”

“Mm.”

I exchanged a short goodbye with Gus, headed down the hill—and then, I turned around and yelled back to him, grinning and waving. “I’ll add in a ‘G’ for my middle name!”

“Idiot! My name begins with an ‘A’! Did my lessons teach you nothing, you halfwit?!” I could hear Gus laughing back.

“You’ll always be Gus to me! Grandpa Augustus is basically a tongue-twister!” I called back to him, cackling loudly.

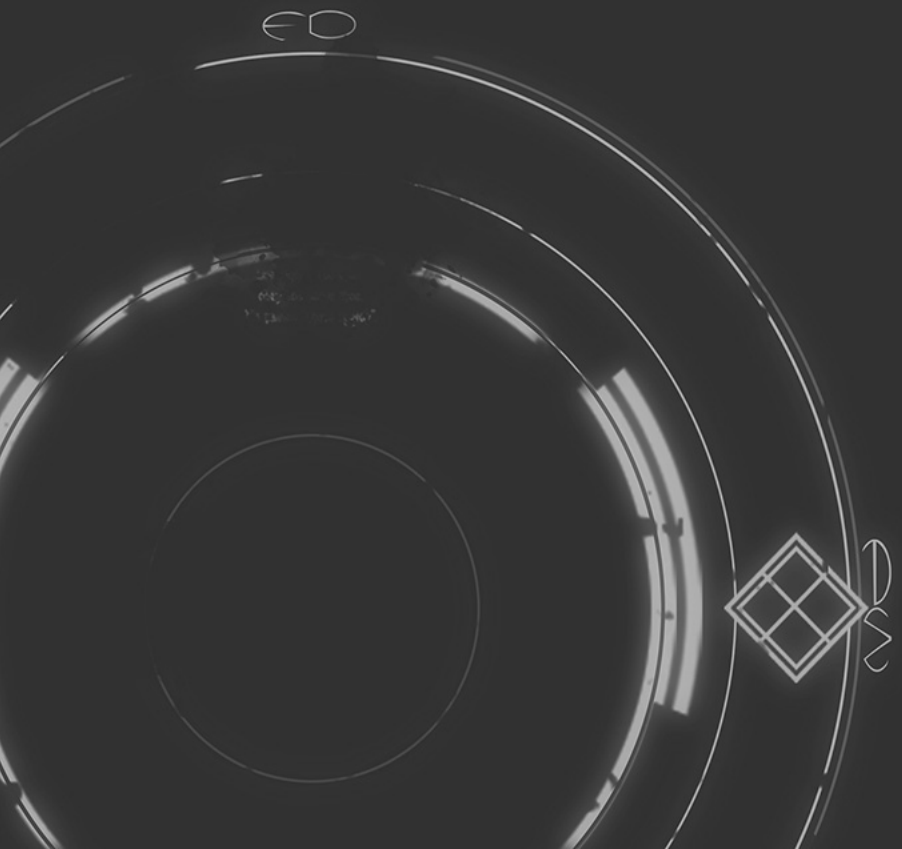
“Hmph. What a hopeless grandson! All right then. Goodbye to you, William G. Maryblood!”

“Goodbye, Gus! I’ll see you again someday—count on it!” We waved to each other.

Then I fixed my gaze straight ahead and started forward, never glancing back. There were traces of an old street that had once run alongside the river, leading away from the lake beside the city. I decided to go down and follow it to the north. Bathed in the radiance of the morning sun, I headed for the outside world.

— Finis —

Side Story: The Building Blocks of a Dream



It was a full moon. The fort was filled with the smell of death.

People's corpses were there. Bodies that had been cut to death, stabbed to death, bitten and battered to death. Bodies covered in mud, blood, and guts. No one would ever be reflected again in their vacant eyes.

Demons' corpses were there. Some with forms taken after humans, some a monstrous cross between man and beast. All of these, too, cut or stabbed to death.

The human and the demon corpses were strewn everywhere, entangled, intertwined. They had killed one another.

Some had lost limbs. Others had had one or both of their eyeballs pulled out. Still others had their intestines hanging out of their body. Some had even expired in pairs, with their weapons gouged into each other's vulnerable spots.

In the courtyard of that fort, which was the embodiment of the word "gruesome," two people were facing each other.

One was a man. He was a very large man with red hair, wearing thick beast-leather armor. He had a muscular, well-forged body, long, unkempt hair like a lion, and sharp eyes. His name was Blood. He was a warrior.

Saying nothing, the man held his two-handed broadsword at the ready. Its long blade was thick and sharp.

An enormous figure stood facing Blood. What comments could be made about that thing? It was large. Staggeringly large and thick. Its head resembled the head of a wild, canyon-dwelling black mountain goat, with enormous horns, and an oval-shaped face. But its eyes were not those of a goat. Its eyes had vertically slit pupils, like a reptile, and though there was no emotion in them, there was certainly an intelligence there not to be found in wild beasts.

Shift your gaze down below the neck, and its body resembled a person's. Its arms were packed with thick muscle and covered in short black hair. It had a bulky chest and a six-pack. And finally, as you descended from its muscular thighs down to its feet, it had a goat's joint structure and hooves. Its form was a disturbing caricature, a mixture of goat parts and human parts, mashed together without rhyme or reason.

It was holding a massive, desperately thick scimitar, which also bore a resemblance to a Japanese nata or a butcher's knife. This gigantic demon, one or two sizes bigger even than Blood, was known, if you followed taxonomic classification, as a "baphomet."

"Hey there, king of the keep." It was Blood who spoke. "How you doing?"

The baphomet did not respond. It merely stood with its scimitar ready. It had determined that the man in front of it would not be an easy opponent.

"See... Us warriors are taught to give our names and a comment or two before getting to the business of battle." Blood shrugged to himself. "Demons... goddamned savages."

Perhaps that looked like a moment of weakness. The baphomet rushed forward, swinging its scimitar straight down toward its opponent.

In that very instant, the baphomet's head flew off. Blood had stepped toward the baphomet with twice the speed and beheaded him.

He had leaped directly into his opponent's slash, but because he had thrust his own blade into the path of his opponent's and knocked it off course, he didn't suffer a single scratch. The baphomet's body, now missing its head, collapsed to its knees and toppled over onto the ground.

To have fought a demon leader in melee combat and won in a single blow? This man clearly had extraordinary sword skills.

“Demons. Absolute goddamned savages.” Blood shrugged once again.

“If *you’re* calling them savages, then they’re *really* in a bad place.” A new, clear voice. It was a voice unfit for a battlefield that stank with blood.

Its owner was a woman, who had her luxuriant blonde hair up in a braided bun. Over her white and green priest’s raiment, she wore a sword belt, attached to which were a one-handed sword and a small shield. The piecemeal leather armor she was wearing was slightly ill-matched for her, but she carried herself in it with confidence. She probably had a certain degree of knowledge of the martial arts.

Her name was Mary. She smiled sweetly at Blood with her beautiful verdant eyes.

“Are you aware of the phrase ‘the pot calling the kettle black’?”

“Hey now, I don’t deserve that. I have style.”

“Style. The man whose greatest contentment is to drown himself in drink, shovel meat into his mouth, and have a big punch-up says he has style.”

“If that ain’t style, what is?”

“You’re blazing new trails, Blood. Unfortunately, in the wrong direction.”

“Blood the Trailblazer! Hot damn, I like that one. Hey, don’t give me the silent treatment.”

Before their friendly banter could go any further, the sky to the south lit up with a blinding light. A moment later, there was a thunderous sound, and the ground rumbled under them.

Blood whistled. “Looks like Old Gus’s team pulled it off.”

"Yes, it does," Mary nodded.

"I brought down this keep fine, too. They'll have no problems pulling out."

"I still can't believe you took down an entire keep on your own. It's honestly ridiculous, even if it was small."

"Aw, shucks."

"That was not a compliment. In any case… I'll give them a simple funeral and prevent them from becoming undead. That is why I'm with you, after all." Mary began offering a prayer to the dead around her. "Mater our Earth-Mother. Gracefeel, god of flux… Let the souls of the dead not wander. Let them not tarry under the god of undeath's protection, filling the world…"

As Mary stood upright, praying in this hellish place, Blood watched her with a smile. Then chuckled grimly and closed his eyes.

"Phew. That will do it."

"Great. Good job."

"Only…" Her expression was dispirited. "How many days do you think breaking the canyon bridge is going to buy us?"

"Well, they've either gotta go around, set up some large-scale magic to reshape the terrain, or… the High King could ride some flying creature across, then make more troops on the other side. I'd say a few days at most." Blood shrugged.

Mary responded with dejected silence.

"Yeah, we're pretty much screwed unless we kill the High King."

"I did hear Gus has something planned…" Mary said, not sounding hopeful.

Blood nodded. "You can bet it'll be a one-way ticket, though. There

won't be coming back from it." He paused and crossed his arms. "And you ain't coming."

"Well, that came from nowhere." Mary rolled her eyes. "I'm a powerful asset for you, if I do say so myself."

"I know that. But you're still staying behind. I'm not having you dying. The thought makes me feel sick." The red-haired man grimaced, as if he'd pictured it all too vividly.

The blonde priest gazed tenderly at him. "Why don't you at least try adding, 'Because I love you'?" she teased. "Women like that. Me, mainly."

"A cheesy line like that? Do you *want* me to throw up?"

Mary gave a resigned laugh, her green eyes sparkling. "You really are impossible... All right, and what if I insist on coming?"

"I'll send you back even if I have to punch your lights out first." Blood's voice was harsh and cold. He had clearly reached a firm decision. "Just so's you know, I got permission from Old Gus for that already."

"I see. There's no use resisting, then." Mary shrugged her shoulders.

"You're pretty skilled, I'm not gonna lie, but you're no match for the great Blood."

"No, I'm not."

They'd known each other for long enough. Something like that was obvious to the both of them.

"How about this, then?" Mary slowly extended her index and middle fingers. "If you leave me behind"—she rested her fingers against her neck like a blade—"I will kill myself on the spot with my own sword." Her smile was blinding.

Blood's expression froze. This was not a joking smile. It was deathly serious. "A-Are you—"

"Did you not hear me? I said, if I cannot stay with you, I will kill myself on the spot." Still smiling, Mary walked up to Blood and looked up into his face. "You *will* take me with you, won't you?" She tilted her head and smiled at him, awaiting an answer. The look was as adorable as it was firm.

Blood's cheeks were drawn back into a horrible grimace. "So manipulative..."

"That's women for you, Blood. You may be the strongest man there is, but a man can't beat a woman. You had better get used to it."

"What a raw deal." Blood tilted his neck back and stared into the sky. "Never known anyone so stubborn. Dammit. Nice going, Blood, you caught yourself a nightmare in women's clothing."

"Oh? You haven't made a single move on me and I'm already yours?"

"That's men for you." A sigh. "Hey... Mary."

"What is it?" Mary tilted her head slightly to the side again.

Blood held the slender tips of Mary's fingers in his rugged hands, and looked intensely into her green eyes. "If we make it back alive, let's settle down somewhere and get married."

She gave a refined and quiet giggle. "Gladly."

"I'd like to find a place on a hill with a nice view or something. Somewhere quiet."

"Oh, that sounds nice. I can imagine the pleasant breeze. Perhaps we could have a vegetable garden," Mary laughed.

"And when our kid is born, we'll get Old Gus to homeschool him."

Another giggle. “I expect Old Gus won’t be happy about that. He’ll agree anyway, of course, he’ll just grumble about it.”

Both of them understood. The flames of their lives had almost burnt out.

“And if he’s a boy, I’m gonna teach him martial arts! He’ll have my fighting skills, plus Old Gus’s magic. He’ll be ultra-mega-strong, even stronger than me! Whaddaya think of that?!”

“I’m sure he will end up a very strong and intelligent person who has no idea how to function in human society.”

“Oof! That hurts…”

“It’ll have to be up to me to teach him all the little things he needs to know.”

They themselves understood better than anyone that they had no hope of returning alive. So this was a dream.

“But I’m sure our child will be adorable.”

“Yeah.”

Despite knowing that it would never come to pass, they grew something private inside their hearts. An earnest wish. A happiness that could have been. Something glimmering, something warm. Like young children, innocently laughing while making a castle out of colored building blocks, they built a small and idle dream.

“Oh, yes. What would you like to call him?”

“Already decided if he’s a boy.”

“It had better not be anything strange.”

“Would I do that? A long time ago, Old Gus gave me a lecture on the origins of names, you see.”

“And you took a liking to it back then?”

“Yeah. He’s our kid. Without any doubt, he’s gonna have a stubborn force of will.” Blood grinned. “So our boy is gonna be called ‘William.’ What do you think?” he asked, and Mary smiled back at him.

“That’s a nice name. I like it, too.”

Will. William. My boy.

As Mary hummed to herself, Blood started walking, her hand still held in his. The two set off toward death and destruction, leaving the building blocks of an ephemeral, naïve dream behind.

No one knew, then. That far away beyond their death, destruction, and years upon years of time, from the remnants of a gentle and glittering dream, there would rise the small, first cry of a child.

— The End —

Afterword

Hello. My name is Kanata Yanagino.

This is my first work. Though I'm sure it must have its defects, I put all my efforts into writing it. I sincerely hope you enjoyed it.

The original idea for *The Faraway Paladin* came to me at the end of April 2015, approximately one year before this book would come out in Japan. It so happened that around that period, I had more free time than I knew what to do with, and I was filled with a sense of emptiness. I was having trouble getting into any books or games, and yet there was nothing else I wanted to do, either. I seem to recall my mind just being incredibly vacant.

Amid those lethargic and weary days, there was a person who dazzled me. He was one of my friends, a fellow tabletop roleplayer. He was an aspiring light novelist, and a few months prior, he'd decided to try to win a Rookie of the Year Award.

Tabletop roleplaying is a type of storytelling game played with a group of people sitting around a table. You make characters according to a set of rules, and use dice rolls and improv-style acting to create a tale as a group. By nature, it has a lot in common with fiction writing, so it's not that uncommon to find aspiring novelists among lovers of tabletop roleplaying games. If I also include the people who once aspired to become novelists and no longer do, it should come to quite a high number.

But for that very reason, I also knew the fate of people who talked about wanting to become novelists and who started writing stories. I do wonder just how many of them were actually capable of writing enough words to fill one whole book, with the full story structure of introduction, development, climax, and conclusion. Of those who did,

I wonder just how many of their stories were interesting enough to be lined up alongside commercial works?

I'm no stranger to this myself; once, some considerable time ago, I got the idea in my head to try writing a little bit of a novel, and hammered away at the keyboard for a while. I ran out of ideas almost immediately, and I abandoned the whole thing in only a few days. So if I may honestly confess, I thought at the time that my friend was just the same.

"Ah," the mean-spirited part of myself muttered, "everyone in this world contracts chickenpox once. Looks like it's his turn." Either he wouldn't be able to finish it, or even if he did, it wouldn't be particularly interesting. More or less, that would be how it'd end up. I would humor him by giving it a read through, and give his story some moderate praise with a put-on smile. Many years of experience had poisoned me into thinking that way.

But I couldn't have been more wrong. After deciding to try to win a Rookie of the Year Award for light novels, he wrote and wrote an incredible amount each day. He'd have enough text to fill an A6 paperback written out in no time at all. Then he'd submit it, and immediately move on to the next story.

His sentences were clear. The content was a little unusual, but there was a coherent theme, and it was interesting. Even I, a complete amateur, could clearly see that what I was reading was special. He wasn't just dreaming. He also had the skill to make his dreams a reality.

My judgment had been completely mistaken, and my eyes had been as good as blind. Curiously, I remember feeling very happy about that.

My friend progressed through the stages of the Rookie of the Year Award, being selected again and again. When the results came in and my friend had almost reached the final selection, I remember how happily he talked about it. He was a blindingly bright and precious

light to me in a time when I was feeling empty and shriveled. It was powerful enough to make me think that I'd like to work toward a dream like him.

And so I, too, decided to write a novel. The story I'd depict would be one I thought up after getting inspiration from the many web novels listed under a genre called "Reincarnation." The story of a boy, raised by undead in a ruined city. I thought it wasn't a bad story, considering it had come out of the head of a total amateur.

However, there was an obvious problem. After all, the only characters it featured were monsters, gods, and the protagonist, a young boy. I knew that light novels nowadays probably needed a charming heroine or two.

So I decided my first attempt would be practice. My goal was simply to write 100,000 Japanese characters without abandoning the whole thing. I decided to post it on "Shousetsuka ni Narou" (Let's Become Novelists), a site that hosted a number of stories I liked. It was just supposed to be an exercise, a first step.

And now... this story is a book. I was surprised to find that the users of "Shousetsuka ni Narou" took to *The Faraway Paladin*. This story, a mixture of old fantasy with no attractive girls, leaped up the rankings at an astonishing pace, and then I was approached about getting it published.

My aforementioned talented writer friend was making his debut at about this time, and before I knew it, I was following right behind. I'd jumped into the world I'd had my sights on in a way I'd never expected. *You never know what's going to happen in life*, I remember thinking.

A while after being approached about the publication of my book, I received a phone call from the same person.

"We're doing a shared-universe type of project," I was told.

"Hm? Well, that sounds interesting," I replied.

“We’d like you to write for us, if you’re willing.”

Maybe they have some unimportant spots they set aside for newbies? “All right, I’d love to take the opportunity. Can you give me an idea of the role my work would play in this shared universe?”

“It would be the centerpiece.”

“What?”

“It would be the centerpiece.”

“(speechless)”

...You never do *know what’s going to happen in life*, I remember thinking.

And so the shared-universe work *Arcadia Garden* was published day and date with *The Faraway Paladin*. It’s an epic project with ten authors collaborating to make a single world. Please do pick it up along with *Paladin* if you have the chance.

In any case, I reached this point with the help of a great number of people. I’ve never written an acknowledgment before, but here goes.

To all my web readers: Your warm support and encouragement was what got me here.

To my many tabletop roleplaying buddies and their lovable characters: All of the memories we’ve created together gave me strength and helped me overcome my difficulties.

To my fellow creative minds, including K-sensei, who I have talked about in this afterword: Thank you so much for always taking the time to read and give me your impressions, and even ideas.

To my local library and all the books and videos on the shelves: Thank you for teaching me so many things. It looks like I’ll finally be able to give back.

Kususaga-sensei, who added such gorgeous illustrations: I have no words to express my gratitude. I have very fond memories of the tabletop RPG *Sword World 2.0*, which you drew the cover for.

To my editor, the editors at Overlap, and everyone involved with this book's printing, advertising, sales, and everything else related to it; and to you, the person who took this book into your hands: I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Kanata Yanagino, February 2016

A few further words for English readers.

I love *A Wizard of Earthsea*. I think that Sparrowhawk is one of the greatest wizards in fantasy. I love the movie *Conan the Barbarian* as well. The moment where Conan prays to Crom before the last battle is very memorable. I had a lot of impressive sci-fi recommended to me by my friends, too. *A Princess of Mars, Citizen of the Galaxy, The Martian*... Ah, and *Civilization*—I'm sure anyone who's played those games will understand when I say that they consumed a "little" of my time. I had "Baba Yetu" on repeat more than once. *Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Superheroes like Superman, Batman, and Spider-Man. *Annie* (the musical), the movies *Singin' in the Rain, Stand by Me, The Professional,* etc. I love the *Rocky* series too. I've seen them countless times. (Except *V*. I repeat: except *V*!)

Some I picked out myself; others were recommended to me by my friends. There are countless works and characters from America and other English-speaking countries that I have very fond memories of. I have received so much from your words, and from the works the English language has produced. So *The Faraway Paladin* getting an English translation is a truly happy thing for me. I have received excitement, emotion, and memories from creators on distant continents oceans apart. If I have been able to give even a little back, nothing would make me happier.

Did you enjoy *The Faraway Paladin*? I hope from my heart that

you did, and that you enjoy the next volume even more. My great respects to J-Novel Club for the marvellous job done on translating this work. And to my darling readers of the English version: my heartfelt thanks to you all.

Kanata Yanagino, January 2017