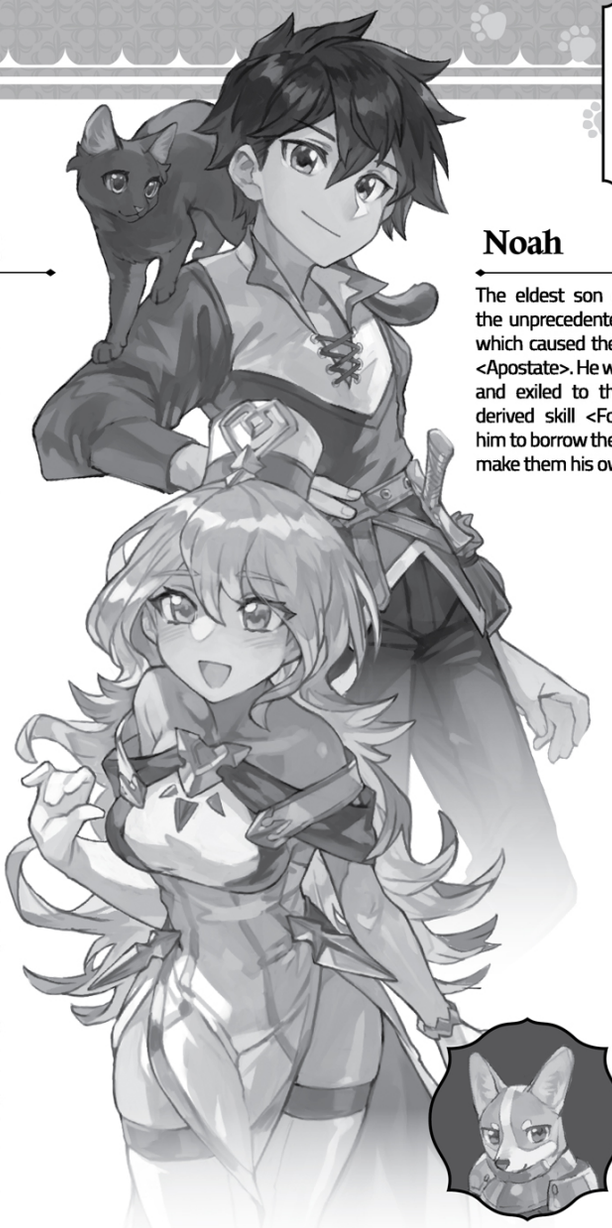

The Exiled Noble Rises as the HOLY KING
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2
Befriending Fluffy Beasts and a Holy Maiden with My Ultimate Cheat Skill!


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Characters



Cath Palug

A juvenile demon cat. Noah saved her when she was being attacked by goblins in the Purgatory Forest, and she became his first follower. Her nickname is "Cath."

Noah

The eldest son of a duke. Noah gained the unprecedented root skill <Holy King>, which caused the Church to brand him an <Apostate>. He was stripped of his position and exiled to the Purgatory Forest. His derived skill <Follower Contract> allows him to borrow the skills of his followers and make them his own.



Mataza

A male kobold soldier, one of the evolved individuals among the kobold pack that follows Noah. He can communicate with Noah and speaks in an archaic fashion.

Aht

One of the Holy Maidens who serve as the Church of Astral's top officers. She possesses superhuman combat strength and came to the Purgatory Forest in pursuit of Noah. But after meeting him, she swore fealty to him and became wholly devoted.

Liber

Like Mataza, a kobold soldier and one of Noah's followers. She speaks like a knight.

The Story So Far

Noah, the eldest son of the Oraculum Kingdom's Duke of Olipiage, **manifested the <Holy King> root skill at his baptism**. This caused the Church of Astral to brand him an **<Apostate>**, and he was **exiled** from the Duke's household.

Abandoned and alone in the monster-infested Purgatory Forest, Noah used **<Follower Contract>, the derived skill** of <Holy King>, which allowed him to recruit followers and then borrow their skills. Befriending the juvenile demon cat Cath and a group of kobolds, he managed to survive.

An assassin from the Church of Astral came after Noah: one of their top officers, the **Holy Maiden Aht**. Aht wielded immense might, but abruptly declared her loyalty to Noah because he possessed the <Holy King> root skill. Furthermore, she claimed that she would sabotage the Church from within so that it would no longer persecute Noah.

Before Aht returned to the Church, she put Noah and his followers through hellish training to survive in monster territory. They parted ways with her, then safely escaped the Purgatory Forest.

Meanwhile, House Olipiage had faith that Noah was still alive, and chose **someone** to go look for him...

Prologue: At the Order of Knights

After Aht temporarily left Noah's side, this exchange was carried out in the guardroom of Duke Olipiage's knights.

"Huh? No no no, father! I can't do that!" said a young man in his mid-teens. He was waving his hands in front of his face and smiling, as if he doubted the sanity of the person he was talking to. This was Kuzan Rogue, squire of Duke Olipiage's order of knights and son of its captain, Bach Rogue. His father stood across from him, eyeing him with a terribly stern expression.

Even when they were put side by side, few people would have been able to tell that they were related, or that they were similar at all. Bach had an inflexible attitude, but remained a serious and steadfast knight. His son, on the other hand, acted like a frivolous youth right down to the way he carried himself.

Bach was used to his son's behavior, but this time he sighed heavily. "You have to. This is a direct order from the master. There's no getting out of this. The mistress and Master Zeld have put their faith in you too. You're the only one who can do this."

"Why do they trust me so much? I'm telling you, I can't! The Purgatory Forest is monster territory, you know! A lone squire heading there on his own is sure to get killed!"

Kuzan found his father's orders to be highly unreasonable. Technically, they were orders from their shared master—Seto, the Duke of Olipiage. When he'd joined the knights, he'd sworn absolute loyalty to the Duke and his household, even if it were to cost him his life. But that only applied in situations where it was a reasonable sacrifice. He wasn't going to simply die on a whim. That was Kuzan's excuse, anyway. His father would've said that orders were orders, and it was his duty as a knight to offer his life regardless. Kuzan had a different opinion entirely, and that was how they'd gotten into this argument.

Bach corrected Kuzan. "But Noah went, and he's still alive."

Yes, that was the root of it all. That was why he was being told to find him—or rather, to confirm that he was safe.

Kuzan didn't have any qualms about that part. Noah was his

future master. He'd trained his whole life with that in mind. He didn't want to throw his life away for no good reason for the current duke, but if it were for Noah…then he'd probably choose to do so with a smile on his face, whether he thought it reasonable or not. He was *that* dedicated to Noah.

And yet Noah had been exiled. Kuzan hadn't been told why exactly, but he must have done something incredibly outrageous. That was the only conceivable answer. After all, the Church had come looking for him.

I told you so, Kuzan had thought when he saw the Duke's household in such a state. *The future master thinks of himself as normal and average, but he can screw up and do some pretty heretical things. Every time, I warned him that he'd get tossed out one of these days if he wasn't careful. He'd reply, with an odd look on his face, "Got it, I'll be careful." But look at him now…*

It's because he didn't listen to me.

But I can't imagine he'd commit a sin so bad that it'd get him shipped off to the Purgatory Forest, he thought now. *I wish I could just leave the Duke's knights and go look for him myself. Well, the opportunity is right here, so I might as well take it.*

But there was still something bothering him.

"Kuzan, why do you hesitate? You were so insistent that I let you go look for Noah, but now you're getting cold feet? You don't need to repeat the same excuse. Nobody will get in your way now," Bach pointed out.

The fake smile on Kuzan's face faded, and he bit his lip. "Father…I…I'm afraid. Master Noah might condemn me. He might say he doesn't need me, because I wasn't there for him when it mattered the most…"

Indeed, that was probably his only reason. That was why he'd taken a flippant attitude and tried to say no. But Bach had seen through his act from the start.

"Ridiculous. You know well that Noah…that your master isn't that petty. He accepted you and earned your devotion. Well, he probably didn't think of it that way. I think he became your friend because you were playmates around the same age. But that's what gave me hope that he would be an excellent duke…"

Yet things had turned out for the worse. Bach restrained himself from saying as much, and took another deep breath. Then

he rested a hand on Kuzan's shoulder and told him straight out.

"Squire Kuzan Rogue, these are your orders. Covertly head to the vicinity of the Purgatory Forest and find Noah. Furthermore, you shall forsake any social status which may hinder you on this mission. Do you follow?"

In other words, his status as a squire was being taken away. That was what going after Noah right now entailed. Otherwise, it'd cause issues for the Duke's household and Bach. Conversely, this meant that Kuzan would have less liability and could travel across national borders more easily. The Duke's household would offer him the same assistance as usual, but it was necessary to do this for form's sake. That was the long and short of it.

Even so, most people would have refused. Social status was important. It was something that people could rely upon. There was usually a very good reason for having one's status revoked, so Kuzan would probably be accused of some major misdeed. In other words, it was very likely that he would be unable to regain his position as a squire.

Even so, Kuzan said, "I accept. I swear I'll find Noah and report on his situation!"



Chapter 1: Outside the Purgatory Forest

Seriously?

Our party had just exited the Purgatory Forest and was headed toward the cities of the Urizen Federation. When the forest thinned out, we were overjoyed. It was an unforgettable moment.

The situation that was unfolding in front of us, however, was a real problem. I was at a loss for what to do. But…

"I can't just abandon them…can I?"

I gave Cath and the kobolds orders as I rushed out. "We're going to save that coach! Mataza and Liber, you're with me. We'll take out the guys nearby. Cath, back us up. Everyone else, take them down one by one!"

There was a coach ahead of us, a common sight among the highways and foot traffic we'd be coming across now that we were outside the forest. But this coach was currently under attack. Not by monsters, but by humans.

Judging by their attire, I couldn't be certain that the assailants were bandits. They gave more of an impression of being rogues. Meanwhile, the people fighting back were fairly well-dressed, but there were only two of them. There had probably been more of them before, but I could see the corpses of soldiers littering the ground. The assailants must have lost some of their number as well, but there were still ten or so of them, outnumbering the rest. We had to go help them.

Honestly, considering my status, I shouldn't have gotten involved. I didn't know what might give away my identity. But I felt like if I abandoned them, I'd lose some vital part of myself. So I didn't have much of a choice.

I do have a few backup plans just in case, so I should be okay. In the worst-case scenario, we'll just retreat back into the Purgatory Forest. Nobody would chase us all the way there, or at least not as far in as where our base is.

Having a stronghold I could run back to made me feel a lot more relaxed.

* * *

“Milady, I believe we are at the breaking point. Please, you must run. I have here a robe of concealment. If you quietly leave with it on, you should be safe. I’ll draw their attention.”

This was the northern region of the Urizen Federation, in the state of Altair. Inside the coach stopped on the road, a man who looked like a butler respectfully addressed the girl sitting across from him.

The girl shook her head. “I couldn’t possibly do that, Greg! I won’t abandon you.”

“But milady, at this rate, all of us will be killed. It is crucial that you survive. You will one day succeed Lord Pagauss. You must not die in such a place.”

“Anyone can become the representative. It doesn’t have to be me.”

“But you will inherit the title of marchioness as well. Lady Katarina, as the sole daughter of Lord Pagauss, you are the only one who can succeed that title.”

The girl he called Katarina was the only daughter of Pagauss, the Marquess of Trahn, and a prominent member of Altair’s state legislature. In Altair, noble succession was not influenced by gender, and thus Katarina had a right to the title. Marquess Pagauss’s position in the legislature also made him eligible to become state governor, and he served as the leader of state representatives. He held sway in the federal government as well, and was a man of considerable influence. The daughter of such a personage could not be permitted to die in this place. That was the opinion of Greg Burton, the steward of House Trahn.

But Katarina disagreed. “Nonetheless, I don’t want to le—” She suddenly stopped herself when more noise came from outside. “What just happened?!”

“I don’t know! What could it be?!” Greg exclaimed as well.

The sound of swords crossing had already been clamorous, but it had just gotten exponentially louder. Not only that, there was even more groaning. Had the enemy gained reinforcements? It was highly possible. Katarina’s forces couldn’t have increased. There was no longer a moment to waste.

“I beg your pardon, milady!” Greg threw the robe over Katarina,

causing her to become hard to detect due to the effect of this magic tool. Greg had kept it with him so that at least his mistress could escape in an emergency.

"Greg!"

"Stay quiet, milady. People are coming. You must run away the very moment the door opens. I'll draw the enemy's attention."

"...ngh!"

The situation no longer allowed any protest. Katarina held her breath and waited for the sound of approaching footsteps. Once the door clicked open, she attempted to bolt out. But then...

"Meow."

Katarina heard an animal cry, and a moment later, she bumped her nose into an invisible wall. She could tell it was probably some kind of magical barrier. She could *also* tell that despite the robe, her presence had been detected. Her face turned pale. She knew that this was the end for her.

But then she heard a weirdly nonchalant voice say, "Cath? What's up? ...Hm? A girl?"

Katarina raised her eyes and saw a boy around her age standing there, looking down at her.

* * *

"Are you certain this is all right? I'm told you are the daughter of the honorable Marquess of Trahn. You should hardly share a coach with a rogue like myself," said the boy sitting across from Katarina inside the coach. He looked about fourteen, around the same age as her. He wasn't very well-kept. The most striking things about him were his messy black hair and beast-like black eyes that suggested both intelligence and barbarity at the same time. He clearly wasn't someone with an upstanding profession, but his manner of speech indicated that he at least understood proper etiquette.

Greg the steward, who was sitting next to Katarina, eyed the boy Noah with suspicion.

Katarina herself thought him very suspicious as well. His external presentation and the skill he had displayed in wiping out so many assailants were just completely incomprehensible. He called himself a rogue, but were any rogues this talented? Then

there were his companion beastmen, and the small feline monster he said he'd tamed as a pet. That wasn't unusual in and of itself, but it still struck a strange chord.

All these flags told Katarina that this group was accustomed to danger, and that under ordinary circumstances, she shouldn't get involved with them. But she had to show her gratitude to them, including on a sentimental level. Thus, she had suggested that they accompany her to town.

Of course, Greg had disapproved at the start. But his opinion had changed when he saw the boy try to leave right away after claiming that he didn't need a reward. Greg had suggested to Katarina that he utilize his competent steward skills of conversation and negotiation to hear out the boy's wants and satisfy them. Doing so would be an extremely simple matter for someone in Katarina's position, so she had agreed.

However, Greg's suggestion had not included letting him aboard the coach. Katarina had decided that on her own. She wanted to talk to this boy. She wasn't wholly conscious of it herself, but Katarina had taken a great interest in Noah.

"No, please don't let it concern you. You say you are a rogue, but you saved our lives in the nick of time. After all that, I cannot treat you as a threat to my safety."

"Yes, but...Mr. Greg? You're her steward. Don't you have any objections?"

"I simply follow the wishes of my mistress. Moreover, if you are headed to Midrogue, it would certainly be better to go together. It will be easier to explain to the guards that you are an official guest if you ride in the coach. I do not see an issue."

Greg's explanation was an interim response and probably wasn't his actual opinion. But he was a first-rate steward for a prominent noble house, so he spoke and acted courteously, and showed no unpleasantness in his expression.

Normally, it should have been fine for the other party to take him at his word, especially if they were a commoner. Even among nobles, an unsympathetic young lord or absent-minded young lady would think nothing more of it. But Katarina noticed something in Noah's expression at that moment. He opened his mouth to argue back at Greg, but showed no dissatisfaction. Instead, his eyes betrayed a tiny bit of emotion. It was as if he was

thinking, “This house’s steward has it rough too.”

It might’ve just been her imagination. But if it wasn’t…

This person really is intriguing, thought Katarina.

Katarina didn’t notice that beside her, Greg’s face only grew more weary. Her interest in this boy was not very proper for a noble lady.

* * *

“You want to let these beastmen into town? Can I see their identification? …I see, they’ll get that later. So they’re refugees… Yeah, that happens to beastmen a lot. Just happened to some others recently. Midrogue’s got plenty of beastmen already, but there are issues with just letting them in. Of course, if you say House Trahn will take some of the responsibility, that’ll do. Yes, otherwise there’ll be no end to them. All right, as long as we’re agreed.” The officer stationed at the front gate guardhouse spoke to Greg in a somewhat high-strung tone.

This was Midrogue, a provincial city in the Marquess of Trahn’s territory in the state of Altair. Katarina’s father had sent her here to learn governance. She wouldn’t be ruling on her own; she had just been given limited powers on the city council. Nonetheless, most of the other council members were under the patronage of the Marquess, so Katarina wouldn’t have to waste her time with incessant power struggles. Thus, it was a simple matter for her to admit a boy, his ten or so beastmen companions, and his pet cat as citizens of Midrogue. Regardless, Katarina was not completely devoid of political enemies, hence the officer’s mild crankiness.

Katarina apologized to the boy. “I’m sorry for the unpleasant experience. You may think it’s easy to accomplish something like this with the Marquess’s authority, but that is not actually the case.”

“Not at all. If I remember correctly, this city is governed by a council. Even if it is part of the Marquess’s territory, the power structure isn’t set up to allow them to get their way all the time. Being questioned like that was only natural. The political systems of federations really are intriguing with how complex they are…”

Both Katarina and her steward Greg were surprised by this response. It certainly wasn’t the kind of thing any rogue on the

street would say.

The boy suddenly seemed to realize this as well. “Ah, pardon me. That’s just what I overheard from some merchants conversing at an inn I stayed at during my travels.”

Though he made this excuse, Katarina’s interest was only further ignited.

* * *

Just who was this boy? This was the plain and simple question on the mind of Greg Burton, steward of the Marquess of Trahn, who was currently acting as Katarina’s advisor. This boy, Noah…who had introduced himself as “just Noah.”

To be frank, the word “just” made him sound *more* suspicious instead of less. If he really were nobody special, he wouldn’t have added that word; people would have assumed as much without him needing to say so. But this Noah had such a captivating charisma that nobody could dismiss him. From the very moment they’d met, both Greg and his mistress Katarina’s attention was forcibly drawn to him. After all, Noah had effortlessly defeated the people who had attacked them.

Half of the assailants’ group had been people they’d hired as escorts, and the other half had suddenly popped up out of hiding along the road. Judging by this, they had clearly been stationed there ahead of time in order to take Katarina’s life. Their belongings only indicated them as rogues, and they had no uniting emblems whatsoever, so this was actually further evidence. Even rogues—*especially* rogues—often wore some distinct symbol to boast their strength.

The most easily recognized of these were tattoos. They would get tattoos with designs based on symbols of evil or the name of their organization, to show they belonged to the same gang of robbers or underground society. This elevated the group’s identity and sense of belonging, and could also be used for intimidation. When they attacked in a group and one of their number was killed, they could often be tracked down through this, but that didn’t matter to them. They would instead use it to claim that they could be anywhere—that they were snakes poised to strike the moment an enemy let down their guard. The terror they instilled persisted

even beyond the grave.

But while the assailants in this instance certainly had that kind of vibe, they didn't have any body markings or common belongings. It was like they were intentionally signaling that they were plain old lowlifes with no affiliation to any group. These were the kinds of people employed for carrying out assassinations against powerful figures...which was exactly what had almost happened here. People who were planned to be used for these objectives were often trained and taught much better than the average thug.

Simply put, they were strong. And a whole group of them had attacked.

Half of Katarina's actual escort had been hired men, and the other half had served her family. But even then, it was a tough battle, and they'd been beaten down to only a few survivors. They were by no means weak. And yet, Noah and his companions had defeated the enemy without a hitch.

Greg hadn't seen it with his own eyes, but that was what the surviving soldiers had reported. According to them, Noah had stood at the vanguard and killed the majority of the enemy with astonishing swordsmanship. The beastmen were each mighty too, and had defeated their opponents without a single injury. There had even been powerful magic fired off from somewhere. The boy had a startling arsenal at his command.

He *had* to be someone special. It was plain to see. But he himself denied it, which in itself was startling.

That was why Greg's first and foremost thought was that he should conduct things in such a way to keep Noah and Katarina from interacting as much as possible. Noah's power was a threat.

Greg had to make sure that this power wouldn't be turned against the House. And on the other hand, it would be risky to let Noah get too involved with Katarina. That was why the best course of action would be to give the boy a reward and get the whole thing over with. But Noah didn't even want a reward. He'd said that he was just satisfied to have saved them and he didn't need anything else.

This seemed somewhat suspicious. It was conceivable that he might've fended off the attack in order to gain her trust. But Greg quickly understood that this would have been superfluous. It

would have been a lot more convenient for anyone targeting Katarina to just kill her instead of trying to gain her trust. With forces as powerful as Noah's, they wouldn't need to take the indirect approach. In conclusion, it was very likely that Noah really *was* happy just to have saved her.

Of course, Greg hoped that Noah would just continue on his way if this was really the case. But he knew his mistress well. She wouldn't let the person who'd saved her life leave without any reward.

He recalled that the Marquess of Trahn had been quite similar in his younger days. But while he was glad that she resembled her father in that way, he also sincerely thought that this would be a tremendous bother.

This feeling worsened when he noticed how Katarina regarded Noah with something fervid in her gaze. It didn't seem to be an emotion with a clear name. But considering the situation—a good-looking, somewhat coarse man the same age as her, coming to her rescue in her moment of peril… Greg was getting up in years, but he knew the kind of feelings that would produce. And at the rate things were going…

That was why Greg drew out what Noah's wants were. Unexpectedly, Noah wanted some proof of identification not just for himself, but for the beastmen that accompanied him as well.

This would be the perfect opportunity. Greg made a suggestion to Katarina. At the time, he hadn't yet realized that this was both a grave mistake and a great stroke of luck.

* * *

Did I just screw up big time?

Reflecting back on the exchange I'd just had, I was starting to feel a little nervous. Specifically, over how I'd accidentally started chatting about this country's political system. Thinking about it, that definitely wasn't something the typical commoner would talk about. Though the city's inhabitants would have a rough understanding of its political system, the majority of them would only understand that some important local ruler and a council worked together to manage the city. It'd be a different story for merchants and pro association leaders, since they had the

qualifications to participate as council members. Regular, unaffiliated citizens wouldn't know the intricate details. They wouldn't have much interest in politics in the first place.

In my case, I was familiar with the system here because I'd been taught about the political systems and structures of other countries in comparison with my own. My prior knowledge had just slipped off my tongue. I genuinely thought it was interesting too. After all, the political system of the Urizen Federation was fairly complex.

Maybe it was just that my homeland of Oraculum was a conventional monarchy and therefore easy to comprehend. A federal system was made up of multiple member governments and would naturally be more elaborate. They'd originally been separate nations, and even now the people tended to think of the states they lived in as their own countries.

For example, the state of Altair used to be the Altair Kingdom. People in this state still thought of themselves as citizens of Altair, but not so much as citizens of the Urizen Federation. Of course, they had basic awareness of the fact, but it just didn't register with them.

There was a reason for this: the politics and systems of each state government varied greatly. There *was* federal law which applied to all regions and served as the basis for the united Urizen Federation, but the miscellaneous details were often decided by the individual state governments. One such example was the presence or absence of nobility. Not all of the Urizen Federation's member states were former monarchies; some of them had been countries which never had nobility in the first place. Altair had originally been a monarchy, but that was no longer viable once it joined the Federation.

However, it's not a simple affair to govern countries and regions. At the time, Altair hadn't had any ongoing internal disputes, but it had felt threatened by outside forces—the Kingdom of Oraculum, among others—and decided to join the larger aegis of the Federation. Thus the spirit of revolution never took root in its citizens and the nobility had been preserved without issue.

However, in order to send state representatives to the parliament of the federal government, it was required that the

citizenry participate in government. Therefore, while the nobility remained in place, the system was reworked so that a council which citizens could become members of was established in each city.

Of course, not all inhabitants were eligible. It was limited to people like representatives of pro associations or merchants who made above a certain income. But officially, citizens could participate in government, and the political gap between nobility and the general public had narrowed.

Regardless, the nobles still had possession of their land and special privileges. Their armed might hadn't changed much either, so there was still a large difference in power. Even so, being able to participate in the federal parliament granted tremendous power to any state representative, even if they were a commoner. Hence, nobles were not always dominant.

That was why Katarina, despite being the daughter of the Marquess of Trahn, didn't hold absolute power in the city of Midrogue. The Marquess himself might've been a different story, but his daughter had just become a city councilmember by appointment of her father. In other words, she had about the same status as the other council members.

If I were in Katarina's position, I would consider exploiting my father's authority to put pressure on the other council members and seize power for myself, but as far as I was hearing, Katarina hadn't gone that far. Rather, she'd been instructed by her father to *not* do that.

As the old proverb goes, dragons throw their young into monster territory. The Marquess of Trahn probably had something similar in mind. He wanted her to govern this tiny locale of Midrogue by her own independent power. Of course, though she'd be "independent," one could tell that he hadn't left Katarina entirely on her own by the fact that Greg, the steward of House Trahn's main branch, was with her.

Whether he'd done this because he expected her to be met with opposition or even assassination was a mystery. Even if she wasn't in a position to get much support from the main branch, most people would think it risky to sabotage her. So he had probably felt like nobody would go that far and it would be safe to send her off on her own. That was all assumption on my part, though.

Well, Greg will probably report to the main branch about this incident, so it's not something I need to worry about. What I really need right now is…

"Is this arrangement satisfactory, Mr. Noah?"

Greg's prompt made me perk my head up. We were at the dinner table. Of course, Greg wasn't eating with us—he was just standing to the side—but we'd been talking over some things until just now, since Katarina had wanted more details.

The topic of our discussion was proof of identification for myself and the kobolds. Yes, *that* was what mattered to me.

* * *

"Yes, it's fine with me. You're referring to registering us with the adventurer's guild and having them issue us status cards, correct?" I repeated the main points of Greg's explanation for good measure.

From what he'd said, that was the easiest legitimate method of getting identification in this city. Naturally, there were other possible methods if we invoked the Marquess of Trahn's power. He'd explained these as well, but each one had some kind of drawback. The most problematic were the ones that weren't in the realm of Katarina's own authority. What *was* within her power was speaking to one of her allies on the city council—namely, the adventurer's guild leader—and getting him to issue us status cards quicker than it would normally take.

Well, it was the safe choice. Status cards were the most common form of identification, but there were a limited number of organizations which issued them. The adventurer's guild was one of these, and unlike the Church, it mainly used status cards to manage its adventurers. The entry categories and design also had various differences from the Church-issued ones. The cards from the adventurer's guild themselves represented an adventurer's rank, the measure of their expertise. Of course, the rank was listed as well, so it wasn't strictly necessary to have distinct designs. It was just for decoration. It probably made it easier to tell at a glance too. They were basically split by color and material.

Status cards needed to have circuits for mana to flow through, due to their nature as magic tools, but they didn't always have to

be made of mythril. Plain iron would work too, depending on how it was processed. In exchange for convenience, they were less durable and had more limited functionality. They were different than the status cards which the Church issued to nobility, but they were good enough for general use. In other words, you could call the Church-issued cards a complete version, and the adventurer's guild-issued ones a simplified or limited-functionality version. Apparently high-ranking adventurers had status cards that were more complete, but the ones that we were to be issued would undoubtedly be for the very lowest rank: iron.

"Indeed. Mr. Fresco Main is the leader of the adventurer's guild, and he dotes on Lady Katarina like a little sister. I'm certain that if we explain the situation to him, he will gladly cooperate. We will give you a letter of introduction. Simply present it to the staff there and they should accommodate you," Greg said with full confidence.

But I wondered if things would really go so well. It might be suspicious if a guy like me showed up out of the blue one day and handed him a letter like that. Well, if he was on good terms with Katarina, he'd have plenty of ways to verify the story, so he might come around pretty quickly...

I decided to voice my concerns anyway. "Even with such a letter, would he really believe a person like myself?"

Katarina answered this. "Indubitably. Lord Fresco is a man of very firm character, but he is as kind as can be toward those who have won his trust. He has helped me on many occasions. So I am quite certain."

"I see. If you say so, then."

The mention of "firm character" made me feel a bit intimidated. I used to know someone like that. Specifically, my old home's captain of knights. He was an obstinate and stern man. And he'd always end up saying to me, "prove it with your sword" or "show me your skills."

But I definitely couldn't complain about that to Katarina and Greg. I just knew I needed to have a line of support ready in case there were issues.

So I asked, "If some manner of misunderstanding occurs, can I contact you?"

Katarina made a puzzled face, but Greg seemed to understand

where I was coming from. “That is a valid point. You may visit here again if that happens. I’ll have a word with the gatekeeper.”

His reply set me at ease. Usually you wouldn’t be able to make repeated calls upon a noble house that easily. It was good enough to get permission to contact them, I thought.

But then, Katarina tilted her head to the side. “Hm? Lord Noah, why not stay at this manor for the time being? You have no lodgings, correct?”

Greg’s expression turned to one of alarm. Apparently he and his mistress weren’t on the same page about this. This was a major oversight for a steward of his caliber. Actually, perhaps he’d expected from the start that Katarina would say this, even without talking to her about it.

I was thinking that we would figure out our lodging situation on our own, and Greg seemed to be inclined toward that as well, so I’d thought we’d had an understanding without really needing to broach the matter.

There were a lot of us, besides. Just me and Cath would’ve been one thing, but there were also the kobolds, who were currently eating in a different room. This was by my request, not because of any prejudice. Since they didn’t know table manners, I’d decided that it could be risky to have them eat in Katarina’s presence. One could never tell what might offend a noble.

As it turned out, Greg was about to get a blemish on his career as a steward. I felt sorry for him.

Katarina continued. “Please feel free to stay here at your leisure until your affairs are sorted. Greg, see to it.”

Greg’s eyes darted around, but he ultimately appeared to give in. “As you wish.”

Somehow or another, we’d just gotten a free ticket for lodgings for a while.

Chapter 2: The Adventurer’s Guild

The place was filled with a peculiar air. The smell of leather goods and metal tools stood out the most, with undertones of medicinal plants. It wasn’t really a bad smell, though. That was important, since plenty of clients were sure to come through here—the adventurer’s guild.

“Woof, woof woof woof, woof (Milord, is it all right for monsters like us to be here?)” the kobold soldier Mataza asked. Beside him, Liber nodded her head up and down, seconding the question. The kobolds behind them also gave me similar looks.

Honestly, since we’d come as a pretty big family, I wondered if we’d be causing trouble. But according to Greg, we were visiting at a relatively quiet hour for the adventurer’s guild, so we should’ve been fine. I could see a few adventurers around, but that was it. I would’ve preferred to just come alone as a representative for the whole group, but since we were getting status cards issued as proof of identity, everybody needed to be present so the magic tool could register each individual’s data.

Primal mana existed in all living creatures. There was a magic tool that scanned this and accessed the Divine Intellect, and…honestly, I don’t really know the rest of how it works. Anyway, everyone has primal mana, but not everyone can use magic. Though people incapable of using magic are said to not have any mana, they obviously possess primal mana. They simply don’t have enough surplus mana to cast magic.

Well, enough of that. I answered Mataza while putting up a weak voice barrier so that nobody could overhear us. <Barrier> skills varied, but this was one that I’d borrowed from Aht and trained. It was currently at level 3, and I could use it moderately well. I’d been told that since it was a handy skill, I should prioritize learning it. I’d used it lots of times while fighting monsters and had gotten better at it over time.

“It should be fine. You saw on the way here how lots of beastmen live here. They have different vocal cords, so a lot of species have trouble enunciating normal folk speech. And you all

just look like small dog beastmen at a glance. Mataza and Liber look closer to midsize, but that's about it."

That was a simple fact. Though because of it, Astralism had a propensity to ostracize demihumans. To them, anyone who couldn't speak the language the gods had given us wasn't on the same level as humans. But beastmen of this description *were* capable of speech—they just used a language that was better suited to their vocal cords. Besides, humans couldn't speak every kind of beastmen speech either. I'd lately become able to speak some kobold language, but the speech of frog beastmen would just be impossible. There were other species which could hear and also produce extremely high-pitched sounds. Humans couldn't even hear their speech, obviously.

What I'm trying to say is, every species had its own capabilities, but Astralism didn't get that. Well, complaining about it wouldn't get me anywhere. I'd just never be able to understand them.

In any case, nobody would find it strange for the kobolds to only speak in woofs. That wouldn't cause any problems.

"Woof. Woof woof woof. (If you say so. But Milord, the human over there is looking this way," Mataza told me.

I turned around. "You're right, he is staring at us..."

Behind us, someone had his eyes fixated in our direction. He was sitting down at one of the many tables the guild had set up as meeting spaces for adventurer parties.

What puzzled me was that he didn't have any weapons or armor on him at all. He was muscular and definitely *looked* the part of an adventurer, but since he didn't have any gear...was he a client? Maybe he was waiting for his request to get accepted. I wasn't sure *why* he was staring at us. Maybe he thought we were an eyesore. I just didn't know.

As I was deep in thought, the man suddenly stood up and approached us.

"W-Woof! (Master, he's coming this way!)" Liber scurried behind me in surprise. The other kobolds, led by Mataza, followed suit. Cath alone climbed up on my shoulders and gave a low, threatening hiss. For her to act this way, he had to be tough.

As far as I could tell, he certainly looked strong. But I didn't feel the need to put up my guard, because I wasn't really sensing hostility from him. I still had no clue what he wanted from me, but

that became clear when he stood imposingly in front of me and opened his mouth.

"You're Noah, right?"

"Huh? Yes, that's correct. Who are you? How do you know my name?"

"Uh-huh, now *I'm* curious about your background too. You sure don't talk like a commoner."

That gave me some idea of who I was talking to. "Are you Mr. Fresco?"

"Yeah, good guess. I'm Fresco Main, the leader of this adventurer's guild."

"I thought as much. If you're the guild leader, what are you doing here?"

The spot where he'd been sitting was usually reserved for adventurers to idle around drinking alcohol or eating a light meal. It didn't seem like the place for a higher-up like him to hang around. Of course, this space was probably used for serious meetings too, but it still felt like a mismatch.

Fresco answered me with a laugh. "Well, Mr. Greg told me about you. Said you'd be coming around this time today, so I was waiting. You probably already know that adventurers are usually a rough bunch. No telling when some inexplicable fight will break out. 'Course, most everybody's out at this hour, so I figured we should be good. But I'm the person responsible for this place, y'know?"

I was a little surprised by how polite and courteous he was being. Just as he'd said, adventurers had a reputation for being a rough bunch. Everything they did was messy and imprecise. It was different for those who were more competent or higher-ranking, but otherwise, you generally couldn't expect them to care about the fine details. The adventurer's guild was an organization that managed these kinds of people, so it was slapdash about a lot of things. The guild leader himself coming to greet a random guest with a completely unknown background like myself was basically unheard of.

To be fair, I may have been a special case, since I had an introduction from House Trahn.

"Well, I appreciate your kindness. To be frank, I didn't expect to receive any kind of welcome. Um, if I may get straight to the point,

we're here for our identification. Our status cards, I mean." I thought it would be better to spit it right out and get this business over with quickly.

But Fresco set a hand on my shoulder—the one that Cath wasn't on. "Come on, man, let's not stand around and talk here. Come with me to the parlor. The dog beastmen are with you, yeah? Bring 'em along."

I couldn't really say no to that. I sensed that it might be a bit of a hassle, but it'd have been hard to decline. So I nodded, and told my group, "You heard him. Let's go."

But obviously, I had some reservations about this. I had a funny feeling that we were in for more than just a typical registration.

* * *

"So, you want to make status cards for everyone here, yeah?" Fresco asked as soon as we entered the room.

The parlor was so elegant, it was hard to believe that it was just for meeting with adventurers. Obviously it wasn't as sophisticated as the mansions of Oraculum nobility, but that would be like comparing apples to oranges. In my opinion, the parlors of nobility were too extravagantly decorated with expensive objects, to the point of poor taste. Meanwhile, I didn't know how much money had been spent on this room, but on first impression, it was intentionally modest.

This was another instance of consideration. I could feel the tactfulness of whoever had arranged this room. Fresco certainly looked like a leader of ruffians, but perhaps he had a different nature.

That aside, I nodded for the moment. "Yes, that's my request. But first, I'd like to confirm something. What is the first thing listed on status cards made by the adventurer's guild?"

I asked because if *everything* was listed, everyone would be exposed as monsters. That would make getting proof of identification near-impossible. Nonetheless, aside from the Church, there weren't many organizations whose status cards recorded every little detail. The adventurer's guild didn't have much call for that. Besides, creating status cards meant having to pay a proportionate amount. In the interest of balancing costs, the

status cards displayed a very limited amount of information. According to what I'd heard before, most of the details were based on a self-introduction. But the most important part for adventurers—their adventuring rank—was faithfully maintained by the guild and displayed on the status card.

"Just your name and skills, basically." Fresco said. "If you wanna know species and age and that kinda stuff, you'd need a Church-class magic tool to pull that directly outta the Divine Intellect. So we just input whatever you say in your self-introduction straight into the magic tool, and then it spits the same thing back out. It shows root skills too...but that's private information. Not even the adventurer's guild is allowed to look at that without permission. We have you select whether to display that stuff or not in advance, then make the status card. We'd be held responsible for it later otherwise."

I listened closely and chuckled to myself. Maybe that sounded a little sinister. If I were to describe my reaction more neutrally, I just thought it was extremely convenient.

Anyone already familiar with our situation would realize that if all our info was pulled from the Divine Intellect, that'd be the end for the kobolds who would be classified as monsters. Skills could be precarious for me too, but every organization was careful about root skills. These could predetermine a person's entire potential to some degree, so the majority of people disliked strangers looking at them. Status cards were frequently used as proof of identity, so these sections were generally hidden on such occasions.

Thus, I'd been reasonably confident that the adventurer's guild would have strict measures on handling them. And if they didn't, I'd just have to accept that there was nothing I could do about it. Well, if that ended up happening, the kobolds wouldn't be able to get their proof of identity, and we'd have to roam about looking for some other way to get documentation.

However, status cards weren't the only form of identification, so it wouldn't be impossible. Status cards were extremely useful magic tools, and most anyone who wanted one would be able to get one, but sometimes the information they displayed was *too* accurate and could cause issues. Everyone has a few questionable things they want to hide, so there weren't many occasions on which you had to present your status card, except for formal

business.

What was used instead, then? Official documentation from the organization you belonged to, usually. Membership cards for trade guilds, certificates from a village chief, travel permits from checkpoints, things like that. There were a lot of types, but none of them exposed as much unnecessary private info as status cards.

If you wanted to enter or exit a city and had a status card, you'd need to show it. They wouldn't necessarily deny you entry if you didn't, but they'd spend a while investigating you. It varied from case to case, but you could be kept waiting for days or even months. The majority of people hated this prospect, so they'd begrudgingly end up showing their status cards.

Anyhow, this was definitely a lucky break for us. I responded, "If that's the case, then I have no objections. I'd be much obliged if you could make status cards for all of us."

"All right, got it. Hey!" Fresco hollered toward the outside. After a while, there was a knock at the door of the parlor. Two female staff members quietly entered, carrying a very large, somewhat heavy-looking object. They set the magic tool on the table with a thud. It was presumably just as heavy as it looked.

The two women who'd carried it in looked slender, but given that they worked at the adventurer's guild, they must have had incredible brute strength. This passing thought must have shown on my face, because while neither of them were really casting any looks at me, I sensed a pressure in the air from them, which made me feel a bit nervous.

"Huh? I'm about to register cards for these guys, so get out of here," Fresco told them. They immediately bowed their heads and left. The guild staff must have had a great deal of trust in him.

Adventurer's guilds were fascinating organizations. Each location had its own characteristics, as they were rooted in the history of their respective towns, villages, and cities. To be more specific, they didn't have very strong horizontal integration. It was easy to envision them as a huge organization spanning the country, but that was hardly the case. Each city's guild was self-reliant and was more like a local public association. Therefore, this adventurer's guild's reach only extended to the adventurers of this city. This was due to the aforementioned history, but also because of tension with countries' governments.

Just consider it. If an independent organization of adventurers with immense combat strength existed in their country, what would the country's authority figures think? They'd definitely want to either destroy it or place it under their own thumb. But the adventurer's guild loathed both options. The most expedient policy they came up with to avoid this was to *not* create an organization spanning the country, but to instead be more like independent vigilante groups in their own regions.

They didn't completely lack connections across the country. They cooperated with each other in times of emergency. But this was how they operated normally. That was why adventurer's guilds differed by city.

And Fresco was basically the dictator of this city's guild. Maybe that was an exaggeration, but he was something similar. He didn't rule with an iron fist, though—it was his virtues that made him a good leader. That must have been the case.

* * *

The magic tool was an unusual shape. What first stood out was a rectangular box about one arm span wide. There was a thin slot visible on the side. On top of the rectangular box part was a crystal ball, in which a strange light swirled. It looked almost mystical, and as I kept looking at it, I felt a strange force drawing me in…

"Hey, don't stare at it too much. It'll mess up the results," Fresco said. I quickly stepped back.

Come to think of it, I'd been told something similar at the Church. The magic tool I'd touched after my root skill was determined was a lot bigger than this one, but there were similar parts. In particular, the crystal ball was the same. I remembered that back then, the technician had instructed me to hold my hand upon it for a while. I'd probably have to do the same thing this time too.

The other mechanical parts were probably smaller due to the limited number of functions. To make a complete status card like the one I had, the magic tool probably needed to be bigger as well. Due to their mechanisms, the more powerful a magic tool was, the bigger it had to be. The circuits were more complex, there was more mana required, and various other factors demanded

that it increase in size. This was not an easy problem to get around. Some ancient magic tools and those found in labyrinths had solved this, but those were miniaturized so small that current technology couldn't analyze and reverse-engineer them, so they were the exception to the rule. Adventurers sought to retrieve these devices because they could be sold for a very high price.

I was low on funds too, so a part of me hoped I could make a huge profit off of one someday, but that wasn't feasible right now. The most famous labyrinths were generally managed by countries and had restrictions on who could enter. For example, they might limit it to adventurers of a certain rank.

The first adventurer rank we could register as was the very lowest: iron. From there, it went from copper, to silver, to gold, to platinum...and the last one was orichalcum, but barely anyone made it that high. Even as the heir to a duke, I'd never met an orichalcum-rank adventurer even once. There were only a handful of them in the first place, and they could choose whatever jobs they wanted, wherever they wanted, so they weren't bound to a single country. I couldn't imagine any of them would want to come to a prejudiced, Church-dominated country like Oraculum Kingdom anyway.

At their core, adventurers loved freedom. Their position vastly differed from the Church, which seemed to make a point of restricting freedom. But both groups still kept up the appearance of civility. They had enough adult manners for that—or maybe they were both just that brazen. That was why there was tension between them.

I got a bit off topic there. Back to the magic tool.

Fresco introduced it. "Now then, as you're aware, this'll let us make status cards. Do you know how to use it?" he asked, just as expected. I knew, but everyone else tilted their heads. That only made sense. The kobolds would have never seen this before. Not to insult their intelligence—there just weren't any of these in the Purgatory Forest. I'd barely even come into contact with any civilized tools over the past month. The kobolds had lived their whole lives there, so they wouldn't have known what it was.

Fresco nodded, extrapolating from their expressions. "I guess you guys must be from the sticks. Oh, not making fun of you or anything. There's a lot of people like that who try to become

adventurers. And they've got a surprising amount of promise. They're used to living in rough rural areas. Got more guts than the city folks, that's for sure. So I've got big expectations for you all."

I translated his words for the kobolds, who were happy to hear it.

"Anyway. To use it, you've gotta put your hands on the crystal ball, one at a time. Then it'll pull your info from the Divine Intellect and display your name and skills here—just your general skills, got it? Your root skills are set to not display initially, so I won't be able to see 'em. As for the other entries, like species, sex, and title, just tell me and I'll input them." After explaining some more important points, Fresco looked at the kobolds and said, "All right, who's first? You're all getting them. Doesn't matter to me who we start with."

The first one to raise their paw was...

"Woof! (Me first, please!)"

...one of the kobold soldiers, Mataza.

Honestly, I had thought I should do it first. Sure, I already had a status card that worked just fine, but one issued by the adventurer's guild would be handy in a lot of ways. I could alter the parts where I couldn't lie on my current status card. I'd also be able to activate the effect of <Info Lookup>, which I'd received from Aht. It had the effect of being able to modify details on a status card. To be precise, it was the ability to influence the Divine Intellect, Aht had said.

But if Mataza wanted to go first, I had no real reason to obstruct him. Fortunately, "species" wasn't included on the display. So I gave a nod, and Fresco spoke to Mataza. "Okay, got it. Go ahead and put your paw on there."

I interpreted this for Mataza, who then willingly did as he was instructed.

* * *

Clank!

A thin, dark gray metallic object which looked like a status card came out of the slot on the magic tool.

Fresco picked it up and handed it over without looking at it too closely. "Here you go. This is your card."

Just as he'd professed, Fresco appeared to be careful about

private information. It wasn't that old of an idea, but plenty of people had had a vague concept of it for ages. It was only recently that it had been treated as a right.

Even extremely confidential info only meant for select people could be physically displayed with status cards, so handling this kind of information had caused problems in the past. I'll skip the full details, but these days, it was universally agreed that this kind of info should be handled with care—or at least, if it had to be shown, there needed to be agreement or consent from the holder if there wasn't any official warrant.

Of course, there were exceptions to this. Policies for handling it varied by country. For example, one could easily imagine a dictatorship ignoring the guidelines about treating private information with respect. Though that wasn't the case in this country. They did have some regard for privacy. Enough that its adventurer's guild wouldn't look right at the status cards they issued.

"Woof? (Milord, what should I do with this?)" Mataza looked at me with confusion, holding his status card.

I answered him, "If you don't want to show anyone, then don't. If you want to show someone, then go right ahead. It's as simple as that. Well, you probably shouldn't show it to anyone outside of your inner circle if you can help it. Some people might use it for malicious purposes."

"Woof woof. (I'm aware of that. However, I was wondering if *you'd* like to take a look, Milord.)"

I hadn't quite expected Mataza to say this, but it seemed like he was making this choice of his own free will. That was fine, then.

"I'd be glad to take a look if you're willing to show me. Are you sure, though?"

"Woof! (Why yes, of course!)" he responded happily.

"All right, then please do. Of course, I swear on my life that I won't leak what it says to anyone else."

Mataza responded with a frantic look. "W-Woof woof...! (Certainly not your life...!)"

But status cards included details that you would never, ever talk to other people about under normal circumstances. "That's just how important it is. Well, you don't have to worry too much about it. Let's see here."

I gave a sidelong glance to Mataza, who was trying to stop me, and quickly checked out his status card. The following was recorded:

```
Name: Mataza
Sex: Male
Species: Dog Beastman
Titles: None
Root Skills: <Hound Sprite 7>, <Hound Soldier 4>
Derived Skills: <Howl 5>, <Pack Supervision 4>,
<Spearmanship 4>
General Skills: <Bite 2>, <Scratch 2>, <Dash 1>,
<Swordplay 3>, <Glide Blade 3>...
```



“Oh, you’ve got a bunch more!” While I was impressed, there were a few categories that were pretty dicey. The root skills section in particular was out of the question. To be fair, I’d heard of some humans who had monster skills. There were a surprising number of them among demihumans, so that might have been a decent cover story. Even so, my own status card still posed a risk…but Fresco had been considerate enough to not look. So for the moment, I could relax in regards to that.

However, observing it more closely, the entry in question was shaded in gray. It must have been another function of the status card. I had the other kobolds take a look, but apparently they couldn’t see the entry.

This was an interesting subject of investigation. There were often grayed-out parts when I tapped into the skill lists of the followers contracted to me, and I was the only one who could read them. Was this the same kind of thing? But while my contracted followers weren’t able to see them, Mataza *was* able to see his own.

This was an unforeseen discrepancy. Well, I couldn’t say if it would matter much. If I just wanted to see the kobolds’ skills, I could rely on <Follower Contract>. Just knowing in general who could and couldn’t see the grayed-out parts was pretty useful.

“So, how are they?” Fresco asked us with curiosity.

I thought it best to not tell him too much lest it backfire. “Well, the results aren’t all that interesting. It just displays a few general skills that we’ve learned.”

“Huh, I didn’t expect you’d have much experience to speak of. What kind of skills, just for reference?”

“A lot in the vein of Needlework and Sawing. And there’s Construction too…”

“…Seriously?”

Naturally, Aht had drilled these into us, but we had a cover story for this too. “We—and by that, I mean the dog beastmen—have led a very rugged lifestyle. They learned what they had to, to get by.”

“I see… Well, can’t say I don’t get that,” Fresco responded to my dodgy explanation with an expression of acquiescence.

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“Okay, here’s the last one.” Fresco handed over the final status card—the one for me. The kobolds had all received theirs by this point, and Cath’d had one for familiars made for her. Status cards came in those kinds of varieties too.

The info on it for Cath was a good deal different than what I could access through <Follower Contract>. For starters, there was her species. Since being listed as a demon cat might have caused issues, her species was instead set to demidemon cat—a species which was extremely similar but still had a distinct classification. It was like the difference between dragons and demidragons. Demon cats would eventually become very powerful monsters as they matured, but demidemon cats didn’t change as drastically and could be kept as pets. A normal household would have no trouble keeping one in check, and they were not perceived as threatening.

Her skills couldn’t be hidden, but Fresco had made sure not to look, so we didn’t have any issues there. Of course, I wasn’t stupid enough to faithfully mention her title, so that was left blank. Incidentally, I was holding on to Cath’s status card since she couldn’t carry it herself, while everyone else was able to carry their own cards. I was a little worried about them keeping track, but Aht had trained them on keeping their belongings organized, so they’d probably be fine.

As for the entries on my status card, they looked like this:

```
Name: Noah
Species: Normal Folk <Human>
Titles:
Root Skills: <Swordfighter 5>, <Great Swordfighter 3>
Derived Skills: <Slash 2>... <Glidedance Blade 1>...
General Skills: <Swordplay 4>, <Wind Magic 3>, <Fire Magic 3>...
```

I was a little surprised… The root skill which was my lifeline wasn’t displayed.

Where did <Holy King> go?! I rushed to check the Church-issued status card in my breast pocket. Sure enough, that one had <Holy

King> on it. I was relieved, but my behavior must have looked strange to Fresco.

“Did something weird happen?”

I’d been careful to make sure he didn’t see me looking at my Church-issued status card. I’d only glimpsed at my pocket, so he shouldn’t have caught on. So I gave an excuse. “No… It’s nothing much. I was just surprised since my skills seem to have improved a bit.”

While it was an excuse, it wasn’t false. A few of my skills actually *had* improved since I last checked. Slash had been at 1 until just recently. I had narrowly managed to get to Swordplay 4, but I was genuinely happy that my elemental magic skills had all reached 3. I’d be able to handily take on even formidable opponents with all these at my disposal. The monsters of the Purgatory Forest were still a different story, though.

Admittedly, Cath’s elemental magic was still stronger than mine. She was at Wind Magic 4. In theory, it would get progressively harder to improve from there, but Cath had latent talent, or rather, she was still growing. I had to keep working hard too if just so that the gap in our levels didn’t grow any wider.

“That so? Well, without a status card, there’s not a lot of ways you can see how many skills you’ve got. I don’t know if you lost your old one, or what…”

Fresco’s phrasing implied that he had figured I had one already, but he’d chosen not to pry. One could easily surmise that someone like me expressly asking a noble for proof of identity meant that what I’d *originally* had was nonfunctional, or I wasn’t in a position to use it. He was still helping me regardless, so he must’ve had some inkling. Given the way he was acting, he’d probably noticed me checking my Church-issued status card. And the excuse I’d given of being surprised by my improvement was only more evidence.

Well, if he was choosing to ignore it, I’d just have to keep up the act too.

“Now we can check details, and it’ll be easier to prove our identities to other people. Thank you so much, truly.”

“Nah, don’t mention it. Besides, this means that House Trahn owes me one.”

“Shouldn’t it be to Lady Katarina personally?” She *was* a

member of House Trahn, to be sure. But in this town, Katarina was not in any position to receive strong support from the Marquess's main branch. That was why we'd had to come to the adventurer's guild to get our documentation.

Fresco looked mildly impressed. "Huh, you sure know your stuff. Hard to believe you're a commoner... Well, you're right. But I'm fine with it that way," he said.

I tilted my head in confusion and questioned him further. "And why is that?"

"'Cause I'm betting that girl is gonna inherit House Trahn someday. For being a sheltered noblewoman, she's pretty interesting, don't you think?"

* * *

I could tell that the guild leader had quite a high opinion of Katarina. But something about this nagged at me.

"What's this about betting on her inheriting House Trahn?" *That* was what had caught my attention.

Fresco tilted his head at what I said, but then it seemed to dawn on him. "Oh. You haven't heard? Guess I shouldn't have mentioned that."

Despite his words, he didn't seem too concerned. It almost felt like an act. *Agh, maybe I shouldn't probe too much*, I lamented, but it was too late now. It'd have been suspicious if I didn't ask for more details, so I had no choice but to keep up the conversation.

"So what you're saying is, Lady Katarina's accession to the title of marchioness is not currently guaranteed?"

Noble houses, including my own, were always in dispute over inheritance. Fortunately, in our case, my brother had no interest whatsoever. Thus, no matter how much external mockery it would incur, my family had been firmly set on me inheriting. But ultimately, my <Holy King> skill and the Church had made everything topsy-turvy, so it was all ridiculous anyway. In any case, it was normal for houses to have disputes even without extra intervening circumstances. Even between siblings related by blood.

However, I was pretty sure Katarina didn't have any brothers or sisters. An only child shouldn't have had much cause for dispute. I

was under the impression that in this country, the eldest child was generally favored to inherit, regardless of gender.

"Yeah, basically. 'Course, Marquess Trahn only has one legitimate child right now, so that works out fine for her. Well, if I remember right, he's got three wives, so we can't be sure things won't change in the future. But since the eldest child's favored, Katarina still gets priority. But still, even though men and women have close to equal rights in this country, we've still got some stinky old traditions. Nobles are supposed to protect the people of their territories from foreign threats…which means they have to fight. So men are valued more than women in that aspect. In Lady Katarina's case, there are some strong opinions out there that instead of making her marchioness, one of her male relatives should get the title."

"I see…"

The Urizen Federation's state of Altair used to be a kingdom, so some of its traditions remained. The noble system was typically like that. Long-standing prejudices didn't go away that easily.

"But couldn't all that just be solved by Marquess Trahn dismissing the complaints?"

"He's doing that…or at least, he tried to. But it didn't go so smoothly."

"Go on."

"It's nearly time to send representatives to the central assembly of the Urizen federal government. One of the Marquess's opponents is a guy named Margrave Frausen, who seems to be sticking his nose in House Trahn's affairs. On the sly, of course, so it's not obvious it's him."

From the way he put it, only nobles would be aware of this. In other words, this Margrave Frausen person was aiding relatives of the Marquess who wanted someone other than Katarina to inherit, and was stoking the dispute. That would be troublesome for the Marquess of Trahn too. They probably had similar levels of influence, seeing as they were fighting for the same position of representative. In fact, I'd even heard his name before, despite being from a different country. If someone that notable was meddling, trying too hard to contain the damage would just present bigger vulnerabilities. So the Marquess probably had his hands tied.

The specific details were probably only known to the members of House Trahn, but…well, I used to be a noble myself. I could understand the gist.

They've really got it rough. And now I know what's going on. That's the reason why Katarina was assigned to this town.

I voiced my supposition. "So Marquess Trahn wants to have Lady Katarina accomplish something and thereby prove to both the family and others that she's suited to becoming the future Marchioness of Trahn."

"Yeah, exactly. You gathered that much? Just who are… Hold on, my bad. I won't pry anymore, so don't look at me like that."

"This is a normal look."

"Doesn't seem that way to me."

"Anyway, what do you want me to do with all that information? I'm a novice who only became an adventurer a few moments ago." I had a bad feeling about where this was going, but I had to ask. Even if I didn't, I could tell that he was going to request something. Better to just get it over with already.

Fresco gave a nod. "Well, you did save Lady Katarina when she was attacked by assassins. So I know I can trust you. If you had just ignored her, it would've been all over. Margrave Frausen would've gotten exactly what he wanted."

"I guess so…"

I didn't think I was *that* trustworthy, but at the very least, my actions told him that I wouldn't cause any harm. Still, while I didn't intend to ally myself with Katarina, I was on bad terms with the Church and had a complicated history. To be fair, Fresco and Katarina had already both surmised that I was tangled in something complicated, so maybe things would be fine with that in mind.

"So I was hoping that you'd aid Lady Katarina."

"As much as I'd like to, I…"

I had my own goal: I had to get stronger. Strong enough that I could hold my own against the Church. I didn't have time to waste on other things.

But then Fresco said, "There's profit in it for you too. If all goes well, Lady Katarina will have immense trust in you. So will Marquess Trahn. That'll give you major connections in this country—though I don't know who you are or where you're from. Having

connections will help a lot when you need it most, yeah?”

Ultimately, I came to the conclusion that Fresco was right. I had a lot of issues to deal with, but my goal was consistent: to simply live a normal life. I didn’t have any dreams of grandeur about reclaiming my noble status or becoming famous, or anything like that. I didn’t even really care about my <Holy King> skill, as long as I could just live in peace. It was still convenient, though, so I’d take advantage of it where possible.

In short, I’d be satisfied if I could just live somewhere happily with Cath and the kobolds. If Aht was there too, that would be just as good. When I considered what would be necessary to achieve that, getting the Church off my tail had to come first. Aht was going to get rid of this problem at the source by telling the Church that I had died and making them understand that there was no longer any need to search for me.

But what if this failed? Or what if it only temporarily succeeded, and they eventually came chasing after me again after discovering that I was still alive? In case these things happened, I’d need to gain “power” in multiple senses of the word. One would be my own physical strength, meaning that I needed to train my combat abilities and <Holy King> skill. This was a priority.

That was why I’d gotten training from Aht, and why our present goal while she was away was to improve our abilities. Getting status cards from the adventurer’s guild was part of that. We’d become adventurers, take on quests, defeat monsters, and raise our ranks so that we could triumph over labyrinths. That would definitely make us stronger.

Plus, it was harder for nations to interfere with the business of high-ranking adventurers. Of course, silver or gold wouldn’t be enough. We’d have to reach platinum at the bare minimum…or orichalcum, if that was even possible. If we got that far, we’d be completely freed from the constraints of national authority. But even then, I’d be in dire straits regardless if the Church brought its full weight down on me, since I had the <Holy King> skill… Putting that stuff aside for now, it wouldn’t be a bad idea to employ ourselves in a way that would let us raise our ranks.

The other kind of power I needed was influence, as cliché as that sounded. As a former noble, I knew well that political power was critical to surviving in society. I had lacked that, or just hadn’t

had enough, and now I was wanted by the Church. This made me all the more aware. If Oraculum Kingdom or House Olipiage had had more influence than the Church, this never would have happened to me. Influence was just that advantageous. I'd be better off amassing it wherever I had the chance. If aiding Katarina would get me influence…then it would behoove me to accept the proposal.

Even if Oraculum or the Church sent people after me, the Urizen Federation wasn't on good terms with either party. That would work in my favor. Oraculum had an antagonistic relationship with it, and the Church didn't have significant influence in this country.

Consequently, if I could borrow the power of this country's politicians…I wouldn't necessarily have total security, but it was at least possible that we could secure a place to eke out our existence. Therefore…

"Lord Noah, you've hardly eaten. Are you quite well?" Katarina asked me at the dinner table. We were in the dining hall of Katarina's manor, which was natural given that we were presently enjoying her hospitality. However, the kobolds were still eating in a different room. Katarina had wanted to eat with them, but we hadn't fixed their manners yet, so I'd given the excuse that they were too self-conscious. The kobolds still weren't very accustomed to human interaction, so I wouldn't mind letting them join us once that improved. And Aht had whacked basic manners into them, so they were still capable even if they weren't yet accustomed to it. In due time, they'd be able to eat alongside other people without issue.

I responded to Katarina. "Ah, yes, I simply had some matters on my mind. Excuse me. I'm sure it irks you to see such unpolished etiquette."

When I apologized for zoning out, Katarina quickly shook her head.

"No, not at all. Your table manners are impeccable. I wonder where you learned them."

Her remark gave me pause. She hadn't seemed to pay it much mind, but she was guessing at my origins too. Well, that was only to be expected. I'd called myself a rogue, but I'd commented on politics and knew a bit about high-class manners. That would have

made anyone wonder about my identity.

Mentioning the Urizen Federation's political system had been a blunder, but after that, I was honestly giving in. I didn't mind so much if they found me out. It was a strategic move which would make it easier to bring up some things later. At first I didn't have a clear idea of what I wanted to do, but part of me had known that I'd need political influence after all. This could be a good starting point to that end.

With this in mind, I spoke to Katarina. "On that subject, Lady Katarina, I have something to discuss with you."

"Goodness, what is it?" Katarina tilted her head.

I cut right to the chase. "I heard from Mr. Fresco about your current position."

Noble etiquette dictated that one typically bring up subjects in a roundabout manner. But I was no longer nobility; I was just Noah. I didn't have to be bound by these customs. Besides, this seemed like a complicated matter in a couple different ways. To be honest, I really didn't want to make the conversation any more annoying than it had to be.

Katarina's eyes widened. "Really, Fresco... Um, exactly how much did he tell you?" she asked.

This manner of speech was much more in keeping with noble etiquette than how I'd spoken.

At present, the nobility of the Urizen Federation was quite obsolete compared to that of the Oraculum Kingdom. While they weren't completely figureheads, the gap in status between nobles and commoners was much narrower, and I'd heard that many of the nobles had consequently been tainted by commoner values. To give a specific example, some nobles went out into town without even bringing an escort. This wasn't completely unheard of in the Oraculum Kingdom, but on such occasions, there would generally be guards just out of sight. This wasn't the case in the Urizen Federation.

Well, that was partly because some states in the federation didn't have nobility at all. When nobles visited such places, they would have no choice but to share a space with commoners. Of course, in these instances, they would typically patronize a luxury inn or restaurant.

With that said, while the Urizen Federation had plenty such

nobles, Katarina likely maintained the proper grace of a noblewoman because her family was practically the highest-ranked nobility in the state.

Meanwhile, I'd thrown away any grace I had long ago. I said to her, "I believe he told me the overall picture. Including that your succession to the title of marchioness is uncertain, and that Margrave Frausen opposes your father, the honorable Marquess Trahn."

"That much... I see. Why did he—"

"He wanted me to aid you. At least, that was the reason he gave. I think he asks too much of a novice who only just registered as an adventurer today."

I added a bit of humility, which got a response from Katarina.

"No, Lord Noah. Your party effortlessly routed the thugs who attacked us. Knowing that, I believe it's only natural he sought your aid."

"It wasn't without difficulty, though."

This was no lie. We'd made it out nearly unscathed, but our enemies had been considerably powerful. We'd just had the advantage of surprise and unusual skills. Cath and the kobolds had their monster skills, and the majority of my skills had come from Aht. Few people would have been able to tackle opponents like that without forewarning. I could tell they were decently trained, but even then, they hadn't been a match for us. That was all.

"You are too modest. However, I do understand. Given that you've brought up this subject, may I assume that you will provide me with your service?"

"Yes, if there's anything I can help with," I said, as if I were a butler who would do whatever she asked.

Katarina gave a courteous smile, but it didn't reflect in her eyes. She pointedly responded, "But it won't be for free. I can tell by your expression."

I understand now. She looks *like an average, naive heiress, but that's not really the case. Well, she didn't seem capable of defending herself during the attack, but she had been pretty composed immediately afterward. A fourteen-year-old girl, retaining her composure in the face of assassination...*

She had to have nerves of steel. The average noblewomen I

knew would faint at the drop of a hat. It was a generalization, of course, but that certainly seemed to be the trend in Oraculum. Considering this, Katarina was quite a tenacious girl for her age. Her reaction wasn't particularly out of character.

I replied to her, "That's correct. I *could* work for free...but that wouldn't make our cooperation very reliable, would it? If you don't pay appropriate compensation for your request, you won't have much right to complain if the results are not to your liking."

"You raise a good point. However, Lord Noah...if I am to compensate you, I must first know what you are capable of."

"Was saving you from those thugs insufficient?"

"That was an unforeseen event, so it's difficult to judge objectively. Therefore, there is another matter I would like for you to settle. Once I can observe your skills and the results, we can then deliberate on our future relationship. Of course, if you are successful, you will be rewarded for it as well. How does that suit you?"

I was intrigued by her proposal and saw no drawbacks to it, so I nodded.

* * *

"This is not what I expected..."

"Meow."

"Woof, woof woof. (Very true, milord.)"

Cath, Mataza, and I shared in our misfortune, shivering as we huddled around a campfire in the middle of the night. We were here because of what we had been told earlier.

There were some houses around us, but they were all decrepit—actually, they were practically falling apart. There were various structures that looked to have been a chapel of some religion, a water well, and a house of gathering at one point, but they had all been abandoned for many long years. This was, in point of fact, a ghost town.

People had resided here in the past, but then they abandoned their homes and the years passed by. Not just one or two years either; more like five or ten. I couldn't say for certain, since no detailed records of the town remained.

But as for *why* we were spending the night in a ghost town, it

was due to the job Katarina had given us through the adventurer's guild. *This* was the matter she wanted us to settle. She'd gone through the adventurer's guild for this so that it would count on our guild record. Besides, she might've wanted to provide details to Fresco as well, to inform him of the manner of job she'd assigned us. That way, she'd know right away if I did anything to betray her trust.

In that sense, Katarina was certainly not as benign as she looked. I'd been well aware that she wasn't someone I could drop my guard around, but it was better that way if we were going to cooperate with each other. She'd be much easier to make use of than some clueless, innocent girl.

Although, with the way things were going, it felt more like *I* was going to get taken advantage of. She was using me right now, in fact. Recent events had led me to wonder if I'd been born under an unlucky star. However, I eventually chose not to continue pursuing such a depressing line of thought.

Regardless, the job request involved a highway which came near this ghost town. Merchants traveled along it on their way from city to city as they distributed their goods. But for the past month, the distribution chain had been disrupted as monsters cropped up around the ghost town and attacked the merchants.

Naturally, the merchants had hired escorts to deal with them, but it was an exorbitant cost that ultimately affected the price of goods. Bit by bit, prices had jumped all across Midrogue. The city council had recognized this as an issue and dispatched investigators to see what could be done, but unfortunately, none of them had had any success.

This was why I had been brusquely requested to find out what was happening here, and then fix it. If monsters were popping up, I had to eliminate the source. I understood that much. But first, I'd have to uncover what the source *was*. And for that, I'd have to find the monsters. That was where we were at right now.

"But really, we aren't seeing any. They're supposed to be coming from around this ghost town," I muttered as I examined the map we'd been provided for the job. There were several red X marks on it. Each mark represented a spot where people were reported to have been attacked. Most of them were clustered around this area. Some of the marks might have just been from

getting attacked by regular monsters, but anyone could tell that this concentrated pattern of incidents was unnatural.

There has to be something here. In the first place—

“Woof!”

“Meow!”

Mataza, Liber, and Cath all sprang up and yelped almost simultaneously.

I could tell why as soon as I looked in the same direction as them. There stood, with their sunken eye sockets, fleshless arms, and rattling footsteps, a horde of eerie skeletons.

I’d been on the lookout too, but everyone else had probably noticed them first by the smell. As they came closer, so did the distinctive reek of corpses.

Undead monsters like these mostly spawned from dead bodies. It had been a long time since they’d passed away, but the indelible scent of death still clung to them. Cath and the kobolds’ sharp noses had caught it early on.

The other kobolds hadn’t come along, so it was just Cath, Liber, and Mataza with me. According to the job details, there was a chance that the monsters wouldn’t show up if our group was too large. But...that might’ve been a needless concern. On the contrary, I was starting to regret coming with such a small party.

“There’s a lot of them... Are you guys ready for this?”

There were twenty skeletons, meaning each member of our one-person-and-three-beastmen party would have to take on five each. But everyone nodded in response to my rally, as if to say “got it!”

“All right, let’s do this!” At my shout, everyone kicked off the ground and dashed forward.



* * *

There's definitely a lot of them, but we can handle this, I thought as I swung my sword at the skeletons. They were the lowest tier of the eerie, bone-rattling undead. I wondered where their source of power was located. There was solidified mana in the form of magic stones somewhere inside their bodies, often in their skulls or torsos. To defeat them, one only had to strike it. But I could tell from the skeletons' movements that it wouldn't be that easy.

Most undead spawned from corpses, so their abilities were influenced by what they had been capable of in life. For example, many of those which had been warriors would be adept at close combat, and those which had been mages could often wield magic. However, if they were powerful enough, they would instead be classified as skeleton knights or skeleton sorcerers, which were higher-ranking monsters. Luckily, these were just normal skeletons, so they wouldn't be nearly that strong.

"Haaah!"

By the time my sword smashed through the third skeleton's head, their numbers had already been reduced by half. I'd been keeping an eye on Cath, Mataza, and Liber, and they were battling without risk. Cath's fighting style kept her completely out of harm's way; she specialized in rapid-firing wind magic from a distance while defending herself with a magic barrier.

One of the more obvious characteristics of normal skeletons was their poor mobility. Their bodies were formed of only bones and magic, and since they only had normal mana capacity, they couldn't cast any significant enhancements on themselves. But they still had enough physical strength to bash a person's head in, so they weren't exactly pushovers either.

Fresco had told me that a good number of novice adventurers were killed by these things each year. And without anyone to care for their bodies, they would rise as new skeletons…

There was a sort of circle of death going on here. It was rather saddening, and I wished it didn't exist. *The least I can do is wipe out all the skeletons from this ghost town*, I thought as I gripped my sword tighter.

* * *

“This is the last one.”

I felled my seventh skeleton. I’d crushed its feet already, so I had the spare energy to say this out loud. Its dark, shining eye sockets turned hollow once I’d smashed its head, and the undead skeleton went back to being a mere cadaver. Its surface, which had been hardened with mana, soon degraded into rough, weathered bones.

When I saw this, I knew for sure that this really *was* the skeletonized remains of a person’s corpse.

“Meow?”

We couldn’t sense the presence of any other enemies around, so Cath jumped up to her usual spot on my shoulder. She was probably asking about what I’d just been thinking.

“You wanna know how I can tell it’s from a human corpse? That’s simple. The undead are broadly split into the unadulterated ones—which are produced just from solidified mana—and ones produced from mana that has condensed into mana stones inside corpses. The latter type tends to leave behind regular corpses when defeated, but in a weathered state, like they were before they became undead.”

“Ruff, woof? (Then what happens to the unadulterated ones?)” Liber asked with curiosity.

“Yeah, those leave something physical behind too…but the lower ranked ones usually just vanish entirely besides their mana stones. With basic skeletons, their bones weather into sand on the spot, and that’s it for them. They’re a lot like labyrinth monsters.”

Labyrinth monsters were known to vanish when defeated and only leave behind certain materials and mana stones. That was why it was said that labyrinth monsters weren’t living beings, and might not even be from the natural world. This was another assertion by the Church, but as much as I disliked them, they had a point on this one.

There were plenty of noticeable differences between regular monsters and labyrinth monsters. The ones outside definitely felt *alive*. For example, goblins in monster territories moved like people and behaved with a degree of sentience. They could come up with logical strategies and spring traps on people.

But those inside labyrinths almost seemed like *tools*. They didn't lack coordination, but it was like they were just repeating behaviors that they had been programmed with in advance. Their movements were so rigidly predictable, the only explanation seemed to be that they weren't alive. They were just mechanisms of their labyrinth. There was credible cause for this conclusion. It irked me to no end to accept the Church's word, but in this instance, I couldn't really argue against it.

"Woof? Woof woof. (Is that so? Then were these skeletons once the residents of this town?)" Liber asked me.

That was the natural conclusion. There were plenty of cases where towns went under and became skeleton dens. But…

"No. This place became a ghost town a while back, but skeletons have only started causing damage here recently. So we can't be certain about that yet."

It was possible that something like the dissemination of mana had greatly altered the surrounding environment and caused skeletons to spawn recently, but I really couldn't say for sure.

"Well, we can think about that later. Let's start with gathering mana stones. These'll get us money too," I instructed everyone.

"Woof! (All right!)"

"Woof (Understood!)"

Liber and Mataza responded and got a move on.

Cath stayed perched on my shoulder, seemingly unmotivated.

"Oh, you… Well, I guess it'd be tough for you to pick up stuff anyway, so there's not much we can do about that."

"Meow."

She sounded like she was saying "that's right." But I knew that she could use her magic barrier or warding techniques or other skills to do that kind of work.

I'm pampering her, but it's not like we're in a hurry. I guess it's okay.

* * *

"Woof…? Arf!!!"

I couldn't tell whether the barks had come from Liber or Mataza, but the sound made me turn around. I saw the two of them holding something and looking at each other as they consulted. I approached them.

“Woof? Woof. (Just what is this? Ah, master.)”

“Woof. Woof woof. (You’ve come at just the right moment. We were wondering about this.)”

The two of them held out something. In Liber’s hands—or rather, on her forepaw pad—was a medal. An intricate design was engraved on it, and it looked to be fairly valuable.

“Oh, a medal? It doesn’t look like currency, though. Maybe it’s a memento, or belongs to some household? I don’t remember seeing this before, so it’s probably not from a noble house. It could be from somewhere less well-known, though. I should ask Katarina about it later.”

That was about all I could tell from looking at it. I didn’t really sense any mana from it either. Actually, there seemed to be a little bit of residue on it…

“Woof woof? (Do all human nobles carry around this sort of thing?)”

“Not all of them. It’s normal to have items marked with your house’s crest or whatever. Medals are usually made to give to your subordinates or acquaintances so they can prove their connection to you.”

House Olipiage had its own medals, but they’d all been taken from me when I was exiled, so I couldn’t show them an example. But this one was of a similar make. Of course, the engraved emblem was completely unlike ours, and the medal itself was made of a different material. The medals of House Olipiage integrated many complex techniques to prevent counterfeiting, and they were even made of mythril, as preposterous as that might seem. You’d have to spend dozens of gold coins to counterfeit just one, and this sort of fraud was met with severe punishment. Maybe it was for the best that mine had been confiscated, as it would definitely be a crime for me to carry them in my current position.

As I considered this, Liber came up with another thought. “Woof? Woof? (Is that so? You don’t make any, master?)”

“Who, me? There’d be no point. I have no use for them.”

I didn’t really have any acquaintances that I needed to pass them out to, and I didn’t have any political influence to support someone in the first place.

Or so I thought, but then Mataza declared, “Woof! (I want one

as a token of serving milord!)”

Liber joined in. “Woof woof! (Me too! Please make some for us!)”

“Seriously? They wouldn’t serve any use. Where would I even get something like that made?”

I remembered that House Olipiage had commissioned a dwarf craftsman for its medals, but the details of the order had been left to the steward, so I didn’t know much about it. Even if I had known the details, the craftsman must have been a master of his trade. Given that I was exiled and financially constrained, I wouldn’t be able to commission him.

Money was precious. I needed to avoid spending it frivolously. It was miserly of me, but it had been on my mind ever since I’d fallen to this position. Of course, we wouldn’t need it at all if we were holing up in the forest, but it was a necessity in town. I wanted to eat out and buy lots of tools. Spending money on *medals*, of all things…

Cath, who was riding on my shoulders, seemed to sense what I was feeling.

“Meow! Mya-meow!” she ordered Liber and Mataza. I didn’t know what she was saying exactly, but I understood the general idea—basically, “Let’s not spend money” and “If you want a token, something cheap will do just fine.”

Hey, don’t give them specific ideas, I thought. But a look of clarity formed on Liber and Mataza’s faces.

“Woof! (The price doesn’t matter to us, so please!)”

“Woof! Woof woof! (We don’t mind if you just make them from wood! I’d like to receive something from you, master!)”

I wondered what made them so intensely loyal, but I quickly remembered it had to be the effect of my skill. Even then, I didn’t understand why Cath wasn’t as completely devoted to me as they were. She often had different wants than me too. The same applied to Aht.

It seemed <Follower Contract> didn’t completely rob them of their free will. They obeyed me under the contract, but I still wasn’t sure to what degree or in what manner.

In any case, I wish I had a magic tool that disrupted the controlling effects of these kinds of skills. With something like that, I could get a better idea of what’s going on here. But for now, I should promise to grant Liber and Mataza’s request.

“All right, you two. But don’t expect anything too expensive…and I’ll give some to the other kobolds too.”

“Meow!” Cath smacked my head, so I had no choice but to concede.

“Okay, you too, Cath. I guess I’ve got my work cut out for me.”

“Excuse me, I want to report in about a job,” I said to the receptionist as soon as we got back to the adventurer’s guild.

I’d never seen this staff member before. They looked young, and were a little confused by what I said. “Um…can I ask you to present your status card?”

That gave me a clue as to why they were perplexed. Usually one would present their status card preemptively.

“Oh, right. Here you go.”

“All right, thank you. Excuse me…huh?! Uh, p-please wait just a moment!”

As soon as they saw my card display, the staff member became flustered and ran off somewhere.

“Looks like they’re in a big hurry,” I murmured as I saw them leave.

Mataza suggested a possible explanation. “Woof woof, woof, wa-woof? (We’ve never seen them around before. Perhaps they didn’t know that Milord received a direct request from Mr. Fresco?)”

“I see, that could be it. I’d be pretty flustered too if I were in their shoes…I must look like a pain to deal with.”

Someone whom the guild leader, the very top member of the organization, was interested in had randomly come up to the general reception desk. Their superiors had probably instructed them to treat visitors like this with the utmost care.

This was going to be annoying.

“Meow…” Cath mewed discontentedly.

“It’s the guild leader’s fault for not making proper arrangements? Don’t say that, Cath. Well, any which way, we can’t really be blamed here.”

The staff member suddenly returned, in just as much of a hurry as before, and turned to us with a relieved look.

“Ah, th-thank you for waiting… Please come this way, Mr. Noah, Mr. Mataza, Ms. Liber, Ms. Cath…”

Judging from how they’d said all of our names, all four of us were getting special treatment.

I nodded. “Okay, thanks.”

* * *

“Don’t freak out the employees, Noah,” Fresco told me bluntly as soon as I entered the guild leader’s office.

I dropped my shoulders and tried to argue back. “Hold on, I wasn’t at fault there. I believe the guild leader should have been responsible for making the proper arrangements in this scenario.”

“Like the nobility would, eh? That’s not my style, so quit talking like a snob. Maybe you’re used to running your mouth like that, but it feels like you’re putting up a wall. I don’t like it.”

I was a little startled at his sudden remark. “You dislike my manner of speech?”

“Case in point.”

“Oh…my formal register? But this only seems appropriate, as I’m essentially your subordinate.”

This was just how things were done at the royal palace, at the Duke’s residence, and at school. When I thought about it, it was standard in every community I’d belonged to.

Fresco surmised as much. “Maybe if we were in high society as part of the royal court or as government officials, sure. But where do you think we are now?”

“The adventurer’s guild, of course.”

“Yeah! And adventurers are…”

I sarcastically finished his sentence for him. “Vulgar ruffians and crooks, so they’d never use inordinately polite speech?”

Fresco snorted. “Hey, that’s a bit much. We know how to show some decorum when we want to. And we obey the law too…usually.”

“In other words, there are times when you *break* the law?”

Well, nobody could stick to the law all the time. There were situations where it was difficult to follow.

Fresco addressed this. “You gotta adapt to the situation, y’know? Sometimes you just can’t be assed.”

“For example?” I asked.

“Lemme think… When there’s a tidal wave or flood. Those are the big ones.”

“Understandable…but those are extraordinary cases. Very few

people follow the law in those instances. There are looters, and some even take advantage of the circumstances to commit murder." I'd never actually witnessed this myself, but I'd studied history and heard from people who'd seen it firsthand. Fresco might have even seen these things happen himself.

An old and weary expression formed on his face. "Is it that exceptional? You sure that's not just human nature?" he said despondently.

He must have remembered something unpleasant, I thought. I tried to change the mood with a little wisecrack. "The guild leader of this town certainly likes to discuss philosophy."

"Sorry, didn't mean to get into that. But anyway, that's just how it is. You can speak more casually to me. That's not major enough to change your nature, right?"

"I'm not too sure about that… There are instances where showing decorum can improve a relationship. Humans are just ignorant animals straightened out through their upbringing."

It was a common argument, but it was still true. Education gave people moral integrity. Or perhaps it was the other way around: people wouldn't know the difference between right and wrong without education. That ignorance might be bliss in its own way, but it would make us no different than animals.

Regardless, Fresco seemed cultured as well. He shot back, "And then there are guys like you, who shoulda had the animal straightened outta them but went and got wild again."

Apparently I'd just brought more trouble on myself. I shook my head. "Let's not talk about this any longer."

Fresco nodded with a triumphant expression. "Fine by me. So, what's your answer?"

"All right, Fresco. But really, you should prep better. Otherwise, people might ask where I get off, talking to the guild leader so pretentiously."

After that whole conversation, I couldn't exactly persist with the same language I'd been using. But I remembered to caution him again, since it'd be annoying if other people took issue with me.

"Oh, huh. So *that's* the way you normally talk? Hm. You sound like the kinda person who's used to ordering others around. Figures…" Fresco sounded rather curious.

"Prying won't do you any good."

“Come on, a little bit won’t hurt. You can pry into *my* life if you want,” he countered.

I scoffed. “Who’d want to learn about some old dude like you?”

Fresco laughed so hard his shoulders shook. “Ha ha, you’re real rude when you wanna be, ain’tcha? Ah well… So, how’d the quest go? Lemme hear your report,” he said, his expression turning serious.

* * *

“It wasn’t as bad as I expected in Asyl…the former village of Asyl, I guess you’d say. There were just a lot of skeletons nesting in that ghost town,” I began.

Fresco nodded. “We’d heard as much from the merchants who were attacked, but they really were skeletons, huh? That’s unusual. That place turned into a ghost town ages ago, but not because people there had died horrible deaths or anything like that. Well, we don’t have much to go on since it wasn’t a very notable town, so we can’t say for sure.”

I hadn’t been given precise details because there were none to begin with. There wasn’t much to be done about that.

“I found it a bit strange too. Undead beings like skeletons are most often produced when someone is killed gruesomely and can’t pass on, or when mana solidifies in the presence of blood. But neither seemed to be the case there.”

On the contrary, the place seemed perfectly nice. I’d almost want to live there myself. But maybe I was just numb to it, after being immersed in the dangerous environs of the Purgatory Forest for so long.

“Huh, you can tell that?”

“A little, just by looking at the mana.”

This was true. Of the skills I’d gained from Aht, the sacred ones had proved most effective.

Fresco sounded pleased to hear this. “That’s a good skill. We could get a lot of mileage out of it.”

I frowned. “Don’t go looking for more uses for me already.”

“The adventurer’s guild leader’s real test of strength is to figure out how to get work for the guild’s adventurers.” He was the adventurer’s guild leader, but his job sounded more like that of a

businessman.

"Spinning it in a different way doesn't make it any better."

"But I'm not wrong, am I?"

"Well, I guess not." I wanted to argue back, but that was all I could say. I understood how important money was, now that I'd been reduced to this. If you had a chance to earn money, it was best to take it.

"Y'see? Anyway, jokes aside, that skill of yours could be in high demand. I'm not gonna ask for the technical details, but since you're the one who has it, you *do* know how to use it, yeah?"

"I don't know the exact specifics of my own skills, but yes, I should be able to."

"Not many people understand the ins and outs of their own skills anyway, so it's fine if you've only got the gist. Anyway, that skill of yours will let you know in advance to some degree where and when the undead will pop up, if I've got this right. That makes it easier to think up a strategy. And you could get rewarded just for standing by and watching. Sounds like a good deal, right?"

"Isn't that kind of crooked? And doesn't the Church usually take care of that kind of thing?"

"In this country, the Church of Astral's influence means nil. They barely even take these kinds of requests. Only when it pays well. They won't be able to complain much if we steal some of their demand."

"Any other religions that might object?"

"None that would go making a fuss about it. The Church of Astral is just weird like that. Most clergy members can't even go into gambling dens. Sure, they might take issue with us purifying a house where someone died, but nobody would complain about adventurers checking out a battlefield or other places like that."

"I guess you raise a good point. Then if there's no problem, you can pass those requests along to me. I'll take them if I've got time."

I didn't plan to accept anything beyond reason. Not because it'd be extra work, but because standing out too much would cause me problems. Fresco seemed like he'd be understanding, but this was just to be safe.

"Okay, sounds good. Anyway, moving on."

"Yeah. We defeated all the skeletons that spawned. There were about twenty of them. We gathered their mana stones too, so that

should be good enough evidence."

I spread them out on the table with a clatter. Fresco picked them up, one at a time, and inspected them with great interest.

"Oh, this one... Is it just me, or is it a little bigger than normal skeleton mana stones?" he said, head tilted in puzzlement. He seemed to feel like it was somehow unlike the ones he was used to. I couldn't tell the difference, but Fresco was a seasoned veteran.

"Really?"

"Yeah, it just feels like it. I'll have someone here appraise it. They might've just been skeletons, but for a group of four people—or three people and a cat, I guess—to defeat twenty of them? You're way better than novices," he complimented, though it might've just been flattery.

"That's to be expected when someone with passable fighting ability registers as an adventurer, right?"

It was common enough for new adventurers to have been knights who'd retired or gotten fired, or warriors who'd gained full mastery of some martial art.

"True. Still, it's rare for them to come as young as you... But enough about that, I guess."

"Yeah. Oh right, I found something else curious." I suddenly remembered, and pulled the item in question out of my pocket.

"Hm?"

"Take a look at this."

Fresco took it in hand and studied it over. "This is...a medal, huh? Hm, there's a crest here. It's...!" His expression turned to one of surprise. Apparently, he had some idea of what this object was.

"What is it? Have you seen it before?"

"Yeah, I have. We better let Lady Katarina know about this," he said with a serious look.

"I'm going to return to the manor after this, so shall I tell her?" I suggested offhand. I expected that Fresco would've preferred to tell her himself, but surprisingly, he agreed.

"Lemme think... Yeah, that might be best. Take this medal with you," he said.

That seemed a little strange. "Are you sure? Shouldn't you hold on to it as the adventurer's guild leader?"

"No, that'll just invite more trouble. Besides, Lady Katarina can

put it to good use."

This probably had something to do with the city's power structure. If so, then it was probably better to have her take it.

I nodded. "I see, so that's what this is about. All right. I'll do that, then. By the way, what about my reward for this job?"

I hadn't forgotten about that. Money was important, after all.

Fresco answered, "Right, your pay. Here you go. And you'll get your portion of the mana stones once they're appraised, so come pick it up in a few days. Sound good?"

"Yeah, thanks."

* * *

"You've brought back quite a portentous souvenir."

I had brought the medal with me as Fresco had said, and immediately presented it to Katarina. Her reaction had been to clutch her forehead with a troubled expression.

This item really *was* problematic. But it made me all the more curious.

"Is it really that bad? I've never seen this crest before."

Katarina gave a deep nod, then hesitated for a moment. She was probably contemplating whether it would be prudent to tell me. But ultimately, she made up her mind and explained. "I'm certain you haven't. This is the personal crest of the leader of Midrogue's mage's guild."

That makes sense, I thought. *If a monster had it, there could be all kinds of issues.*

At the same time, I found it strange. Why had we found an item belonging to a person with such status?

I asked honestly, "It belongs to the mage's guild leader? But why would a skeleton have something like that?"

Katarina shook her head. "I shudder to think of it, but the only natural conclusion is that the skeletons have something to do with him."

I could tell that much. The problem was, what *exactly* was the relationship between them? Judging by Katarina's behavior, it must have been something adverse.

Going by this assumption, I spoke, looking closely to catch her reaction. "You mean the skeletons are..."

Katarina nodded. “I believe it must be the case. I am not well-versed in magic, but…Master Noah, are you aware that there are multiple ways to produce undead beings such as skeletons?”

Magic was often studied by nobles, but the curriculum varied by country and family. It was basically compulsory for the Olipiages. As one could tell from my father and brother’s talent, we were a magic-focused family. Other families which focused more on military or civic matters wouldn’t have been as knowledgeable. Katarina’s family was likely this sort. Besides, being the age she was, she might just not have learned about it yet.

“Of course I’m aware. They’re produced either by the natural solidification of mana, or by mana concentrating due to a corpse’s lasting hatred.”

Those were the two main types, but these weren’t what Katarina wanted to know about. As could be expected, after nodding, she pressed me for more. “I’ve heard that those are the conditions by which they’re naturally produced. I believe there’s one other method, though?”

I had fully intended to tell her, so I affirmed what she said and answered. “Yes. There are monsters that can be artificially produced by magic. Skeletons are one of this sort. Of course, if summoning arts are used, that’s another thing…”

Summoning arts were a kind of magic that could call forth various kinds of monsters. Through the use of magic circles or offerings, one could even call forth a being far beyond the scope of one’s own power. However, it was extremely dangerous by nature, and legend had it that failed rites had ruined entire countries before. There existed powerful monsters which were not to be trifled with for any reason, and it was said that they originated from the foolish summoning rites conducted by these countries, called here from other worlds. It was a cautionary lesson in recognizing human boundaries.

While she hadn’t known all of that, Katarina at least seemed to understand the challenges of summoning arts. “But I’ve heard that summoning magic is exceedingly difficult?”

“That it is. It’s not something just any inept mage could easily accomplish. But artificially producing skeletons is also…”

“Difficult?”

Exactly. Magic *could* produce skeletons, but it wasn't easy. If it were, everyone would be doing it. You could basically create an infinite army. Even if you couldn't control them, you could continuously summon them within an enemy nation and deal massive damage. But almost nobody had actually pulled that off.

That "almost" was the kicker, though...

In any case, I told Katarina, "Yes, both practically and ethically. Artificially producing undead beings falls under the category of necromancy, which is forbidden in most countries."

That was a fact. The Church of Astral in particular had strict prohibitions on necromancy. Wherever the faith was strongest, necromancy was abhorred even more. Regardless of the Church's influence, necromancy was strongly despised because it manipulated people's souls. That was why many countries, including this one, had banned it.

And yet...

Katarina's eyes were downcast. "But someone who has broken the taboo is here in this very city..."

Chapter 3: At the Ghost Town

“This just seems altogether too reckless. Isn’t it your responsibility to stop her, Mr. Greg?” I asked.

We were in the middle of a dark forest, watching a crackling campfire from a short distance.

Greg replied, “My master has ordered me to serve as Lady Katarina’s aide while in Midrogue. I am to obey her decisions to the letter.”

“I get it. So you can’t stop her unless her life is in immediate jeopardy.”

“Precisely.”

That was the typical master-servant relationship, especially between children who were assigned a challenging task and sent off to far lands and their stewards. Katarina and Greg were the very paradigm of this. Still…

“I still think this qualifies as putting her life in danger. We may be registered adventurers, but I’m sure you’re aware that we’re still only the lowest rank of iron. I intend to protect her as best I can, but I can’t take responsibility for whatever happens…”

We were currently in the ruins of Asyl, where the skeletons had appeared en masse. While there were no monsters at the moment, this was still no place for a noblewoman. But Katarina had insisted upon coming and wouldn’t take no for an answer. Her reason was that she desperately wanted to catch the mage’s guild leader red-handed herself.

She’d already informed the city council that the skeletons had been eradicated, so the mage’s guild leader was sure to return here after hearing the news. After all, as a council member, he would have heard it straight from Katarina’s mouth. We predicted that, given his character, there was no way he wouldn’t come to check up on his own schemes.

Greg responded, “I understand that. I know we are asking much of you. However, you have bested opponents that our knights struggled against. I believe in you. And if the situation truly becomes hopeless…you are free to abandon us. I’ve left a

letter instructing that your party is not to be held responsible."

Hearing that gave me some relief. They were being quite considerate, and were prepared for the worst. However...

"I don't think it's necessary to go quite that far. Certainly, having a necromancer on the loose is dangerous, and I believe he should be arrested as soon as possible, but can't you let other people handle it?"

Like knights or soldiers, for example. Or adventurers, depending on the circumstances. Or me, if it came down to it.

But Greg simply shook his head. "I'm sure we could, if only they were an ordinary individual. However, our opponent is the leader of Midrogue's mage's guild. It would be difficult for a person of lower status to handle this. Of course, there is also the matter of physical strength. However, if both you and Lady Katarina are present, he can be pressured both ways. That is why..."

"...You're willing to use any means necessary. Oh, all right. Besides, you're here already. I shouldn't be wasting time complaining at this point."

I'd just wanted to say it for the record. I knew there was nothing more that could be done, so I decided to not pursue it any further.

"It's no fault of yours," Greg said. "And we haven't had the chance for a private conversation before. Regardless, there's a fragrant aroma drifting around. Are you certain about this? We've come to catch the mage's guild leader as soon as he arrives, so that he can't make any excuses. Won't it be detrimental for him to know we're here?"

True enough, it probably seemed that way to him. But I had an assortment of handy skills, and one of them was active at this very moment.

"You don't need to worry about that. I've set up a barrier around the area. The smell and light won't escape to the outside."

It consumed a fair amount of mana, but it didn't need to be that strong, so it was still surprisingly energy efficient.

Greg's eyes opened wide in surprise. "What?! We are only a short distance away, but that is still a considerable range. The average mage is capable of putting up barriers a few meters in radius at most."

"Well, there's a trick to it. And I've had a lot of practice. It's an essential skill when traveling through the forest with such a large

family.”

Thus, I’d had Aht relentlessly drill it into me. That was all there was to it.

Greg didn’t have the slightest idea about this, so he was persuaded that there must have been some special training method. “I see. Nonetheless, achieving it out of necessity must not be a simple matter.”

“There’s a lot you can do if you’re desperate enough.”

“Is that so?”

Greg fell silent, having gotten the hint from my expression not to pry any further.

Someone approached us with brisk footsteps. “Hm? Is something the matter, you two? The food’s done cooking. Although all I did was put the fish on skewers.”

Of course, that someone was Katarina. She’d been sitting beside the campfire a short distance away, preparing dinner with Cath, Mataza, and Liber. Apparently they’d just finished.

“No, it’s nothing. That aside, there is no need for you to do the cooking, Lady Katarina. I could have—”

“That would simply be boring, Greg. Besides, you two appeared to be talking in secret.”

“I… I am sorry for that.”

Unable to make a rebuttal, I offered an apology.

Katarina puffed out her cheeks in discontent. “If you are really sorry, then would you stop speaking like that? I’ll do the same,” she said.

Reminded of a certain adventurer’s guild leader, I asked, “You mean my formal register?”

Katarina seemed to already be aware, and continued. “Yes. I’ve heard that you speak to Master Fresco as an equal, correct? You could do the same with me…”

She seemed jealous, though I didn’t really understand why. I tried to refuse on the basis that doing so was unconventional. “No, despite your insistence, Mr. Fresco is just a commoner. There’s no issue with me speaking to him that way. Whereas for you, Lady Katarina…”

“Does it really matter? You’re nobility too, aren’t you? Or rather, you *were*.” All of a sudden, she stopped using polite speech and broached an extremely delicate subject.

Nothing I can do about it now, I figured. “Hey. I thought you weren’t gonna bring that up?” I remarked.

Katarina gave a thin smile. “I’d intended not to. Of course, I won’t pry any further. But you left me with no choice, since you hid behind the claim that you’re not a noble. Actually, now that you’re speaking this way too, I take it that means you’ll listen to my request?”

I decided I wasn’t going to gripe anymore. “You stopped using polite language too. *Siiigh*… Mr. Greg, I apologize. I didn’t start this, so please forgive me.”

“You have nothing to apologize for! This is exactly what Lady Katarina desires. Although…”

“Although what?”

“I believe it would be unusual for you to continue speaking so formally to *me* when you no longer do so with Lady Katarina. Please, if you would be so kind as to address me casually.”

“But to speak like that to the steward of a house of high standing would be…”

“Please, I implore you. It simply does not sit well with me.”

“*Sigh*…all right. But don’t come complaining to me later. Oh, I’ll still act formal toward both of you when other people are around, so please be understanding about that. Got it?”

The two of them agreed to my request with a nod. *They aren’t related by blood, but like master, like servant,* I thought to myself.

* * *

“Mya-meow.”

As we were conversing, Cath’s head suddenly lifted up and her ears prickled. She stared in a certain direction, on high alert. I knew full well what that meant.

“Hey, looks like he’s here. What’s the strategy?”

I could hear the thudding footsteps of a person approaching. They were relatively calm footsteps, which seemed to be in no hurry. That told me that they were probably the person we were after.

Katarina and Greg quickly changed attitudes. Katarina said, “Let’s observe first. While he *has* come here, he could still claim to just be investigating the area.”

I'd been worried that she might say "Let's seize him immediately," but Katarina was much more composed than I'd expected.

Greg, satisfied with her response, voiced his assent. "That works best. We must catch him in the act, or else coming all this way would be for naught."

I was also in agreement, and started to lay the groundwork. "All right. Then I'll keep the barrier up as it is. Guess I'll use a concealment skill for good measure…and put out the campfire too."

After I promptly did each of these things, Katarina turned to me with a look of amazement.

"You really can do anything all by yourself, Noah."

"Not exactly. There are tons of people out there in the world who I can't hold a candle to."

Especially at the Church. As I currently was, I couldn't compete with Aht in anything. Comparing myself to a Holy Maiden was unfair, but even if they weren't quite on Aht's level, the Church probably had lots of people who were very close to her in strength. Besides, there must have been plenty of adventurers who were stronger than me, including in Midrogue.

But Katarina gave me a dubious look. "I find that hard to believe."

"Really, there are. Midrogue's just a small town, but I'm sure there are people stronger than me even there."

Katarina probably just didn't see them around much because many of the knights her father had granted her as an escort were actually squires. In addition, it was tough for strong adventurers to settle down in Midrogue. The place didn't offer much excitement for them. They'd just drop by for a look, and most of the adventurers there were mid-level at most. Fresco was probably adequately strong, but that was about it.

While it was a mystery whether she understood what I was thinking or not, Katarina tentatively responded, "I suppose, but…"

There was nothing else that could be added, and the person was coming closer. So I cut the conversation short. "Come on, he's getting closer. Keep quiet. The barrier should stop sound and light from leaking out, but he's a mage. It's entirely possible that he'll notice the presence of magic. We should be fine as long as he

doesn’t get too close, but I wouldn’t gamble on it.”

“Ah, y-you have a point… As I thought, it’s Glydel Baud.”

“That’s definitely the mage’s guild leader, then?”

“Yes. He wears a robe and carries a staff as mages customarily do, but I couldn’t possibly mistake that glowering face and the distasteful jewelry all over him.”

It was a prejudiced description, but it certainly fit the person who was approaching. However, I had a slightly different assessment than Katarina.

“Maybe it looks distasteful, but those are all magic tools. Unfortunately for us, he seems like a pretty cautious guy.”

“Huh? Is that so? But I don’t sense anything from them.”

“There are plenty of methods to conceal a magic tool. I mean, he hasn’t caught onto our presence yet. The same can be done for magic tools, as long as you know how.” And honestly, anyone who didn’t know how was an amateur. This showed that he was at least competent.

“So we must be cautious, then,” Katarina concluded.

I nodded, then turned my attention back to the mage’s guild leader, Glydel. “Of course. Oh, looks like he’s doing something.”

* * *

“The skeletons were all defeated, as I feared. Indeed, it was quite detrimental that they were discovered before they matured,” Glydel said as he surveyed the surroundings.

Observing the uncanny scene, Katarina said, “He’s muttering something. Is he talking to himself?”

I could see how she thought that, but I gently corrected her. “No, he’s probably using a magic tool for long-distance communication. They’re a rare find in labyrinths, and most of them have a limited number of uses, but he’s using one unsparingly. Is the person he’s talking to that important?”

The content of his conversation supported my theory. “No, that won’t be an issue. I already have it figured out. Fortunately, due to the battle that took place here, there’s enough hatred to go around. If used efficiently, it should take little effort. You won’t be inconvenienced. On the contrary, I may be able to bring you good news.”

“Just what is he talking about… Urk! Oh shoot!” I sensed something was off in the middle of the conversation. But as soon as the last sentence was out of his mouth, I realized that Glydel’s eyes were looking this way. And by then, it was too late. He’d noticed us.

“Now then, shall we begin the hunt?” He then began to recite, “Heed my name and make good on our contract. Evil spirit, manifest—come forth, skeleton king!”

Mana began to concentrate, compelled by his incantation.

We fell for it, I thought. *But now that things have turned out this way, we’ve just gotta make the most of it.* That was all we could do.

* * *

There stood a notoriously powerful monster: an honest-to-goodness skeleton king. Unlike with normal skeletons, the bones that composed its body were dark-colored, and it radiated a shadowy aura. Blazing, pale blue hellfire glittered within its all-consuming eye sockets. In its hand was a weapon which looked to be a renowned blade. It was clad in hefty black iron armor which closely matched its body color, and its head was adorned with a crown of sharp bladelike horns.

This was more imposing than even a standard skeleton king. I could plainly tell that this was Glydel’s ace in the hole.

“Stand back, you two. That thing’s dangerous.” I stood in front of Katarina and Greg to protect them.

Glydel seemed to notice something, and called out to us. “Dear me, I had thought there was a puny little rat snooping around, but… Well, well. If it isn’t the daughter of Marquess Trahn. What brings you to this vacant ghost town?”

Katarina’s anger flared at his suddenly unctuous tone, but Greg lightly patted her shoulder to calm her down. Upon regaining a modicum of composure, Katarina spoke back to Glydel. “That is exactly what I wish to ask *you*, guild leader Glydel. There is no business that would bring you here. Unless, of course, it’s something unsavory?”

As I listened, I thought to myself, *Now there’s a noblewoman for you.* So far, Katarina had been far removed from the noblewomen of Oraculum, exhibiting none of their snideness. But now I knew

that she was quite capable of making such remarks. I don't mean that in a patronizing or demeaning way; on the contrary, being able to act was a crucial skill in noble society. Those who couldn't bluff well would be knocked down. I had been worried that Katarina was one of those types, but my concerns were all dispelled in this moment.

Glydel responded to Katarina with a smile and an unfalteringly tranquil attitude. "Goodness, no. After hearing what you had to say at the council meeting, I simply came to verify the strange goings-on in this ghost town for myself. As I was doing so, I sensed an unusual presence..."

Katarina acquiesced and made an unexpected statement. "I see. Very well then, if you say so. It would appear we are not especially needed here, so we'll take our leave."

True enough, it might have been best to leave without fighting. He'd already found us spying on him, so we'd need to rethink our strategy.

I couldn't tell whether he had read her intent or not. Glydel replied politely, "Is that so? Please feel free. I'll continue to investigate the area a little longer."

Katarina nodded. "Well then, if you'll excuse us. Greg, Noah, and the rest of you, let's be on our way," she said, turning on her heel and preparing to walk away.

However...

"Ah yes, but you *did* see this. I suppose that's enough of the charade, then. It'll be simpler if you just die now," Glydel spat. The aura exuding from the skeleton king standing next to him changed palpably. It had already been vastly imposing, but now it had been given direction, unleashing its bloodlust at us.

Clannng! came a sound as a powerful shock wave reverberated into my hands. Before my eyes was the skeleton king, which had closed the distance between us in an instant and swung its sword down at me. I had just barely caught it with my own sword. Aht's training was definitely paying off. As much as she'd pledged her allegiance to me, she was a lunatic who'd come at me with real bloodlust during training. Well, it hardly would've prepared me for something like this otherwise. The old me would have been knocked off my feet just by being around this much bloodlust.

"But now...!"

Vwoosh! With a momentous swing of my sword, I shook off the skeleton king. It was pretty heavy, but not so much that I couldn't deal with it. Now that I knew, I became more rational and held my sword at the ready. I called out to everyone, ordering them to surround the skeleton king. "Cath, Mataza, Liber! Let's do this!"

Taking it down alone seemed feasible, but it would still have been tough. With the four of us, though...

"Have you forgotten that I'm a mage?" came a voice. Mana concentrated behind the skeleton and erupted, sending huge orbs of fire streaking toward us. This was the fire magic, Grand Fireball. They'd hit us directly if we stayed still, so we were forced to step back. They struck the ground, scattering flames everywhere. The sheer spectacle of their impacts spoke volumes of how powerful they were.

The mage's guild leader and the skeleton king—the most frustrating part was, they made a well-balanced team of rear guard and front line. Even so, we couldn't lose this battle.

"We're gonna bring them down," I said. We once more faced toward our enemies.

"Glidedance Blade!"

I gave it everything I had from the get-go and unleashed the most powerful skill I was currently capable of. There was no time to test the waters. As I swung my sword, numerous invisible blades shot out of its arc and launched at the skeleton king.

I just hope this'll do the trick, I thought.

Buh-buh-buh-buh-bam!

The echoing sound let me know that my attacks had hit their target. The impact made a haze rise from the ground, obscuring my vision.

Did I beat it, or only damage it? I gripped my sword warily, observing the situation.

However...

"Damn!" As soon as the haze cleared, a giant body twice the size of a normal skeleton sprang out like a cannonball.

Its target...is me. I'm glad it's not going after the other three. I can take its attack. It'll swing its sword down like before, and...

But looking again, I saw that the sword's surface was glossed with a thin layer of mana.

Better not let this one hit me.

I managed to dodge the strike, and the black skeleton's blade plunged into the ground. The spot instantaneously froze over, making crystalline blossoms of ice.

"It's a magic sword!"

These weapons were a type of magic tool that could unleash special attacks by channeling mana into them. It was widely known that even the weaker ones were twice as expensive as regular weapons. And this skeleton's magic sword seemed like a remarkably powerful one.

If I'd blocked, I'd probably have frozen over. That was a close call.

But it seemed that *someone* didn't intend to give me a moment's rest.

"Your back's wide open!" Glydel called out.

He must have been sure that he had the upper hand, or he was simply trying to startle me. I wasn't sure which, but even without turning around, I could sense a clod of mana headed straight for me. I took evasive action as soon as I found solid footing, watching a fireball pass through where I'd just been. This was unmistakably the magic of the mage's guild leader.

The way things are going, we might get backed into a corner. Foreseeing this, I signaled to Cath with my gaze. I could've done it with Mataza or Liber too, but she knew me best after all the time we'd been together. As expected, she immediately understood my intention. She approached Glydel, her presence masked by her small size.

"Ho ho, let's see how long you can last!" Glydel gloated, unaware of the small monster which had come up from behind him.

"Meow!"

Cath stretched out her front paw and forcefully smacked Glydel's neck—a kitty punch from her <Catfight> skill.



“Ungh!”

I would be insulting a lot of people if I said this was typical of mages, but it seemed that Glydel wasn’t very good at close combat. He was unable to counter, and Cath’s strike hit him. That single blow knocked him unconscious, and he collapsed on the spot. I’d instructed Cath via eye contact to avoid killing him if possible, so I appreciated that she’d followed through.

It went without saying that this wasn’t out of mercy. It was just that if we killed Glydel now, we wouldn’t get any further answers.

“Now we can focus on this guy. Mataza, Liber!”

While Cath targeted Glydel, the rest of us had been dodging the skeleton king’s attacks. We hadn’t been able to take any risks when there was the threat of being blindsided by magic. We’d essentially been stuck in a deadlock.

But now…

In answer to my cry, the two of them spread out and closed the distance, attacking from different angles.

The skeleton king seemed to be at a loss over which one to go after. It seemed to have poorer decision-making than before, probably because Glydel had lost consciousness. That was another reason why taking him out first had been the right move.

The skeleton king ended up veering toward Liber first, but she was able to skillfully dodge its sword. She had evaded Aht’s strikes better than anyone during training. So even against this unique skeleton king, she was doing fine.

Meanwhile, Mataza waited for an opening and thrust his spear. Though it was a higher-ranked creature, its basic structure was the same as a normal skeleton. There had to be a solidified mana stone in its body somewhere. I couldn’t get a clear look because of the armor, but through the gaps I could just barely see that there was a mana stone in its torso. Mataza had noticed it as well. His spear pierced straight through to it.

All of a sudden, the skeleton king started to wobble, and its movements lost dynamism. It was as good as gone. Just for good measure, I came up to it and swung my sword. “This will finish you off!”

I forcefully brought it down upon its head. The skeleton king’s cranium was smashed open, exposing the mana stone inside. My sword kept going and broke the mana stone. The massive

skeleton king's body lost cohesion and scattered on the ground.

* * *

"This'll do for now."

I wiped the sweat from my brow after tightly tying up Glydel's arms and legs. I wasn't all that physically exhausted, but I was a little uneasy about what would happen if he suddenly woke up. In other words, it was a cold, nervous sweat. Regardless, he was tightly bound now. I called over to the pair who had been watching behind me.

"Katarina, Greg? You can come out now."

The two of them crept out of the rustling bushes. Our fight had been intense enough that they'd retreated pretty far from the positions they were initially watching from, but fortunately they were still within hearing distance. If they had wandered too far away, they might have encountered some of the regular monsters around the area. That could have spelled trouble, since my attention had been completely drawn away.

Well, I hadn't sensed an inordinate number of monsters like the skeleton horde. The regular forest monsters were spread out, so it should've been fine. But that was only in our cases. Greg and Katarina would've had a much tougher time.

"Are you sure? Glydel is a mage. Rope bindings won't stop him from using magic, will they?" Katarina asked. She'd come pretty close despite that, but she was hesitating to take the last step. If Glydel used his magic like she feared, that slight distance wouldn't mean much, but I suppose her keeping just a little ways away was to give herself some peace of mind.

I gave an explanation to assuage her apprehension. "That would usually be the case, but these ropes are imbued with magic. This is something called <Magic-Sealing White Rope>, and it absorbs the mana of whoever it binds. It's got a lot of other properties that can render mages unable to use their magic."

"Such a thing exists? But I've never seen any in magic tool shops. When mages are imprisoned, their magic is sealed by putting up a powerful magic circle barrier."

Sealing a mage's abilities was actually very difficult, and there were only a few methods of doing so. When mages committed

crimes and were thrown in jail, the prisons themselves were often made of special materials so that barriers could be formed by large magic circles. When they needed to be moved, they would be knocked out or guarded by a stronger mage. However, this <Magic-Sealing White Rope> allowed one to achieve the same results just by tying them up. One might wonder why it wasn't in common use, but there was an unavoidable reason why.

"It takes a lot of valuable materials to make this, and you need purification magic too. It's tricky for the average magifacturer to make."

"Huh? How is it that *you* have some, then?"

"Well…stuff happened."

Basically, I'd gotten the materials in the Purgatory Forest and Aht had created it, since she had the right skills. She couldn't hand over her magical pouch, but she had provided me with some good tools and weapons. This was one of them.

I wanted to become capable of crafting these myself eventually, but I could only dream of that at my current skill level. Well, I had the skill, so I'd just have to keep working at it bit by bit. Skills weren't some kind of divine blessing from a generous god. They were just explicit quantifications of a person's hard work. And they weren't completely foolproof either—someone wasn't guaranteed to be superior to another just because their numbers were higher. If you weren't careful, you could easily end up dying, so it was important to pay heed.

Aht had also told me that I shouldn't trust skill values too much. The numbers only represented one's peak performance, which wasn't always possible to achieve. That was why routine training was necessary to master a skill, and you just had to keep working at it. We were still alive because we'd followed those teachings. If we ever forgot them, we'd be doomed.

That was my line of thinking, but Katarina didn't seem to agree one whit. She said with an astounded look, "People with talent for anything are really in a different class. I'm sure you made it yourself, didn't you?"

She was wrong there, but I just gave an ambiguous laugh. "Well, maybe I did, maybe I didn't," I said, and left it at that. I then turned my gaze to Glydel. "Enough talk about the bindings. What do we do now? There's stuff you have to ask him, right?"

Katarina nodded. “Yes, there’s much that we need to interrogate him about, like why he was making skeletons or who he was talking with earlier. But I’m not certain this is the place to ask. I think we should bring him back to town for now. Do you think that would work?”

I replied, “Yeah, the ropes should definitely stay effective that long. Although we should toss him into a magic-sealing prison as soon as we arrive… Ah!” I exclaimed after suddenly remembering something.

“I-Is something the matter?” Katarina asked me.

“Nah, I just forgot something important.”

“Which is?”

“Simple. We’ve gotta collect materials. Mataza, Liber, Cath! Let’s gather up all the usable parts of the skeleton king!”

Katarina looked at me in relief. “I almost thought something terrible had happened. If that’s all, we’ll help. Won’t we, Greg?”

“Indeed. We can certainly lend a hand with that,” he said.

* * *

“Agh, I guess it’s not going to be any good. Well, I should’ve expected that,” I murmured disappointedly, looking at what was in my hand.

Katarina heard me and came closer. “Is something wrong?” she asked.

“You can tell just by looking, right?”

She tilted her head, but she was still quite knowledgeable. She figured out what it was quickly enough. “A broken mana stone?”

I nodded. “Right.”

That was enough for her to understand why I was so disappointed. Mana stones had inherent value. They had a variety of practical uses, such as sources of energy, decorative stones, or materials for magic tools. However, their size affected their value. They weren’t completely worthless in a broken state, but their value dropped significantly.

“But it was necessary to defeat the skeleton king, right? Besides, my reward will be generous,” Katarina said, hoping that would compensate for it.

Well, we had already been guaranteed a reward at the time we

received the request to escort them. It was a considerable amount, much more than it was reasonable to pay to adventurers of our class. Of course, she was paying that much because she had high expectations from what she'd seen when we rescued her. In any case, I nodded.

"I know. But if this hadn't been damaged, I was thinking of using it to make a magic tool. And since the skeleton king was so strong, I was hoping that it'd have another mana stone inside it. Sadly, that wasn't the case."

Monsters sometimes had more than one mana stone, and there had been two inside the skeleton king's body. There was the one in the torso that Mataza had destroyed, and the one in the head that I'd broken. But it was too much to ask for a third one. Considering that it might've been even more powerful if that were the case, we'd probably gotten lucky. There was no use in asking for the impossible.

Katarina seemed to reach the same conclusion. "Are there any salvageable materials besides the mana stones?"

She wasn't an adventurer and therefore wasn't familiar with monster materials. She probably knew the basics, but she wouldn't have known the type and value of materials that could be acquired from a skeleton king. They rarely appeared in the first place. You wouldn't come across them except in special locations or in labyrinths filled with undead.

I answered her, "There are. Well, as you can see, it's just the bones themselves, but these can still be good materials. They can be used to make magic tools if combined with mana stones from other monsters."

Bones were the primary material you could obtain from skeleton monsters. You could whittle them into arrow or spearheads, crush them for use in powdered medicine, melt them into a catalyst for construction material, and much more. It was a remarkably versatile material.

However, the black bones of the skeleton king might have been too potent and therefore inadvisable for use in medicine or construction. It'd probably be best to just make my own weapons and magic tools with them. This was what I'd had in mind when I'd spoken, but Katarina had more questions.

"By the way, you're talking about making magic tools as if it

were the simplest thing in the world, but how many of them can you make? Can you easily craft something like those ropes?"

The way she had no doubts that I could make them in the first place made me feel like I was rubbing off on her a lot. But I did have a liking for noblewomen who were fast on the uptake. There were a surprising number of them who stuck to their own logic no matter what might challenge it. Having an open mind was itself a virtue.

I answered her. "No way, as if. That's pretty high-level stuff. It's not that easy to make. But I'd like to be able to, someday."

It was a pretty casual response, but I'd underestimated Katarina's smarts. "Which means you aren't the one who made that item. That's a surprise."

The fact that she'd immediately hit upon this conclusion made me marvel at her fast thinking.

"Who do you think I *am*? Well, I wasn't planning on mentioning it, but my teacher made that for me." I figured it was okay to tell her this much by now, though naturally I could hardly mention her specific name and occupation. If I said that she was the Church of Astral's Holy Maiden of Swords, even Katarina might faint. She was just that notorious, feared, and someone who hardly seemed willing to ally herself with anyone outside of the Church. I'd just gotten extremely lucky.

"So that person taught you how to make magic tools?"

Rather than "taught," it'd be more apt to say that I'd borrowed her skills and made them my own through rigorous practice. But I couldn't mention that to Katarina yet either. I gave her a vague answer. "Well, I guess you could say that. I did learn the basics in school, but...whoops."

I'd added a bit of excess information to distract from what I really didn't want her to ask more about. As I'd hoped, Katarina's attention was drawn to the decoy, and she skipped asking about the part I wanted to avoid...

"That was too spurious. You wouldn't let those details slip off your tongue that easily."

...Except she'd noticed that I'd done that intentionally.

I really can't let my guard down with her. I replied to her, enjoying the exchange. "Obviously not. Well, it doesn't hurt to tell you, since you're already aware that I'm an ex-noble." Katarina already knew

about that, so I decided to just make things easier by saying it outright.

Katarina interpreted this positively. “I suppose so. Can I take this to mean you somewhat trust me now?”

I nodded. “Somewhat. But people can betray each other in a heartbeat. There may come a time when we’re on opposite sides,” I responded.

“That’s awfully pessimistic,” Katarina said, looking a little let down.

I responded with a wry smile. “I’d rather you call it pragmatic.”

These were my actual, honest feelings. People betrayed each other. In a heartbeat. Even family…

Well, I knew that there had been no other option, and there was nothing else to be done about it. But still, the bitterness of being betrayed was still fermenting somewhere inside of me. Maybe I was being too spiteful, but these feelings probably wouldn’t be resolved unless I got to see and talk to them again. Of course, I didn’t despise them with every fiber of my being. I’d just lost everything I’d come to rely on…

There was no way she understood where I was coming from, but Katarina seemed to strike upon an idea. “I’m sure you’ll need some manner of support. I think I’d be ideal for the role.” She seemed willing to become my sponsor.

Of course, I’d been borrowing her aid so far with that in mind, but I was glad that she’d brought it up first. Even so, apparently I was too cranky at the moment to wholeheartedly accept. “Not all the time. Only if I want to have a civilized lifestyle in human settlements. If it comes down to it, I’ll literally run for the hills. I can survive.”

This was also true. For better or worse, I’d become able to live without relying on the help of others. In the worst-case scenario, I could live out the rest of my life in the Purgatory Forest. Sure, that carried a higher risk of getting killed by monsters, but if I kept training, raised my skill levels, and gathered more allies with my <Follower Contract> skill…I could practically build an army.

The only reason why I hadn’t yet was because I was still experimenting. If I increased my allies by too much, I’d limit the range of what I could do. Right now, there were more than ten of us, and moving as a group was incredibly conspicuous. Figuring

out what to do about that was an immediate issue. The obvious solution would be to disband, but I couldn't do that. I'd decided to stick together with them.

I wouldn't betray them. Even if it meant we had to go back to the Purgatory Forest.

"I'd rather you didn't, if at all possible…but what I'm saying is reasonable, don't you think?" Katarina had sensed that I was serious, and tried to dissuade me from it.

I acquiesced for the moment. "I guess so. I do want to live an easy life in a sturdy house, with a comfortable bed and well-seasoned food. I'm sick of spending my days in a monster-infested forest, jumping at every howl." These were my genuine, true feelings. Anyone would hate living in a forest full of monsters and bugs all the time.

"It seems you've had quite a rough time."

"But I'm still alive. That's what matters."

I just didn't want to die. That was my goal in life.

Katarina smiled with admiration and said, "Then you've been living ignobly…in a positive sense, I mean."

I narrowed my eyes at her. "Are you making fun of me?"

"I'm complimenting you. It's rare for nobles to put so much effort into something. So…I have a proposal for you. Would you give it a listen?" she asked with upturned eyes.

Is this something she feels guilty about requesting? I wondered, but gave her the go-ahead. "I'll listen to what you have to say, but if push comes to shove, I'm heading for the hills."

"That's enough of that. We're both fourteen, right?"

The sudden change of subject made me even more puzzled. But she was correct, so I told her so. "Huh? Well, yes, but what does that have to do with anything? Do you want to have a joint birthday party once we get back to your manor?"

It made me feel nostalgic. Back at the Duke's residence, we would hold birthday parties for me, my younger brother, and my parents. I wouldn't mind doing one, but at the same time, part of me felt like it was tremendously inane.

Katarina replied with dismay, "My birthday was two months ago already."

"Congrats. Mine was three months ago."

Apparently it was past time for both of us.

“Congratulations to you too. Then that means you’re slightly older than me.” Katarina seemed a little surprised.

“A month hardly makes a difference. So, what else did you want to say?”

“Right. Since we’re the same age, I thought it might be interesting to go to school together.”

This was an abrupt proposal. *School?*

“Huh? What are you even saying? You’re nobility, I’m a commoner…and I don’t even have a permanent address. There’s no way I can go to school with you.” Those were the first words out of my mouth.

But Katarina replied, “There *is* a way. What do you know about the Urizen Federation’s top educational institution?”

“It’s the Arcgal Magic Academy, right? If I remember right, it accepts new students regardless of social status. But it’s a bit late now…” It wasn’t entirely impossible, but there was no reason for me to enter.

Katarina wasn’t concerned about that and kept talking. “It’s an institute of higher learning which teaches advanced disciplines and techniques. There’s no ordained enrollment age, but the average is fifteen. The average time it takes to graduate is…well, if you get out in three years, it means you have talent.”

“And you want *me* to go there? Like I said, no way, no how. I’m…a fugitive. I can’t go to a conspicuous place like that in my situation.”

Yes, that was the biggest problem. The old me might not have cared, but right now, there was a lot I wanted to learn about. I was a little interested in the prospect of studying and researching what I could at a school, but it was just impossible.

Even so, Katarina was persistent. “I’ll devise a name and social position for you.”

I snorted. “Your influence can’t even keep Midrogue under control, and that’s just one city.”

Katarina firmly retorted, “It’ll be fine. This job you just performed should resolve most of the problems. I can borrow my father’s influence for this.”

Is this really that big of an achievement? At the moment, we couldn’t gauge how well this job would be received. She might’ve just said it with confidence in order to encourage herself. Everyone

did that sometimes, when they were chasing after their hopes.

"It sounds like you really want this. But what's in it for me?"

"Power, plain and simple. You can't put your full faith in me, right? Then why not make more connections with other people?"

"At the academy?"

"Precisely. The children of many powerful figures come from all over the Urizen Federation to study there. I believe that's very expedient for what you're trying to do. Besides, you do seem like you'd be interested in the subject matter itself."

"I…"

Well, she's right about that. Making connections with influential people in Urizen is exactly what I wanted. Katarina is just the first one. There'd be no harm in meeting more of them… I started to mull it over, Katarina's hopes rising all the while.

"Then be optimistic. You don't have to think that hard about it. If it gets to be too annoying, you can just run away to the forest or hills, right?"

"You've got a point there. I guess I'll consider it."

"Good. With that said, I think it'll take a full year until I have Midrogue completely under my control, so enrollment will have to wait until after that. It's something to look forward to."

"In other words, it'll be off the table if you lose your standing by then. This could be interesting."

"Don't even joke about that. Besides, you might be able to live the way you want by then," Katarina said with puffed cheeks. She looked a bit cute that way.

* * *

We conversed while gathering up various materials, and afterward, we brought the unconscious mage's guild leader in the coach and returned to the city of Midrogue. As it happened, besides the bones and mana stone fragments of the skeleton king, we also collected its cursed sword and armor. Usually we'd have been at a loss as to how to transport them back, but this time we had Katarina's coach. It belonged to her personally, so we didn't have to pay the fee that a hired coach would usually charge for extra baggage. We eagerly took advantage of her kindness.

The possessions of the mage's guild leader himself were

technically part of my haul as well, but I relinquished them to Katarina, who I assumed would want them. Naturally, he had a lot of different expensive—and therefore useful—magic tools, but currying favor with Katarina was more important. However, Katarina said that once the investigation was over, she'd hand them all over to me or buy them at market price. She stressed that since I'd been the one who defeated him, I had the right to take spoils.

This could've been interpreted as Katarina being loath to owe me a debt, but it was long past time for that. If she felt that way at all, she wouldn't have entrusted me with this job. In other words, this was purely her being considerate of me.

I was extremely appreciative of this, and I had no reason to turn her down. So I accepted Katarina's offer and told her that if there was anything she wanted, she'd get first dibs to buy it.

* * *

"The mage's guild leader, huh? Well, he was always a pretty shady guy, but I never would've expected him to be a necromancer," Fresco remarked weightily when I returned to the adventurer's guild to report in. Katarina had hired us through the adventurer's guild, so I had a duty to report. But given its nature, the details of the job were a secret from all the staff except for the guild leader himself. That was possible, if you were someone with influence.

Well, Katarina wasn't *that* big of a deal, but it was possible this time due to Katarina and Fresco's personal affiliation. Besides, their goals of improving Midrogue were in alignment. *The mage's guild leader must have been quite a hindrance to them*, I thought.

"He was shady?" I asked.

Fresco reiterated, "Yeah, he was shady as hell. He's on the city council, but he's opposed basically every city growth proposal."

"It could just be that he has a different perspective, right?"

A plan that Fresco and Katarina were sure would benefit the city might be disadvantageous for the mage's guild leader. For example, a proposal might allow the city to grow as a whole but undermine the mage's guild or endanger its continued existence altogether. In those cases, the mage's guild leader would be forced

to oppose the proposal in order to protect his own position, the guild, and its members. It was a common enough situation.

But Fresco shook his head. “Nope, that wasn’t it. Me and Lady Katarina both started out with a lot of proposals that would mitigate the mage’s guild leader’s power. He was vocally against those. We wanted to take the reins wherever we could, of course.”

“Then…”

“But when things get into a long-standing deadlock, it doesn’t help anyone. Once we realized that, we started to compromise. We didn’t like having to do it, but we all live in the same city. We gotta compromise where we can so that we can all benefit. That was our line of thinking. So most of our proposals didn’t put him at a disadvantage.”

“And yet he was still opposed? Well, I guess that does seem strange.”

“There’s more. In general, he really didn’t want to bring people into the city. He vehemently argued that it was a waste of money to repair highways or plan celebrations so we’d get more visitors. And that brings us to now…”

“…With the repeated attacks on merchants along the highways, huh? That does seem to narrow down the culprits.”

“Exactly. But still, he’s the mage’s guild leader. Shady or not, we figured he wasn’t directly interfering with things. Turns out we were wrong. Sheesh.”

“It makes me wonder what he was doing all this for.”

“I don’t know the answer either.”

“You’re going to go interrogate him along with the other city council members, right? I guess I can’t ask about the specifics of that.”

I wasn’t on the city council. I’d just been hired as Katarina’s escort. Naturally, I wanted to know more about his motivations since I’d already gotten involved this far, but I knew my boundaries. I had supposed that hearing the details of the mage’s guild leader’s questioning would be crossing the line.

But to my surprise, Fresco said, “Nah, why not? Lady Katarina’s probably going to tell you about it anyway.”

“Huh?”

“At a glance, it looks like everything’s settled now, but there might be another disturbance on the horizon. She’s pretty

perceptive about these things. I think she's planning on talking to you about it so she can get your help."

* * *

"All right, let me tell you about the interrogation."

When we returned to our present lodgings at Katarina's manor, Katarina was waiting. She cut right to the chase.

Cath was stretched languidly on her lap, getting plenty of attention. She showed none of the majesty one would expect from a demon cat.

Well, she's still only a kitten, so that's only natural...but isn't she a little too friendly? I'd been able to form a <Follower Contract> with her, so she was clearly an eccentric kind of monster. I'd proved myself to the kobolds by force, but Cath had been a different story.

Speaking of which, I'd noticed a change in the skills on my status card earlier. I had wanted to check it as soon as I got back, but given the current situation, that would have to wait a bit longer.

Left without a say in the matter, I sat down close to Katarina. "I'd like to hear, but are you sure? This seems like a confidential city affair," I asked.

"Well, that is true. But you're the one who contributed the most in this matter, Noah. You have a right to know."

"And what's your *real* motive?"

"We learned a lot of bothersome things, so I want to tell you about it and get you further involved."

"Thanks for being honest. I prefer it that way, since I can trust you more. So, what'd you find out?"

"After we brought Glydel back to town, he was bound and imprisoned in a magic-sealing prison. Ah, let me give you back this white rope."

"Oh, thanks."

"Don't mention it. The other council members were astounded by its effect, but I came up with some excuse, so they won't make any inquiries."

"Thanks for being prudent."

"You're welcome. So, let's continue. I'll start from when Glydel woke up."

* * *

“Ungh… Wh-Where am I?”

The stale air of the magic-sealing prison acted as a smelling salt. The mage’s guild leader, Glydel, shook his head and slowly opened his eyes. The feet of a slender woman entered his field of vision. When he looked up to see whose they were, he was met with a familiar face.

“Miss Katarina. I see, so I lost…” He sounded full of regret, but his voice carried a tone of admission.

Katarina thought this was strange. “I’d expected you to curse at me more than that. You’re quick to admit defeat, aren’t you?”

“Why, yes. If I lost the battle, then that means my skeleton king must have been defeated.”

“Are you certain? I’m quite good at running away. I might have just fled the scene.”

“No, that would be impossible. I gave the skeleton king direct orders to kill you. It would have gone after you no matter what. And it would be impossible for a mere noblewoman to escape from an undead being with inexhaustible endurance. The skeleton king must have been defeated by someone.”

Katarina sighed. “It pains me to admit it, but you certainly have earned your position as mage’s guild leader, the size of Midrogue notwithstanding. You have terrific insight. Yes, you’re correct. The black skeleton king was defeated.”

“Which leaves me curious as to *who* did the deed. Was it that boy and the canine beastmen? Who are they? Would you give me an answer?”

“As much as I’d like to, that depends on your behavior. First, I need to know exactly what you were doing there.”

“Hm… Well, I’m sure you do. However, I’m sure you have a general idea already. We’ve been on opposite sides for so long.”

“You wanted the reins of power in Midrogue? I can’t say I don’t understand that, but…”

The two of them had constantly quarreled over that, so it seemed the most likely motivation. But Katarina had an indescribable feeling about this, one she couldn’t quite put into words no matter how long she ruminated over it. Surprisingly, Glydel helped her out.

“Does it seem peculiar to you?”

Katarina nodded, a little surprised. “Yes, if you’ll permit the expression. I don’t believe you would need to do something this outrageous just to wrest control from a fourteen-year-old political opponent. I may have the backing of my father, who is a leading figure in this country and state, but the mage’s guild has plenty of power to contend with that. As a member of such an organization, you could have eventually surpassed me through honest means of struggle. You knew the position I’d been placed in.”

“Heh. For a mere girl of fourteen, you’re quite a tough little lady. Indeed, I understood your position. If you didn’t get results here quickly, you would eventually be replaced by another suitable man from your family. If I just waited patiently for that day to come, Midrogue would have fallen right into the palm of my hand.”

“Then why?”

“Simply because I didn’t have the time. That’s all.”

“Time? Time for what?”

As soon as Katarina asked this, madness took over the eyes of the formerly rational mage’s guild leader, Glydel. He then exclaimed, “I hardly need say. For the salvation of souls! The world will one day be destroyed. We must guide all humans to the promised land in preparation!”

When she heard this, Katarina understood why he had instigated this incident. “I see now. You’re an adherent of the Sect of Forneus.”

The Sect of Forneus was a religious organization which had been spreading through Urizen in recent years. It hadn’t even been a decade since its existence had first come into the light, yet it had garnered quite a following. The majority of devotees were average citizens, but it was infamous for having extremist and fundamentalist troublemakers. It seemed Glydel was one such person.

“Exactly so. Surprised?”

“Yes, I am. I had thought you were a more rational person than that. And yet…”

For one to align themselves with the Sect of Forneus wasn’t particularly problematic by itself. However, their teachings ran counter to logic; Katarina saw them as more like fairy tales. At the core of their beliefs was the duty of chosen ones to guide people

to the promised land before the world's inevitable destruction. Well, this was common enough. But for someone like Glydel to believe this implicitly…

Glydel read her expression and laughed. "You find it unusual for a person such as myself to join a religion that preaches the end of the world?"

"Yes, I do. Of course, I believe people cannot cast aside religion entirely, no matter how strictly logical they may be."

Even after growing and maturing into an adult, it would be difficult for one to abandon the core faith they had been raised with since childhood. One might even be afraid to do so. It had laid the foundation for everything, so denying that faith might even seem like denying oneself. There wasn't much helping that.

But Glydel didn't give the impression of having such a *human* weakness. He seemed like he could cast aside anything if it was necessary. He possessed that kind of stoicism which could hardly be complimented up front. That was how they'd stayed in opposition so far, and why she'd thought him so formidable. She found it peculiar that he'd turned out to be such a *disappointment*, so to speak.

Perceiving how she thought of him now, Glydel spoke resignedly, "You should understand. You're the child of a politician, so surely you comprehend the true nature of religion…but I belong to the sect because I believe in it sincerely. I'm not just another member of the ignorant masses."

Such a sentiment could have come from a believer of any religion. But as Katarina was a nonbeliever, the mage's guild leader's words were lost on her. Katarina sensed that it would be pointless for her to keep questioning him. "Very well, I understand. That's all I wanted to ask. However, we still need more answers out of you…so I'll let the specialist handle it. I recommend you cooperate with them; you will suffer less that way."

"You may look like you wouldn't hurt a fly, but you're a noble through and through. Well, isn't that how they all are? I'm sure I'll be able to bear it. Until we meet again, Miss Katarina."

Though what Glydel said unsettled her, Katarina knew she wouldn't get any more answers out of him. She left the prison without stopping to look back, even after the interrogator stepped in to replace her and screams of pain began to ring out.

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“The Sect of Forneus, huh? So that kind of group is getting a foothold here,” I said with comprehension. I’d definitely heard its name before. But I was surprised by just how much influence and momentum it had. Well, it’d only gotten big in the last ten years, so it probably just hadn’t made a name for itself in the Oraculum Kingdom yet.

Besides, almost no religious group was acknowledged in Oraculum other than the Church of Astral. It wasn’t like there were none, but most operated underground after having been oppressed. The other contributing factor was that it was difficult for detailed information about foreign religions to enter the country. I only knew a certain degree about them in spite of this because I had been a noble of considerable standing. There were probably a lot of commoners who didn’t know about them at all.

“Because people want something to depend on. I think the fact that the Urizen Federation doesn’t have a prevalent nationwide religion has contributed to that. The Sect of Forneus has done well for itself in that regard.”

Urizen was a federation of multiple states. In brief, each state had its own local religion. Whether they be normal folk or demihumans, people can’t live without some kind of faith. That was why there was an assortment of religions across the country to this day. But most were only relevant to certain regions or species. Because of that, none had individually spread through all of Urizen.

But the teachings of the Sect of Forneus were exceedingly simple. “The world may meet its end one day, so let us avoid this by going to the promised land.” That was all. There were no restrictions on who could join.

The sect’s method of proselytizing was of a distinct nature from other religious groups as well. I hadn’t witnessed it firsthand, but Katarina told me, “The majority of the Sect of Forneus’s believers are regular people. Many of them start participating in their congregations before even realizing it.”

“That doesn’t sound like a big deal to me.” *If they don’t like it, they can just leave. Simple.* That was what I had thought, but Katarina shook her head.

“Perhaps, if all they did was just group discussions and parties. But little by little, more of the sect’s creed is revealed to them.”

“If they don’t want to convert, then they can just stop going, right? And if they’re interested, then they can go ahead and stick around.” *That’s definitely what I would do.*

But Katarina continued. “In theory, yes. But most people don’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“That’s simple. Because it all seems innocuous.”

Now that we’d gotten this far, I was starting to understand the underlying principles of the Sect of Forneus’s methods a little. It all seemed relatively harmless. But the organization must have been designed so that they’d gradually get more immersed.

Which meant that…

“I get it. So they’re in too deep before they even know it.”

Katarina concurred with my remark. “Exactly. The teachings gradually dive deeper, calling for more assertive action. Their positions change as well. Those who start out as just guests become believers without any special declaration. Then, although they’re not hosting the gatherings themselves, they’re given minor positions of responsibility under the pretense of helping out…”

“And in the end, they’re completely immersed. It’s a brilliant method…of easily brainwashing people.”

This is a clever approach. And it’s pretty devious too. The people who fall for it won’t even think they’ve been brainwashed. They’ll think they chose to do everything of their own free will, which will reinforce their conviction in their own religious faith. Even when other people point it out to them, they’ll trust their own feelings more. Of course they would. Because nobody wants to be brainwashed. That’s scary.

Katarina voiced her anxious agreement. “Indeed…”

But Katarina was a politician. If they knew all this, then surely they’d be able to come up with some policy against the sect. So I asked her, “Isn’t the government doing anything about this? It sounds like if they just leave it be, it’s going to swallow them whole one day.”

The Sect of Forneus was quietly but steadily expanding. Eventually they’d have a significant number of citizens believing in them, and then they’d hold the majority. It’d be all over then. The country would change its name to the Religious Empire of

Forneus, and the takeover of the Urizen Federation would be complete.

Katarina was aware of this as well, but feebly shook her head. “They are, but it’s not enough to convince people. It’s difficult to convey the dangers that the Sect of Forneus poses. As I said before, the gatherings really are innocuous.”

“They don’t ask for donations or anything like that?” Religious groups couldn’t maintain themselves on nothing. They needed to cover their operating expenses, at the very least.

“Naturally, the sect needs funds, so they do ask for some, but not enough that it would put a strain on people’s lifestyles. Well, I suppose it’s about the cost of a few meals per month at most.”

So they pull the same tricks here. They don’t deal any major blows, thus preventing people from realizing the damage that’s being done. That’s their modus operandi.

“If you don’t mind me saying, it’s interesting how they run things the polar opposite of how the Church of Astral does. They’re the sort to casually, trivially snatch things away from a wide range of people.”

“Ultimately taking their entire country. We must ensure that doesn’t happen. With this incident, we may be able to strike a blow to their operations.”

“Because you can publicly announce that Glydel, a member of the sect, was behind this whole situation?”

“Precisely.”

“That makes sense…but I’m not sure it’ll go that smoothly.”

“Why do you say that?”

“This sect has been devious about this sort of thing in the past. They might just forsake Glydel. In fact, they might even claim that Glydel has no connection to them.”

“But we have his confession.”

“You know a confession is flimsy on its own.”

“Well, the interrogator is currently questioning him. We’ll just have to wait and see what we can glean,” said Katarina, but she probably already knew that nothing would come of it.

Chapter 4: Reclaiming the Ghost Town

“Well, what do we want to do now? I guess this place would make a decent base for the time being. It’s better than the middle of the Purgatory Forest, at least,” I mused as I surveyed the ghost town in front of us.

“Woof woof! (I hardly expected we’d be granted this place!)” said Mataza happily. I could understand why; he had high hopes for the immediate future.

Beside him, Liber said merrily, “Woof woof, woof! (We’ll be starting from scratch, but this is a fine place, close to the city!)”

Yes, we’d been granted the village of Asyl. By whom? The city council of Midrogue, of course. To be more precise, the city council had decided to lend us a long-term exclusive right to use the land, but Katarina had devised the technical legal formalities in our favor as best she could, so there was no point in dwelling on it. She’d told me her intent was to eventually amend it so that the area would be completely transferred to me, so I’d just have to trust her on that. If it didn’t work out, then so be it. We could just withdraw to the forest if need be, so we had nothing to lose.

When I’d been a noble, the prospect of having nothing had been terrifying. But it actually felt quite exhilarating to have total freedom this way.

“Meow.” As if she knew what I was thinking, the feline monster Cath, the most free animal in the world, meowed at me.

* * *

“We should start by demolishing all the dilapidated houses. Let’s do our best, guys,” I said in front of the buildings.

The kobolds all gave a howl of “Woof!” and got to work. Their behavior was confident, a far cry from the kobold pack that had lived fearfully in the forest not too long ago. Mataza and Liber gave precise instructions, and the crumbling houses were dismantled bit by bit.

One might wonder if it was really all right for us to do this. This

village had been deserted for ages now, but someone might still own the houses or other buildings, so we shouldn't have touched them. But Asyl was where Glydel had produced droves of skeletons, and it had been abandoned for a long time. Therefore, there was nobody who could claim to hold rights to the area. No human would willingly live in a place where tons of undead had shown up. The location was also very remote and had no special commodities. By all measures, the land was completely useless.

Even so, people used to live there. There were good spots for water wells and farming, and the forest was bountiful. It was relatively decent land, but the fact that nobody had decided to move back in showed that the place was unwanted. It was still under Midrogue's jurisdiction, so you would need the city's permission to use it, which the city council had voted to grant us. Thus we could have some peace of mind about demolishing everything.

What would we do after destroying it all? We'd steadily construct new buildings and turn the place into our own settlement. We were doing this because we couldn't impose upon Katarina's hospitality forever. Of course, that wasn't the only reason. The biggest issue lay with my skills.

That day, I'd noticed that there was a new entry on my status card under the <Follower Contract> section:

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Follower Contract: Demon Cat (Juvenile), Hound Sprite x10, Hound Trooper x2, Normal Folk x1, Black Skeleton King
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That last entry was startling. There was Cath, the kobolds, Mataza and Liber. And then there was Aht. But...a black skeleton king?

I don't remember contracting with one of those things, I wanted to say. But it was written right there. I couldn't deny the facts. So I tested it out to discover what exactly this "black skeleton king" was. But of course, I couldn't experiment in a populated area.

I took on a random job and exited Midrogue. After I'd gotten somewhere a little bit away from the highway, I tapped on the "black skeleton king" letters on my card display. Suddenly, a

dreadfully powerful skeleton king appeared in front of me. Its bones were dark-colored, and I could tell that it was a special individual.

Aha. I can see how someone controlling this thing would believe that a noblewoman, her steward, and a couple of iron-rank adventurers would be easy pickings. I understood what Glydel must have felt. Yes, this was without a doubt the skeleton king that Glydel had used.

But why is it listed? I was confused, and at the same time I wondered, *Will it even listen to my orders?* Only more questions came to mind.

I stared into its sunken black eye sockets. It went without saying that I was poised at the ready in case it attacked.

But despite staying like that for a while, the black skeleton king didn't have any reaction. Actually, it was like it was waiting for *me* to react. When I looked into its sunken eye sockets, I sensed no emotions within. Nonetheless, somehow I knew that there was still *something* there. Was it its soul? It was an undead being, but it sure seemed like it had one.

It was a strange feeling, but I knew the importance of intuition from my rugged life in the Purgatory Forest and my onerous training with Aht. It's said that humans lost most of their animal instincts after building civilization, but it seemed like I'd regained them after returning to the wild.

Regardless, what I had to do right now was…

"Hey. Do you understand what I'm saying?" I asked the black skeleton king.

It rattled its dark bones and gave a reserved nod of its head. It was much bigger than a normal skeleton, big enough that it could have squashed me with its weight, but I was surprised at myself for thinking it strangely cute.

There really shouldn't be anything cute about it, though… It doesn't look like it can speak, so I should just ask yes-or-no questions.

"All right. Then…let me think. Are you the same one that previously served Glydel?"

This is crucial. Depending on its answer, I might be able to get an idea of where it came from. How will it answer?

The black skeleton king nodded again.



“I thought so…” Now I understood the reason why it had ended up as my follower, more or less.

The black skeleton king had originally been manipulated by necromancy. The specific techniques of necromancy were kept secret from outsiders. It was wicked and ordinary people considered it taboo, so it was only taught to disciples. Even so, its inner workings weren’t completely obscure. It was a type of magic, so one could make a broad conjecture of what it was like.

Besides, while it was rarely seen in the open, there were historically a considerable number of incidents caused by necromancers, like this affair with Glydel had been. It would be extremely dangerous to not know anything about necromancy techniques in those instances, so it had been researched to an extent. Of course, it was still forbidden to use it.

Part of that knowledge was communicated to top members of the government. I used to be a member of the Duke’s household and was the next in line. I’d been expected to learn about the grim side of things, thus I knew the basic outline of necromancy.

From what I had been told, the foundation of necromancy was forming a contract with a departed soul and having it serve you. Loosely speaking, necromancers were like Tamers of the dead. Of course, the technical aspects were tremendously different, but they fell under the same broad umbrella. The same went for my <Follower Contract>, since it was also contract-based magic.

There were commonalities. Generally, tamer skills established a contract by making the other party accept the terms through some method, including submission by force. You could make a monster recognize your strength by fighting it, so there was probably a similar method for necromancy. And I had a feeling that I’d done something akin to this.

After all, I’d defeated the black skeleton king. What was more, my follower Cath had defeated Glydel. Had that made the contract between Glydel and the black skeleton king transfer over to me? But I wasn’t a necromancer, so the contract conditions had been revised to fit my skill. Thus it was now my follower through <Follower Contract>. That was the most likely explanation for what was going on here.

Well, I could’ve been completely off the mark, but I definitely thought it was the most convincing theory. I’d just have to work

under that assumption for now.

But...this was a huge problem. I could be accused of necromancy for having something like this under my thrall. If it were just a normal skeleton, I could claim to be a Tamer. But this was a unique skeleton king. A skeleton king with dark bones wasn't something you would see every day.

Plus, the only time one had shown up lately was with Glydel. If it tagged along with me now, people would definitely assume that I was one of Glydel's confederates. In short, I couldn't let people see it.

What should I do? I wondered.

"Oh yeah, you did pop out of nowhere just now. How'd you do that?"

It was conceivable that my question might not get any response. But either I'd gotten lucky, or it was inevitable since there was *something* there, since the black skeleton king reacted to what I said and turned its face to me very slightly. I might not have understood what this meant in any other case. But since I was looking for answers from it, I could understand it. I was *able* to understand.

"You want to show me? Sure, I don't mind. As long as you don't try to kill me," I joked. The black skeleton king frantically shook its head at that, so I was probably in the clear.

Its reactions are a lot more human than I'd expect... Is its personality different from when it was serving Glydel? Maybe that changes depending on who it's contracted to.

"Okay, go ahead," I told it.

The black skeleton king nodded deeply, then its body turned even darker...or rather, it transformed into countless tiny black particles. They stayed in the shape of the black skeleton king's contour, but after a little while, they started to move like a swarm of millions of bugs. They flew behind me and disappeared, diving into my shadow.

"What the—?!"

The black skeleton king had vanished without a trace. Even its presence seemed to be completely gone.

"Black skeleton king, are you there?" I asked. A black bone arm extended out of my shadow.

"Whoa...so you really just went into my shadow. You can do

that?”

If it could go into my shadow, then could it go into *any* shadow? Or were there other properties that made this possible? I’d need to test it out, but at first look, the latter seemed to be the case.

Well, with this, it won’t be exposed so easily. That’s a relief for the time being. But I can’t leave things this way forever either. If I want to keep it hidden, I’ll need to keep the black skeleton king away from people, but…

I have high hopes for it in combat. If possible, I want to put it to use as a practice partner for Mataza and Liber, and I’d want it to fight with us when we’re facing stronger monsters. So what should I do?

I deliberated over this for a while, but my worries would be dispelled a few days later.

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“I have good news and bad news. Which would you like to hear first?” We were in Katarina’s manor. She said this with a sour expression, so it wasn’t hard to guess that something pretty bad had happened.

But I wasn’t good-natured enough to be considerate of her feelings. In these circumstances, it was better to start with the bad news. That would give me more time to formulate a strategy for it.

“The bad news.”

“You’re a strange one. But oh well. Glydel’s dead.”

She got straight to the point, but that let me instantly understand. I didn’t know whether he’d been killed or if he’d committed suicide, but either way, this whole affair had officially ended without us being able to glean any significant details from him.

“Yeah, that *is* bad news. Can I ask what the cause was?”

“It wasn’t the fault of the interrogator’s methods of questioning. It seems he died by taking poison.”

“You didn’t do a body search? I gave him a once-over, but…”

“Apparently there was a magic tool concealed in his molars. Even you didn’t notice, it seems.”

“No, I didn’t… I guess that couldn’t be helped.”

I’d rummaged through Glydel’s possessions, but I definitely hadn’t checked every nook and cranny of his mouth. I *had* opened

it and taken a look inside for anything suspicious, but if he'd cast concealment magic on his molars, then it was no surprise I didn't spot it. I hadn't expected anything like that. I'd just have to take this as a lesson to investigate those spots more closely next time.

"That being the case, it was almost certainly suicide. The next likely cause would be assassination disguised as suicide…but there's no evidence of that, and we don't have the means to investigate any further."

"True. Supposing it *was* a clever murder, we wouldn't be able to do anything about it anyway…"

A skilled assassin would leave no trace. They didn't use any magic or magic tools to erase their tracks. Well, I could only repeat what I'd heard secondhand, but they appeared and disappeared like mist. Of course, someone very familiar with their tricks might have been able to notice something, but I doubted Midrogue had anyone that capable on retainer.

I'd had plenty of assassination attempts made on me when I was the next in line to become duke, so I might've been able to uncover a little bit if I checked it out, but there were almost definitely other people in Midrogue who could uncover as much as me. In short, it wasn't my job.

So this is where Glydel's story ends…

I decided I'd ask any other questions I came up with later, and changed the subject.

"Now I know the bad news. So what's the good news?"

"Well, the council has recognized your outstanding service in this affair and would like to reward you. Is there anything you'd like?"

This couldn't have come at a better time. But I didn't know if my desire would be acceptable or not, so I decided to find out. "Is there a limit on what I can request?"

Katarina looked surprised by what I'd said. "Oh my, I had fully expected you to say you don't need anything again," she said.

I *had* told her that when I rescued her before, after all. I certainly might have said the same thing this time, if it hadn't been for my current problem.

But since this was the perfect opportunity to get my wish granted in my time of need, it would have been wrong to not take advantage of it. I wasn't trying to be stubborn, but it wasn't like I

had no desires either. When there was something I wanted, I'd express that.

Therefore, I said to Katarina, "There just wasn't anything I wanted then. But there is now. So, how about it? What's the answer to my question?" I wanted to know how much I could ask for.

Katarina thought it over. "Well, it would have to be something within the scope of what the Midrogue city council can grant. Peerage is out of the question. My father would be able to do that, though. Money would be easiest, or magic tools. Oh, you don't really need status, do you?"

"By status, you mean..."

"Oh, are you interested? I didn't expect that either. Well...you could get a position as a city council member, a city clerk, or maybe head of some village? I don't think you'd—"

Katarina was about to say I wouldn't be interested in any of those, but one of the things she listed actually *did* suit my convenience.

"Actually, I *am* interested. If I were the head of a village...could it be a village that doesn't exist right now?"

"Huh? I-I suppose... You want to be the mayor of a frontier town? Well, that would be easy to accomplish. Development in the outlying areas of Midrogue is currently being encouraged. Land is treated as the property of whoever develops it. You'd need to pay a usage fee for the highway, as well as other taxes. But conventionally, the taxes aren't imposed until the land is developed to a certain degree. Noah, you aren't *really*...?"

"I don't know whether it'd be treated as a development, but I want to be loaned the land around the forest where Glydel hid his skeletons. If possible, I'd like to own it."

"I see, so that's why you're asking about being a village head. But why? You can just live here."

"I can't impose on your hospitality forever. Besides, there's a lot I want to accomplish. I want to experiment with magic tools and techniques. It'd be dangerous to do that in the middle of Midrogue, so I was thinking it'd be handy to have somewhere a little out of the way to use. And it'd be good if it was close to a forest that the canine beastmen can run around in, and stuff like that."

These sounded like excuses even to me, but they were all true.

When she heard what I had to say, Katarina looked relieved. “Then it’s not just because you want to leave Midrogue?”

I see, so that’s what she’s worried about. To Katarina, I’m the perfect adventurer who can get anything she wants done. She’d probably be in a jam if I up and left all of a sudden.

So I told her, “Of course not. I’m an adventurer in this city now, and I can earn money by taking on jobs. And I’ve gotten to know you well…so I’m not planning on leaving without any warning. I want to build a base both in this city and in that village. That’s about the long and short of it.”

I want to be able to travel between the two of them. That’d be ideal.

There were too many of us with the normal kobolds included, so I was scared of something happening if I left them alone in the city. If we could turn that village into our base, there wouldn’t be much to worry about. The monsters that spawned there were vastly different from those in the Purgatory Forest, so the kobolds would be able to handle those on their own.

Katarina seemed convinced after everything I’d said. She contemplated it for a little, and then said, “I understand. In that case, the land rights around the village—it’s called Asyl, correct?—will be granted to you as your reward. As this falls within Midrogue’s autonomy, they can be loaned to you without fuss. As for the transfer…I’ll make arrangements for you to be nominated as the frontier town’s mayor so that it can ultimately belong to you.”

“You can do that?”

“This country…or rather, this state, has always been an aristocracy. I can’t give you peerage, but the system of land belonging to the one who developed it is still alive and well. There’s a lot of legal red tape, but I’ll take care of it one way or another, so it should be fine. Does that suit you?”

“Yeah, of course. Thanks, Katarina.”

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That was how we’d handily gotten the rights to Asyl and everything else associated with it, but…

“There were barely any usable houses after all.”

“Meow…” Cath smacked my head in a disappointed manner. “Don’t assume you can take the easy way out,” she seemed to be saying.

“Woof. Woof woof woof, woof? Woof woof. (But Milord, there *was* one sound stone building, so won’t that be enough for the time being? We can start there and focus our efforts on building new residences.)” Mataza gave his pragmatic opinion.

“You’ve got a point. That building probably used to be a chapel. But the Church of Astral’s not popular in this country, and it especially wasn’t popular decades ago. That said, the Sect of Forneus has only been around for ten years or so…so what religion was it for?”

I was a little curious about that. We were going to use it regardless of what denomination it had belonged to, so it didn’t really matter, but it’d be a bit annoying if someone complained about it later. Midrogue’s city council had transferred the rights over, so we could shoot down any complaints, but I knew very well that power struggles were truly tiresome affairs. If simple legal matters could be dealt with on their own, I wouldn’t have been expelled from my homeland.

“Woof woof, wa-woof, woof woof. Wheem? (We’ve prioritized demolishing and disassembling other houses first, so we haven’t yet investigated the inside of that building at length. Shall we have a look?)” asked Liber.

Taking a glance around the village again, I saw that most of the ten or so wooden houses had been destroyed or disassembled. That was a weight off my shoulders. About all that was left was the stone well and what looked to be a chapel. Seeing it this way, I noticed that this area was pretty wide open.

This is in the middle of a forest, but someone developed the area a long time ago and built a village. Although, since it’s been abandoned for so long, there’s plant overgrowth here and there. We’ll probably need to prune it all, but our group’s used to that kind of thing. It shouldn’t take that long.

I nodded to Liber and told her, “Yeah. Let’s ask the others to take care of the weeds and shrubs while we go make sure that building is safe.”

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“It’s pretty messy inside. There aren’t any obvious signs of deterioration, so we’ll definitely be able to use it. We’ll have to clean up first, though…”

The chapel was in the middle of the village and had a belfry, furnished with a bell, sticking up out of its base. It was fairly large for such a small village, but it hardly compared with the size of even the residential housing in Midrogue. It seemed that this had always been a small village.

A quick examination indicated that the nave stretched out from the entrance and led to the main altar in the back. Light streamed in from above, likely from the belfry seen outside. It seemed to serve as a window to let light in as well.

There were also sun fade marks on the floor where I assumed pews had once been placed. Unfortunately, either they hadn’t withstood the test of time, or the villagers had removed them when they left. There was nothing there but debris.

“It’s still standing, but it’s not completely unscathed either. Even so, it’d be a waste to demolish it. If we thoroughly check out wherever it’s falling apart and reinforce those spots, we should be able to use it.”

“Woof, woof woof. (Milord, you can’t possibly expect us to be able to restore a building such as this.)” Mataza said.

“We’ll just make some temporary repairs. You guys should be able to handle that. Although, it might still be hazardous, so I’ll put together a magic circle for reinforcing it too.”

This was a technique made accessible to me through <Magifacture> skills. Methods of magically strengthening and reinforcing physical matter were commonplace enough, but the degree of enhancement varied by skill level and plain old experience. I’d only just learned the skill, so mine wasn’t very impressive, but I *did* still have <Magifacture 2>. I could fix it up with some reinforcement about once a month so that it wouldn’t collapse. That would still be a lot of effort, so I’d want to call in a real carpenter eventually, but I was afraid of bringing in an outsider before we were familiar with the area around our base. I’d just have to keep hanging in there until then.

While I was thinking about this, Liber, who was roving all around checking out different spots, howled.

“Wo-Woof! (Ah, Master! There are stairs here!)”

* * *

We descended the stairway into darkness.



It went down much deeper than I'd expected, which seemed unusual for the basement of a building this size. *It's not unheard of, but…does it really need to be this deep?* That was what it felt like.

"Oh, we're nearly there." Seeing the last step, I signaled for Mataza and Liber following behind me to halt. They had said they wanted to go ahead of me, but Cath and I could react better to surprise attacks, so they let us take the lead. Meanwhile, Cath rode on my shoulders as usual. I almost wanted to tell her to walk on her own legs, but it wasn't like she was there *all* the time, so it was hard to grumble about it. Besides, I felt better having her there right now. Even if something that I couldn't deal with popped out, Cath could drive it back with her magic. That would be relying on her too much, though, so I was still on high alert.

"Doesn't *look* like there's anything dangerous."

I had been illuminating the way with a magic tool I'd procured in the city, commonly called a <Torch>. Thanks to that, I'd been able to see enough of the way forward while going down the stairs. But when we reached the basement, the whole interior was dimly lit, revealing its outline.

It was a fairly spacious room, so I couldn't see all the way to the walls, but I could tell the overall structure. It was a wide, rectangular room which seemed to be a little larger than the chapel's prayer hall up above. The layout seemed very similar too… Was that because it was part of the same building? It was hard to say. If the basement was just meant for storing supplies, the layout wouldn't have needed to be so similar. But just like it was above, there was a nave and an altar in the back. Compared to the altar above, something felt a little different about this one. It was almost *sinister*.

There was some kind of statue enshrined atop the altar.

"What is this?" I absentmindedly reached out to it. I should've learned my lesson about being cautious in these situations by now. But if I were the kind of person who could stop and think before acting, my present circumstances would be much different.

I carelessly stretched out my arm…

Snag!

…and something *grabbed* it.

I pulled my arm back in an instant. Mataza cried out, seeming to sense that something was off. "Woof! (Milord!)"

Surprisingly, Cath hadn't reacted to the hand grabbing my arm. "Meow?" She tilted her head.

Why? I didn't understand. And then suddenly, there was a voice in my ear.

"Would you not move that?"

I turned around in surprise to see a peculiar person standing there. When had they gotten there?

No, this was whoever had grabbed my arm, stretching their hand out from behind me. When I yanked my arm away, the person's hand let go.

Or rather, it just *appeared* to let go. While it had been grabbing me, there hadn't been any physical sensation. I'd only seen the hand come into sight and had interpreted it that way, despite there being no contact.

"Who are you?" I gripped the handle of my sword, about to draw it from its place at my hip.

"Hold on a second!" they said in a hurry. "I don't intend to harm you—any of you. Actually, are those two beastmen? No, they seem more primal than that. Are they kobolds?"

I hadn't said anything about them, so how did they know all that? I was on even higher alert.

"Just what are you? What are you doing here? Are you...a beastman?"

They certainly *looked* like a beastman, specifically of the sheep persuasion. Their facial features didn't look much different from those of normal folk, but the giant curly horns on their head clearly indicated that they were a different species.

There was also something strange about their garb. They wore a pure white, fluttering tunic. There wasn't a single blemish on it, which was very unusual since we had gotten pretty grimy after walking all the way here.



The person responded to my barrage. “That’s a lot of questions. I’m not sure which to answer first, but I’ll start with the easiest one. I’m not a beastman.”

“You don’t look like normal folk to me either, though.”

“Well, yeah. That’s because I’m not any human species.”

“What are you trying to say?” I couldn’t understand what they meant.

But they just observed my expression with a mild smile and went on. “I understand your feelings, but that’s the only way I can describe it. If I were to make it simpler for you, then I suppose…I’m *that*.”

“*That*?” I repeated, aware of how foolish I sounded.

The person raised their arm, pointed a finger, and said, “That thing you tried to move earlier.”

I hurriedly glanced at *that*. The statue of something atop the altar.

It was an effigy of a sheep beastman.

“So basically, you’re the…*deity* or whatever that’s enshrined here?” I asked dubiously.

There were still villages and towns that clandestinely worshipped evil gods, to be sure. They weren’t unheard of, even in Oraculum where the Church of Astral kept a tight leash. But obviously, they were purged by Holy Maidens or the Order of Paladins as soon as they were discovered.

I wondered how the Urizen Federation dealt with these factions. I imagined they wouldn’t be anywhere nearly as severe as the Oraculum Kingdom about it. After all, there was no official state religion—especially not since the founding of the Federation. Though they no longer had to observe each state’s unique religion and value system, they couldn’t intervene much in religious affairs anymore. Of course, there wasn’t a total lack of oversight…but as a foreigner, I had trouble comprehending the finer nuances of this.

As I pondered this, the being with curly horns replied.

“I can’t give you a clear answer there. I was *treated* as a deity, at least. But am I *really* a deity? That’s harder to say.”

“So you aren’t one.”

“I don’t suppose I am. I think I’m closer to…a spirit,” they answered.

Spirits are beings of solidified energy representing earth, water, fire,

or wind. So this one is something like that? I tilted my head. *Actually, to be honest, I can't even tell if they're male or female. They look androgynous.*

"People's prayers are a force to be reckoned with. The people who used to live in this village prayed to this idol for many years, and I materialized as a result."

"The power of prayer? So you're like an artificial spirit?"

Artificial spirits were a product of magitech. There was a technological system that could artificially create spirits, which arose and expired naturally, through artificial concentration and manipulation of mana. This system could even generate types of spirits that would never form naturally. It couldn't be done easily, since it required large stores of mana, lengthy rituals, and an awful lot of offerings. But a country as big as Oraculum could sufficiently pull it off once every few years.

Could such a tiny village manage something similar? Is that even possible? Then again, the magnitude of mana and rituals and offerings is just to speed up the process…

As I wondered this, the being spoke again.

"Well, I suppose it must be something like that. I came into existence a hundred years after this village was established, and I've been watching over it for a few hundred years since…so I think I'm pretty old. I've been able to live this long because I'm similar to a spirit."

"But there's nothing left in this village now. How is it that you're still here?"

It was no secret that people's prayers could materialize as real beings, interchangeably called spirits or demigods. But it was also a known fact that without a continuous supply of energy or prayers, these beings would expire in due time. And yet this one had continued to exist for decades without receiving power from anyone. This was bizarre.

The sheep-horned artificial spirit responded, "Well, it's probably thanks to that effigy. I don't know if you can tell just by looking, but there's a large mana stone set in it. A girl who often used to speak to me a long time ago put it in there. My existence has felt remarkably stable ever since."

"Is that so?" Hearing them mention this made me terribly curious to see for myself. Still, I demurred. I knew the kind of

trusting relationship and trade-offs that they must have had with the residents of this village since long ago.

I didn't know what kind of being they had been. But this village had most likely worshipped them as their deity made flesh. Since the being had a physical form and could touch me, they must have given the villagers actual divine protection. Of course I was hesitant to casually touch the effigy made to worship this spirit and the mana stone kept inside.

Any other adventurer might not have cared, but this was my first time encountering a technically divine being. Whatever god had bestowed the <Holy King> ability upon me still hadn't shown up to explain anything, but I still held some weird respect for it. This might sound peculiar, but I often felt that there was meaning behind the things we mortals were granted. Thus, I believed that meeting this sheep-horned demigod also held some meaning.

"By the way, I'm asking this a little late, but who *are* you all? You don't seem like residents of this village. They all passed away a long time ago," the sheep-horned entity said.

I'd almost forgotten that neither of us had properly introduced ourselves yet.

"Oh, I'm Noah. Stuff happened, and now I'm the tenant of this town and the land around it. Strictly speaking, I've been granted the position of mayor as well." It felt weird to call this completely vacant region a town, although we had plans to construct buildings and the like soon enough.

The horned entity reacted in surprise. "What? You really want to borrow *this* area? It's been a ghost town for so long. You're quite an eccentric human."

"That's rich, coming from someone who's been hanging around this abandoned ghost town since forever."

"I don't have a say in that. I'd love to go somewhere else if I could, but it seems I can't stray too far from this effigy. Besides, I barely have a fraction of my former power."

This was new information. "Really?"

"Yes. It used to be that I could perform minor miracles with enough accumulated prayer power from the villagers. I could create a font of water or move boulders."

"Wow, that's really something."

Those were useful abilities. Human magic could accomplish

similar feats, but not easily. Water magic couldn't create an entire spring from nothing. Although, you could probably manage to move boulders with earth magic...

It seems they can use a power that's fundamentally different from mortal magic systems. I might be able to take advantage of this, I thought.

The horned entity sensed that I was being overly eager. "Are you thinking about exploiting me?" they asked with suspicion.

I could've masked my intentions and pretended otherwise, but that just didn't feel like the right thing to do. So I spoke honestly.

"That's a nasty way of putting it, but I *was* hoping that you'd cooperate with me, if possible. I—I mean we—are going to build a village here. I don't know how big it'll end up being, but if we're doing all this work anyway, I want to make it as comfortable to live in as we can. If you'd lend us your power as a spirit, I think construction would go a lot smoother."

I thought for a moment before continuing. "It'd be a pretty good deal for you too. We're not exactly worshipping another god at the moment, and we can at least fix up this chapel. If you want prayer power, I guess we could work some prayer time into our daily routine too."

I didn't know how a being like this was supposed to collect "prayer power." I was pretty sure that artificial spirits in Oraculum had their power boosted to the extreme through generally unethical means like offerings and mana injections. But this horned entity gave me the impression that they got their fill through more benign methods—certainly not anything as terrible as what would be practiced in Oraculum, at least. As far as I could gather, they progressively gathered mana or something like it through worship, among other things. This conjecture was what had prompted my suggestion.

The horned entity reacted with some surprise. "I'd welcome that, but are you sure? I've been enshrined here as a deity. From the Church's perspective, I'm an evil god. Won't you be in trouble if I'm discovered?"

Unexpectedly, they seemed to be concerned about us—but their statement was a little off the mark. Since this spirit had stayed here for so long, they probably didn't know much about world events. Asyl didn't seem like it had ever had much contact

with the outside world either, so maybe they were just clueless about society as a whole. A god who was largely ignorant of the world was a bizarre concept, but still possible, I supposed.

I told them, "You don't need to worry about that. This country, Urizen, is rather tolerant when it comes to religion. A pretty radical group calling themselves the Sect of Forneus has been gaining steam in recent years, but the government hasn't been able to do much about them. I don't think anyone will denounce us for worshipping an abandoned deity in a tiny village like—"

"Huh? Hold on. Did you just say 'Forneus'?" The horned entity asked, their eyes opened wider than I'd seen them yet.

I tilted my head in puzzlement. "Yeah. What about it? They're a religious organization that's been rapidly spreading over the past ten years or so. It's a big issue in Urizen right now."

"But Forneus is *me*."

"Huh?"

"*I'm* Forneus. At least, that's what my worshippers called me."

I was astonished. *This is Forneus? The god of the Sect of Forneus? No way, that can't possibly be right.*

The horned entity—or rather, Forneus—quickly concurred. "Well, plenty of humans have the same name as each other. It's probably something similar," they said, shaking their head. We wouldn't know for sure unless we asked the Sect of Forneus, and I doubted they'd give us a useful answer. The organization was home to some intensely radical people like Glydel.

According to Katarina, those people were considered extremists or fundamentalists, whereas ordinary believers led normal, commonplace lives. However, the fanatics were probably the only ones who knew much about the entity Forneus itself. I imagined that the average layman didn't get in that deep.

But if this *was* Forneus, would that explain why Glydel had been in this village? He could have easily found some other ghost town. There were plenty of towns that had been abandoned due to encroaching monsters, bandits, natural disasters, or whatever else. He could've found two or three other places just like this in the same area. But he'd specifically chosen *this* place. There had to be some meaning to it. Or maybe I was just overthinking things.

Anyway, it sounds like they might be willing to cooperate with us, so let's focus on that first.

Mataza, who had been silently listening, suddenly chimed in. “W-Woof… (Mi-Milord…?)”

“What is it? They said they’re willing to work with us, so I wanna discuss that further. Is there an issue with—”

Before I could finish my sentence, Mataza shook his head and spoke. “W-Woof… Wa-woof, woof. (Th-That’s not it… Um, this is terribly difficult to mention, but…)”

“What? Go ahead and spit it out.”

“W-Woof (Y-Yes). Woof…woof woof? (Who exactly…have you been talking to, Milord?)”

“Huh?” My mouth gaped open like a dunce.

Liber followed suit. “W-Woof… Woof? (I wanted to ask as well. Is someone there?)”

“You too, Liber? Then that must mean…”

I wasn’t so dense that I couldn’t come to a realization based on these hints. I had thought that they were staying silent out of consideration and letting me handle everything. But that wasn’t the case. *In short, this is…*

I turned my gaze to Forneus. The beastman-like sheep-horned spirit smiled cutely.

“Oh, yes. I neglected to mention that I’m only visible to certain people. So I think, out of everyone here, you might be the only person who can see me.”

“That explains it.” It was just as I’d thought. Thinking back on it, there had been signs the whole time. Cath’s reaction had been strange when this spirit grabbed my arm because she couldn’t see them in the first place. Cath was very protective of me, so she should’ve yowled a warning or made a swipe. Instead, she hadn’t reacted at all…or rather, she had reacted peculiarly to something she could sense but not see.

“So that’s what’s been going on. Can you not be heard either?”

“So it seems. Only certain people can hear my voice. The villagers who used to live here called them <Diviners>. The one who put the mana stone in that statue was a <Diviner> too.”

“So what does that make me? Am I a <Diviner> too?”

“I’m not quite sure… I really didn’t expect you to be able to see or hear me.”

“Then why did you grab my arm?”

“Even if people can’t see me, I can give them an uncanny feeling

by touching them or speaking. That's exactly what happened with your kitty. I was going to give you a bit of a spook so that you'd leave."

"I see. That explains a lot, including why people would abandon this village without taking its rare pseudo-artificial spirit along with them."

"Does it, now?" Forneus asked blithely. It wasn't that they didn't understand what I was implying; on the contrary, they already understood everything and wanted to hear the conclusions I had reached. They had a nastier personality than I'd initially thought. Well, they *were* like an evil god, so maybe that was obvious.

"Yes, it does," I said, unfazed. "By that time, there probably wasn't anyone left who could see you."

"Indeed. The villagers left a long while after the last <Diviner> stopped coming. I recall the person who last came here saying something along those lines."

"And they didn't bring you along with them?"

"No, but I think they tried to."

"What do you mean by that?"

"What you see there is the idol that tethers me, but there used to be a larger, more magnificent statue which they took. They said to leave this shabby old one behind."

"So...they mistakenly thought that you resided in the more grandiose one? No way, they couldn't have been *that* stupid."

"Well, they certainly handled it with care, so that's probably exactly what happened. I took a passive attitude about it and didn't lift a finger. Well, I couldn't have, even if I'd wanted to."

"Really?"

"You tell me. But it's all right. Because of that, I was able to meet you here today. You're going to build a town for me, aren't you?"

"You've got that wrong. We're making a town for *us*. It just happens that you'll benefit too."

"That's fine. Then shall we make a contract? I'll follow what you say as the town's mayor—"

"Ack! Y-You idiot! You just—"

In an instant, I sensed a strange link form between Forneus and myself.

* * *

“Hmm? I just felt something weird...” Forneus murmured. Apparently they hadn’t realized yet.

But everyone else around noticed the change.

“Meow?!”

“W-Woof! (Mi-Milord!) Woof woof?! (Who in the world is that?!)”

Cath and Mataza were startled, and so was Liber.

“Woof? (Is that a sheep beastman?)” she asked cautiously.



“Wait, can you see them?” I asked the trio. They each nodded. Somehow, the link formed between us made them visible to everyone else. Was this another effect of the <Holy King> skill?

“Huh? What’s going on here? Can you all see me too?” Forneus asked the others, waving a hand in front of all their faces. Upon seeing their eyes following the movement, they exclaimed, “Wow, you can see me! There have never been this many <Diviners> before!”

From Forneus’s perspective, they were <Diviners>, but I knew otherwise. *The real reason why they can see Forneus now is probably…*

When I checked my status card, the <Follower Contract> section listed:

```
Follower Contract: Demon Cat (Juvenile), Hound
Sprite x10, Hound Trooper x2, Normal Folk x1, Black
Skeleton King, Artificial Spirit x1
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“I thought as much…” I sighed, but it made complete sense. Just moments ago, Forneus had clearly stated a desire to form a contract and follow me. That had caused a Follower Contract to form between us.

Forneus had probably been half-joking and hadn’t meant it as a serious promise, but my skill had interpreted this caprice as consent. For my part, I’d been hoping to establish a working relationship with them, so in a way, we had an accord.

I really wanted to complain about how loose the rules were. Similar things had happened with Cath, the kobolds, and Aht. As for the black skeleton king, I’d basically swiped its contract from someone else. In this case, an intent had been clearly said out loud, so it was no wonder that had been taken as agreement to the contract.

As I was thinking this, Forneus asked me, “Huh? What’s up? Is there a problem?”

It seemed Forneus didn’t understand exactly what was going on here. I’d assumed that a being that had been worshipped as a god would be perfectly aware of their own status, but they seemed not to pay it any mind. So it was probably inevitable that they hadn’t

noticed.

But now that we were bound together, there was nothing I could do about it. I still didn't know anything about how to annul a contract. So for the time being, I explained it to Forneus.

"Yeah, there *is* a problem. You just formed a contract with me."

"Hm? I did. We agreed that you'd build a town and I'd help."

"No, that's not what I'm talking about. It's a contract where you serve me, but not vice versa. I can monitor your powers and abilities…if I want. All of your basic personal info is exposed to me. I don't think you can really disobey my commands either, right?"

That was the way my followers so far had acted. Cath sometimes seemed a little rebellious, and Aht was fully compliant but also strict. Despite this, they more or less did as I ordered. It was still a mystery whether their free will was being manipulated or if there was some other basis for this, but that was my general experience.

However, Forneus reacted with astonishment. "No, that can't possibly be right. There's no way I would form such an unfair contract with a person I only just met. Don't you know you're asking way too much? If that's how you're going to be, I must reconsider cooperating with—Hm? That's strange. For some reason, I just can't bring myself to refuse you."

"Is that so? You haven't completely lost your free will, have you? Or is it just because you're an artificial spirit? I'll need to experiment and find out, but not right now."

Forneus's species had been recorded as "Artificial Spirit." I had expected they might be recorded as "Evil God" or "Demigod," but this was probably the most appropriate designation. That said, spirits didn't obey humans by nature, even if they were artificial. In my homeland, after they were generated, they would be forced into submission or treated as nothing more than an energy source. The spirits usually had no say in how they were used. Considering this, it was extraordinary that artificial spirits could be forced to comply, although it required the use of skills.

"Erm… What exactly does this mean?" By now, Forneus had finally realized that something was off.

I told it to them straight. "You've been turned into my loyal follower by the effects of my skill. I don't know how to undo it, so you're stuck following me indefinitely."

“That’s ridiculous. I’ve been worshipped and adored here as an evil god for *centuries*! An insignificant little nothing like you couldn’t—” Forneus groaned, gripping their head. Forming the contract must have made it harder for them to lie. The language they used with me had turned rather harsh. Usually I’d have found this upsetting, but this time, I was intrigued because I could see the influence of <Follower Contract> at work. As I had thought, it didn’t completely take over followers’ minds. I decided to question Forneus as a way to further experiment.

“Oh? Is that your true nature? I guess the cat’s out of the bag now… Oh, sorry Cath. I wasn’t complaining about you.”

Cath had started clawing my shoulders in protest at my phrasing. She was a <Demon Cat> and therefore not exactly what the idiom was referring to. Still, the same terms were used for them, so she’d taken it as an insult and was now objecting. She must have understood my apology, since she immediately stopped.

That’s what’s so nice and adorable about my partner, I thought.

Meanwhile, Forneus glowered at me. “Now I understand. You didn’t trust me, so you set up a trap to bind me into a contract?”

“No, that’s not it. On the contrary, I was being mindful of it. This skill is hard to use. It can make contracts over the slightest things, so I try to avoid triggering it. But you were the one who suggested making a contract. You sure you didn’t adopt that trait from your believers who carried off the wrong idol?”

This evil god and its believers were a bit clumsy. Thinking of it like that almost made the Sect of Forneus seem cute—but they were still a villainous organization that was willing to commit terrorism in order to rapidly spread throughout Urizen. It was still unclear whether they were related to *this* Forneus, though.

Forneus sighed in response. “You’ve got me there… I messed up. And you said there’s no way to undo it?”

“Honestly, I don’t know. I did test something out since I figured it’d be better to know in advance, but it didn’t end up working.”

I’d tried it with the kobolds. I’d overwhelmed them by force before, so I presumed that they wouldn’t suddenly turn on me if their contracts were annulled. In that sense, I figured Cath wouldn’t assault me either, but she was stronger than them. Just in case, I decided it would be best to experiment with the kobolds.

But none of it had yielded any results, no matter who I tried it on.

Forneus sighed again. “What’s done is done. Do you intend to find a way to cancel it?”

“It’s not causing me any trouble right now, so I’m not about to go looking.”

“Well, I’d rather you do, please.”

Given that they were bound by <Follower Contract> and wanted to get out of it, I could assume their free will was still intact. I’d have to test it out on others to see if Forneus was just unique by virtue of being an artificial spirit, but it was good to have an example.

“You hate it that much? Well, I guess that makes sense. But you’re going to cooperate with me, right? Actually, please answer this honestly. That’s an order.” My experiments had found that followers were compelled to a degree when I told them that something was an order.

As a matter of fact, Forneus looked discontent as they answered. “I *was* going to cooperate. I was just planning to convert everyone once the town was built and grew big enough.”

“I see. That doesn’t sound all that crooked. I said at the very beginning that we could do that.”

“So you claimed, but politicians don’t like excessive evangelization, right? I thought you’d go back on your word sooner or later. But if I work alongside you for now and win your trust…”

They were more realistic than they let on. Maybe their ignorance of society was just an act. With that in mind, this Forneus really was…

“You’re pretty tenacious. Well, I can’t say I mind that. Not like I can judge.”

Forneus seemed mildly surprised by my reply. “I tried to trick you, but you’re forgiving me?”

“There isn’t really anything to forgive. There was never any trust between us in the first place, but it’s fine. Now that we have a contract, it’ll be tough for you to defy me anyway. Even more so if we build a rapport. I guess you’re not too happy about that, though.”

“You probably wouldn’t believe me if I said otherwise, but I think I’ll be in good hands if I follow you. But in exchange, I need

you to proselytize for me. I can’t keep existing without energy from believers, after all.”

“Huh? I thought the mana stone inside the idol was keeping you tethered?”

“That’s true, but it won’t hold out forever. I think I only had around one or two years left when you all came around. Since I couldn’t miss that opportunity, I had to do something.”

“That explains it. All right, then. Now that that’s all sorted out, it’s good to have you with us.”

“Yes. I’m glad to be working with you, Noah. And this time, I mean it.”

Chapter 5: Growing Reputation and Friendships

“There weren’t any clues here either. I guess that means he isn’t in the country anymore,” said Kuzan Rogue, former squire of the Duke of Olipiage’s knights.

He was in Jagarta, a city on the western edge of the Oraculum Kingdom. If you went any farther west, you would hit the Purgatory Forest, which was infamous throughout the country—nay, throughout the world—as monster territory. That was where Kuzan’s former liege, Noah Olipiage, had been abandoned. Technically, he’d been sent there for his own protection, but since he hadn’t been given any allies or assets, he may as well have been abandoned. However, out of all the things they could have done, this method decidedly gave him the highest chances of survival.

All of House Olipiage, Kuzan included, knew that Noah Olipiage was both extraordinary and ignoble. Not in a derogatory sense—he simply had the resilience and open-mindedness to adapt to anything. As remarkable as the saints and luminaries famed throughout the world were, most of them would perish if they were suddenly tossed into the Purgatory Forest one day.

That wouldn’t happen to Noah. It *couldn’t* happen to him. He had something unique about him—call it charm, charisma, or a gift—that made one want to believe that he was an exception.

However, Noah himself didn’t think he had any of this, and always considered himself to be just *average*. To be fair, as far as his skills went, he wasn’t exceptional in any particular area. But after he’d gained the incredible <Holy King> skill, he’d become anything *but* average. It had simply taken him too long to figure it out. If he’d known earlier, there would have been more options. That was cause for regret.

“Yo, Kuzan, can you just give up already? He got dumped in the Purgatory Forest of all places. There’s no way he’s getting out of there. You may as well assume he’s already dead. Y’know what’d be better? Us getting outta this country and chasing fame

somewhere else. You're a guy I can stick with," said a girl.

Her manner of speech was extremely coarse and boyish, but her appearance was the exact opposite. She seemed to be around ten years old, and when standing next to Kuzan, she practically looked like she could be his little sister. They actually *had* been pretending to be siblings while in the company of others.

It's not that they looked similar, but they both had relatively well-proportioned facial features, so they could get away with making this claim. However, the girl was not as she appeared. She wasn't even a normal folk. She was a dwarf, and much older than her appearance suggested. From what Kuzan had gathered, she was well over fifty.

Why, then, was she sharing a room with Kuzan? The reason was that the two of them were currently traveling together. Of course, they had different motives. Kuzan was searching for his liege, and the dwarf girl was looking for a place where she could put her talents to use.

They'd met in a town that Kuzan had come through on his travels, when he saved the dwarf girl from being enslaved. To repay the favor, and because she felt the hand of fate at work, the dwarf girl had insisted that she would accompany him. Kuzan had yielded, and the two of them wound up traveling with each other.

The girl's name was Merikur. She was both a proficient blacksmith and fighter, so she was by no means an impediment—honestly, she made for a good partner.

Even so, Kuzan couldn't explain everything about Noah. There were things he couldn't risk divulging, including his own origins...at least, not while they were in this city. Anyone could be listening in. All that he'd said was that he was looking for an old friend who was in the Purgatory Forest. That much was certainly true.

His cover story was that his friend had rocked the boat too many times and couldn't stay in the country anymore, and was at last exiled to monster territory. The least Kuzan could do was to go out and look for him.

Noah would probably grumble that this wasn't very sympathetic toward him, but the funny thing was that all of it was true—though none of it had occurred through any fault of Noah's.

"It'd take more than going through monster territory to kill him.

At least now I know he's not in this country anymore. I can't say I blame him for leaving it. I just searched around here because I thought it'd be the quickest exit from the Purgatory Forest, if he made it out…"

"Then you're not gonna give up on looking for him? Makes me wonder what kinda guy he is if someone like you is going to all these lengths."

"He's an interesting person. At least, the most interesting one *I've* ever met. But he's also complicated to explain. So I'd like for you to meet him yourself."

She sighed. "All right. Well, I'll stick with you till you find him. Oh, let's check out the Urizen Federation next. It touches the southern border of the Purgatory Forest, so if he didn't come this way, he'd probably have gone there. Plus it's a better place for demihumans like me."

"True enough. It's more likely than the northern border. Okay, let's exit Oraculum tomorrow."

"Gotcha."

The pair had yet to discover that in arbitrarily deciding these travel plans, they had stumbled upon the correct choice.

* * *

"So this is Midrogue. It's pretty busy for a frontier district. Seems like they're growing," Kuzan mused.

Merikur was similarly agape. "Yeah, I'm impressed. And the expressions on the demihumans' faces here are way different than in Oraculum! Urizen really is great! Y'wanna settle down here?"

These carefree expressions, which she'd hardly seen in Oraculum, told her that the previous country they'd been in wasn't a very good place. Kuzan felt guilty about that. Of course, he wasn't to blame for the normal folk supremacism in Oraculum, but he was still employed by the government. Thus he still felt some responsibility for the country's poor treatment of demihumans.

Nonetheless, Kuzan didn't let his feelings show. "I don't think I can do that. I'm here to look for my friend. But you can live here if you want. I bet a dwarf craftsman can get permanent residence pretty easily." He'd be lonely without her, but if she liked the place that much, then so be it.

Merikur was bewildered. “F-For real?! I never got it in Oraculum, even after living in one of their towns for ten years!”

Now it was Kuzan’s turn to be surprised. “What, it was *that* bad? It wasn’t like that in Duke Olipiage’s territory…”

Oraculum was indeed very tough on demihumans, but that only applied to those who weren’t productive. Dwarves were treated relatively well because they were particularly skilled with their hands, especially with blacksmithing and in the industrial arts. There were also very stringent restrictions on travel in Olipiage territory, and Kuzan recalled there being various policies in place to prevent them from suddenly leaving the country. These travel limitations were probably only common in Olipiage territory.

Merikur resolved Kuzan’s confusion. “I lived in the Earl of Ermis’s territory. A lot of Oraculum’s dwarves live there!”

“Right, I’ve heard there are many dwarves there because of the booming mining and smithing industry. Is that where you come from?”

She shook her head. “No, I’m from Marquess Huebra’s territory,” she responded.

This made sense to Kuzan. “That’s where the headquarters of Oraculum’s blacksmith guild are, right? That sounds like a better place, so why did you go to the Earl of Ermis’s territory?”

“For training. There’s lots of blacksmith work around Marquess Huebra’s territory, but most of it is advanced and intricate stuff, like magic swords and armor. A dwarf who’s only got average skills isn’t any help with that. That’s why.”

“But you’re really talented!”

Kuzan had seen her skills firsthand on their travels when they had occasion to borrow a smithy in town. But apparently, she wasn’t fully confident in her own prowess yet.

Merikur replied, “I’m nowhere near good enough yet. Although, I think I’m on par with the foremen of your average smithy by now. Especially when it comes to infusing and engraving magic into tools.”

“Is that so? I guess the craftsman’s profession is a lifelong journey.”

“Exactly. Anyway, you really think I can get permanent residence in this town even at my level?”

Kuzan nodded. “I think it’d work out. From what I’ve seen, your

work is first-class by normal folk standards. I bet they'd say the same wherever you went. Those top-tier master craftsmen are just off the charts."

The dwarves who could forge superlative creations were referred to as master craftsmen. There were only a handful of these in Oraculum. For some reason, Merikur considered them as her benchmark, and thus undervalued her own skills.

"Huh, you really think? Guess I'll skip the question of permanent residency for now and go check out the blacksmith's guild to see if they'll give me any work. Sounds like a good way to make money. Kuzan, you're gonna stay here a while to look for your friend, yeah? We'll need enough cash to get by in the meantime."

Kuzan reacted with a wry smile. Merikur had been constantly considerate of Kuzan's finances during their travels. She was a big eater, enough to make Kuzan's cheeks blanch early in their travels. She'd started doing blacksmithing jobs to make up the difference, and had already fully repaid the money he'd had to spend on her. Even so, she hadn't quit yet, seemingly still feeling an obligation toward him.

"I've told you before, you don't have to earn enough for the both of us. I do have some travel savings...admittedly not a lot, but still."

"Come on, don't be modest! We're pals, right? If you're gonna look for your friend, then of course I'm gonna help out!"

Kuzan sensed that she wouldn't let up about this easily, so he conceded for now. "Hmmm... Well, if you say so."

"Okay! I'm off to the blacksmith's guild. I can ask around for directions. How about you?"

"I'll start by checking out the tavern. But first, we should find lodgings. Someplace that isn't too expensive."

"Oh, right. I almost forgot."

And so the pair set off through the streets of Midrogue in search of an inn.

* * *

"In this vast world, fated spirits can be far out of reach. It's nothing short of a miracle, when two finally meet."

...sang a minstrel with his naturally beautiful voice.

Kuzan silently approved and gave a bitter smile. “True enough,” he murmured to himself.

As dusk approached, more people filed into the tavern from outside. They were brawny, hardworking men, drawn by liquor in the same way that a swarm of bugs might be drawn to the aroma of sap. And unlike what might be seen in Oraculum, they weren’t the only ones. In addition to the men coming into the tavern, there were young women as well. They entered cheerily in all-female groups, both eye-catching and full of optimism.

This “Midrogue” place really did seem like a good city. If this were a city in Oraculum, some less savory types would have made off with them in no time. They’d be enslaved and…well, it was better left unsaid.

Kuzan recalled having to save women who’d fallen into such circumstances many times back when he’d been a knight. The Duke of Olipiage’s territory was one of the better-policed areas of Oraculum. The Duke himself had seen to it that maintaining public order was made a priority. As a result, there was a large influx of people from other lands, and his territory exhibited regular growth.

He had wanted for Noah to govern it one day…but that dream was now unattainable. In all likelihood, his younger brother would inherit the land. His brother was quite talented, especially in comparison to the average young nobleman, so there would be no problem there. But Kuzan had wanted to bear witness to this at Noah’s side.

However, he didn’t necessarily have to be in Duke Olipiage’s territory in order to be by Noah’s side. On the contrary, Noah’s exile may have made things easier for Kuzan. If Noah had become duke, Kuzan would have had to aspire to become the captain of the duke’s knights in order to be treated as his right-hand man. He’d have had to surpass his father, the vice-captain, and become even better than the current captain of knights. Considering that, it seemed completely out of reach.

This current situation could actually be a lucky break for me, he told himself as he listened to the growing crowd of customers around him.

“When you’re in an unfamiliar place and want to get broad information, head to the tavern first.” His father had told him that.

He'd been quite young back then, before he thought much about Noah or becoming a knight. But everything he'd been taught at that age had eventually come in use. This knowledge was worth its weight in gold, especially now that he'd left the formal organization that was the order of the knights. It almost made him think that his father had predicted that this might happen to him one day. The realization that he'd had the potential for such uncertainty since childhood made Kuzan feel guilty for stressing out his father.

"But seriously, it's a huge boon that Midrogue's economy has been flourishing lately," came a voice from the next seat over. Kuzan glanced to the side.

He looks like he does some kind of physical labor for a job. Could be a stonemason, a carpenter, or maybe even an adventurer. Actually, he's dressed too lightly for that. Even off the battlefield, adventurers don't shed their equipment. Especially not their weapons. But these guys are just wearing linen. He kept listening in.

"Must be thanks to all those new policies. The highways have been fixed, which brings in more customers for the merchants and helps out the relay stations too."

Apparently, a lot of reforms had been recently implemented in Midrogue. They didn't seem to know the exact details, but from the fragments Kuzan picked up, he could tell that the reforms were meant to improve circulation and stimulate the economy.

"I didn't put any stock in that council lass when she first got here, but she's more ingenious than I expected."

"I heard! Not even the new mage's guild leader can match up to her these days."

Kuzan had heard that this city was governed by a council. Apparently one of their number was a young woman, and a very capable one at that. Maybe that was why there were so many women in this tavern.

They continued.

"'Course not. Word is that she made the last mage's guild leader quit."

This gave Kuzan the impression that governing territory wasn't this lady's only forte. Mage's guilds had a lot of pull no matter what city you went to. They weren't an organization you could casually pick a fight with. If you went about it the wrong way,

they'd retaliate in ways you couldn't even imagine. But that lady had gotten its leader to quit. That was quite a feat.

"Yeah, they *were* political opponents. But does she really have that much sway?"

"Her dad's Marquis Trahn. It'd be as easy as pie for him."

So her father's an influential noble. Does that put her on even footing with the mage's guild? Sounds like a complex situation…

He had wanted to hear more, but the men seemed to be tired of this subject.

"Shoulda gotten around to it earlier, then. Not like it has much to do with us, though. I'm satisfied just to have work."

"You bet. I'll drink to that."

They then started on a completely different topic, so Kuzan shifted his attention to the conversation at the next table over.

"That reminds me, are you gonna apply to that latest advertisement? The one from what's-his-name, the new mayor of that frontier town."

"You mean Noah?"

Kuzan was startled to hear this.

"Yeah, Noah. *That* was his name."

The name filled Kuzan with wistfulness. It could have just been a different person with the same name, but for him to be spoken of in this manner meant that he had to have done something to rock the boat. And Noah Olipiage was the exact kind of person who would do that.

Believing there was no small chance that the Noah these men were talking about was the same individual, Kuzan listened keenly.

"Isn't he pretty young? I hear he's practically a kid."

"He's fourteen, but he's got a lot of demihumans with him. They're pretty competent. I hear they're doing some big jobs in the adventurer's guild. They registered as iron rank not too long ago, but they've already hit copper. They're well on their way to silver rank, but that's a long way to go."

Fourteen. That's Noah's exact age. But…demihumans? I've never heard of him having any such friends, at least not while he was in House Olipiage. I don't think His Excellency knows any either. And yet…

Maybe he's made some secret connections. The scary thing about Noah is, I can't rule out that possibility.

"Why do you say that? If he's got the skills and the manpower,

he may as well keep moving up. The more seasoned adventurers we have around, the less damage from monsters there'll be, and there'll be more materials to go around. It's convenient for us too. You think the adventurer's guild leader would turn him down just because of his age?"

"Hardly. You know what Fresco's like. He doesn't care about age or species at all, as long as you've got the skills."

Apparently the Midrogue adventurer's guild leader only looked at one's results.

Adventurer's guild bosses could largely be split into two categories: those who catered to authority and those who valued individual merit. Neither philosophy was unconditionally correct. In Oraculum, the former sort was necessary to ensure success. But in this country, the latter seemed to be more popular. Kuzan personally preferred it that way as well.

"Then why?"

"'Cause he became mayor of that frontier town, duh."

The mayor of a "frontier town." He'd heard the phrase before, but what did it mean? He wanted to hear the specifics, but the men didn't seem to know and didn't discuss the details. Instead, they talked about their hypotheses surrounding Noah.

"Oh right. You mean he's too busy and doesn't have time for the adventurer grind anymore? I can believe that."

"That's what I'm getting at. Anyway, he's recruiting people for work there now. I wanted to know if you were gonna apply."

Apparently this Noah was recruiting tradesmen for his frontier town. The specifics were unclear, but these frontier towns were always in want of labor, no matter what country they were in. Few people proactively enlisted, because the work would be undoubtedly arduous. It would be better to live peacefully in a town that was already developed. Despite that, these men were seriously discussing applying. What could this mean?

The second man was skeptical. "What, you're interested? Then *you* can apply."

"Well, I *would*, but the requirements are pretty steep. But if we both apply and one of us gets in, the other one could come along as his associate."

"Are you seriously trying to string me along just to boost your own chances?"

“Why not? It’d be a pretty good deal for you too. The council’s endorsing this job. Best-case scenario, we could get an official warrant of approval from the council.”

Evidently, that was this man’s motive. Provided that the Midrogue city council didn’t play favorites, they’d gain job security as tradesmen. And if they failed, it wouldn’t be a big deal. That was his attitude toward this job, which sounded convincing enough. But why was the council backing Noah to this degree?

The second man seemed curious about this as well. “Does Noah have ties to the council?”

This was exactly the question that was weighing on Kuzan’s mind.

“Yeah. I dunno the specifics, but it sounds like he’s cozy with Lady Katarina. Well, he may be mayor now, but he started out as an adventurer. They probably met through some job.”

That makes sense. That can happen in an adventurer’s line of work. And knowing Noah, he’d do that kind of thing without a second thought, Kuzan sincerely thought.

But the second man didn’t share his impressions. “So you’re saying he did such a good job that he earned the position of mayor? Sounds a little *too* impressive for a fourteen-year-old…”

“You think it’s suspicious?”

He hastily shook his head in response. “Nah, I’m just envious. But anyway, it doesn’t sound like a bad offer if it’ll put us in the council’s good graces. We’ve got nothing to lose if we fail. You wanna take the plunge together, then?”

“Now that’s the spirit. Okay, let’s celebrate in advance! Barkeep, get us some drinks!”

The men proceeded to order more alcohol.

I’ve heard enough, thought Kuzan. He got out of his seat, paid exact change, and left the tavern.

* * *

“So you wanna go see the mayor of the frontier town. I get it,” said Merikur. They were back in their two-person room at the Midrogue inn. She was of course speaking to Kuzan, who was reporting back with what he’d learned at the tavern.

“Yes. But there’s just one problem: the site of the town hasn’t

been made public yet."

Afterward, he had asked around for the frontier town's location, but nobody knew the precise spot. All they knew was its general direction. This in itself wasn't that unusual. After all, the town was *going* to be built where there was currently nothing. Most people wouldn't know the location of the town at such an early stage. But even when he'd asked the adventurer's guild directly, they hadn't answered. *That* was abnormal.

According to the employee he'd spoken with, there weren't exact coordinates yet. If too many people crowded in under the current conditions, they wouldn't be able to handle them all. It was necessary to limit travel to only authorized personnel, and therefore the precise location couldn't be made public at this juncture.

They'd also informed him that merchants and tradesmen, including peddlers, carpenters, and blacksmiths would be told the location whenever their services were required. The town certainly *seemed* to have a location in mind, so this didn't quite add up.

What concerned Kuzan the most was that he would have to go to the town in order to verify whether this Noah was really the one he knew. But without the town's coordinates…

"Oof, that *is* a pickle," Merikur said. "I heard about that frontier town too. I think they called it the old village of Asyl, or something like that."

"Wait, you discovered the town's name? Then if we do some research—"

"No, it was abandoned a pretty long time ago. It's not on any maps."

"Did you have to let down my hopes that fast? That's a dead end, then… But I have to find *some* way to pinpoint the location," Kuzan grumbled with disappointment, before realizing something. "That reminds me, Merikur. Since you heard about that, I take it you found work with the blacksmith's guild?" He figured they wouldn't share information like this to outsiders.

Merikur grinned and nodded. "You bet. Apparently the blacksmith guild's leader has known my dad since way back when. That's how I got in."

"Wow, small world. But you look a little displeased. Why's that?" He asked because although Merikur had a grin on her face, she

seemed a little dissatisfied, or possibly self-critical.

Merikur responded sourly. “It feels like I got the job through my dad’s connections, not because of my own talent. It just doesn’t sit right.”

Oh, so it’s a matter of her pride as a craftsman. But…

“Does it really matter?”

“Huh?”

“If that’s all, then you just have to prove your talent to them now that you have the job. Sure, some might claim that you just got the position through nepotism, but if you do good work, they won’t have a leg to stand on.”

“B-But…”

“I went through the same stuff. You’ll be fine.”

When Kuzan had been in the order of knights, he’d dealt with similar criticism. The worst of it had been before he became a squire, back when he was a page.

The Duke’s order of knights was renowned. It wasn’t easy to join, even as only a lowly page. But since Kuzan’s father was the vice-captain of knights, he had seemingly gained the position effortlessly. Kuzan did recall that he’d enlisted without much trouble. He hadn’t even taken an entry exam.

Although the circumstances of his enlistment were exceptional, his father, the vice-captain, had regularly assigned him extremely rigorous training. If one counted that, suddenly it didn’t seem so easy. In fact, when he *did* eventually take a look at the entrance exam, he’d wondered why it was so lenient.

Nevertheless, Kuzan had been harangued for a while because he got in through preferential treatment. This was inevitable since he’d gotten in without taking an exam, but it was bad enough that he’d wished he *had* taken it. He was confident he could’ve passed with flying colors. Although, he’d later heard that his father and the other knights were of the opinion that giving an exam to someone who was sure to pass would have just been a waste of time. Besides, if these accusations were enough to break his spirit, then it wouldn’t have mattered if he took an entry exam anyway. This was harsh in multiple senses, but thinking back on it now, they’d been correct, so he couldn’t complain.

In reality, the people who had harassed him were the ones who gradually couldn’t keep up with the strict training and quit. The

last ones remaining were those who hadn't given him grief, and those who'd stubbornly insisted upon vilifying Kuzan and faced him head-on. In the end, he'd ended up forming a very positive relationship with them as fellow cohort members, so looking back on it now, that was probably just the way things were. The same thing could happen in Merikur's case.

Surprised by Kuzan's remark, Merikur made up her mind. "You're really something, y'know that? Anyway, gotcha. I'll try giving the job a whirl for now. But first..."

"You wanna know where Asyl is, right?"

"I suppose. Why do you ask?"

"I was just thinking I could try to pull a few strings on my end. If everything comes down to who you know anyway, I might as well take advantage of it at a time like this."

* * *

"You're really sure about this?" Kuzan brooded in the coach as it rattled along the path to the old village of Asyl.

Merikur replied, "We're not being dishonest, so who cares? Right, guild leader?"

She directed this last part toward the coach's driver, the only other person present.

"Right. Mr. Tag-Along, you don't have any relevant skills, right? But with someone as talented as Miss Merikur along, we can get by just fine. Me and the little miss will focus on building the smithy, and you'll do what we instruct. You can do simple manual labor, can't you?"

The person saying this was not just a coach driver—he was the leader of the Midrogue blacksmith's guild, a dwarf man named Kaus Dieff. It was unusual to find a dwarf blacksmith in such a remote place. Supposedly he, his wife, and their children were the only dwarves in Midrogue. That was why he'd been very happy to see Merikur come by.

Kuzan didn't know the specifics, but there were quite a few processing techniques that only dwarf blacksmiths could do, and Merikur knew all of them. Merikur had claimed to only get in through preferential treatment, but this fact clearly indicated otherwise.

Kuzan wondered why Merikur was still under the wrong impression. Kaus later explained that Merikur's father was an influential figure in Oraculum's blacksmith guilds, so she'd had people fussing over her all her life. She'd gotten it into her head that her connections mattered more to others than her talents.

Afterward, a series of events had occurred that led to her nearly getting captured by slave traders. Given her circumstances, they were probably worried sick about her back in Oraculum. She hadn't had any contact with her father in Oraculum so far, so he must have been concerned about her welfare. *I guess I'll have to tell her to write a letter home later*, Kuzan thought.

Considering all this, Kuzan responded to Kaus. "Certainly, I can do that. But are you really sure this is okay? It seemed like there were a lot of other blacksmiths who wanted to go to the frontier town."

There had been more than a few people in the tavern who'd been having a lively discussion on the subject. Despite this, Kuzan, who had no tradesman skills whatsoever, had been permitted to accompany Merikur as her associate. He couldn't help but feel ashamed that he'd unfairly stolen someone else's opportunity.

"It's fine. Besides, all of those guys just want to cotton up to the council. The ones who don't care about that are too busy with their own work right now to apply. Out of the whole bunch, Merikur, with her abilities plus her tag-along, was the right fit for the job."

"I appreciate you saying that. I suppose there's no point in stressing about it any further. Um, if you don't mind switching to a lighter subject, I'd like to ask more about Asyl."

"Oh right, you didn't get to hear much. All right, ask away."

"Regarding the frontier town's mayor..."

"Ah, Noah? He's an interesting guy. He gets along well with Miss Katarina, and not only that, he brings in good materials pretty often."

"Really? But I heard he was relatively young."

"The thing is, he's practically a kid. Says he's fourteen. But the beastmen he's got along with him are competent. Plus they perfectly handle the materials they get from hunting monsters around the outskirts of the frontier town. They know exactly how to hit the vitals with one strike. They're a notch or two higher in quality than the stuff the adventurer's guild delivers every day.

They’re the only ones I give a bonus to.”

“They’re that good?” Hearing this, Kuzan started to doubt that this was the Noah he knew. To start with, Noah had never been a very proficient fighter. His other skills were nothing special either. The one thing he had going for him was his charisma that drew attention. He had an air about him that raised curious expectations. That was all.

But the frontier town’s Noah sounded like he himself had a fair amount of prowess in battle. For better or worse, beastmen were susceptible to power dynamics and therefore rarely served anyone who was weaker than themselves. Of course, they would obey authority or the children of their master and such, but neither situation applied here. Noah’s own strength was the deciding factor. In short, Noah had to be more powerful than the beastmen.

Kuzan couldn’t come up with an explanation of why this would be. *Well, I’ll find out once I meet him. Maybe I shouldn’t waste time stewing over it.* Kuzan proceeded to ask an assortment of questions, but nothing made him feel certain that this Noah was *the* Noah.

After a while…

“Oh, we’re almost at Asyl. It’s still under development and doesn’t have a new name yet. You two will be living there for a while. Are you ready for this?”

“Yeah, no problem. Right, Kuzan?”

“Yes. I’m used to camping out. I think I’ll get along fine in this frontier town.”

“Sounds promising. All right, let’s head on in.”

And so the coach carried on toward the improvised entrance of the town.

* * *

“Not bad, considering we built it all by ourselves. It’s beginning to look like a real town here, don’t you think?” I commented as I surveyed the almost finished frontier town from what could generously be called an entrance.

About a month had passed since Cath and the kobolds started building the town from scratch. Well, almost. The chapel was made of stone and sufficiently robust, so all it had needed was some

cleaning and reinforcement. The kobolds and I had built about five wooden houses around it. Of course, they were just shabby one-story buildings made by amateurs, but they were more than enough to house one kobold family each.

Excluding Mataza and Liber, there were currently fifteen kobolds. There were more of them than before because during our time here, we'd been attacked by wild kobolds. Since being defeated, the survivors obeyed me and were bound by my <Follower Contract>. There were ten adult kobolds and five pups. The kobold population would probably only increase, but five houses was plenty for now. Besides, kobolds generally lived as packs, so they all just slept wherever they wanted.

However, this was at odds with the other typical habits of canine beastmen. Canine beastmen had the concept of packs as well, but they weren't as feral as kobolds, so their households were properly divided by family. That was why I'd asked the kobolds to imitate those kinds of familial arrangements whenever possible. Of course, we could give that up if it was too difficult for them to go against their instincts or if it was emotionally distressing. We didn't really plan to invite lots of outsiders anytime soon anyway, so we'd be fine for the time being. That being said...

"They're supposed to arrive soon..."

"Woof woof, woof? (You're referring to the blacksmiths and carpenters you hired through the adventurer's guild?)" Mataza asked.

I nodded. "Yeah. We've managed to make some temporary housing on our own, but it's tough to construct real buildings that are up to standard. Besides, we're going to need more specialized tools like hoes for when we have to grow fields and clear the forest. We could just buy them, but it would be better in the long-term to have someone who can do blacksmithing."

I'd considered using <Follower Contract> for that, but decided against it because it just didn't sit well with me. If I did so, I could learn smithing skills and teach them to the kobolds. It would be great for the town's growth, but it'd be just too inhumane.

I wouldn't feel particularly guilty about imposing <Follower Contract> on an attacking enemy, but tricking someone who was just trying to do their job would leave a sour taste in my mouth. Well, if I really wanted to guarantee my safety and nothing else, it

might be best to just make <Follower Contracts> with one person after another...but even then, that could be risky. My conversation with Forneus had made it clear that the contract didn't rob the contractor of their free will. A direct order might be the exception, but even then, there were still too many things I didn't know for sure.

For now, it seemed best to avoid adventuring much, at least until our town base was sufficiently developed. I'd somehow have to experiment with my own skills in the meantime, so I intended to use them on monsters rather than humans. For the most part, monsters couldn't blab to other people like humans could. Especially not monsters that didn't even have their own languages. Even among kobolds, few of them could understand human language. The new kobolds I'd formed <Follower Contracts> with had been the first of these experiments.

"Woof, woof woof (But our coming guests won't stay here for a prolonged period, correct?)"

"Of course they won't. For now, I just wanted to get some tradesmen in so they see that the work here isn't too bad. That way, it'll be easier to procure more of them, and eventually people will come along who are willing to live here a while. That's the long-term picture, though. Also, I want you all to observe their work and try to steal their skills, just like how you did with Aht."

"Woof! Woof woof! (Aha! If that's the case, then gladly!)"

Aht had taught us plenty of skills, but the most valuable lesson had been how to *steal* rather than *be taught*. It wasn't literally theft; rather, they were methods of observing, analyzing, and then mastering someone else's skill. These methods could be used for basically anything. Fortunately, Aht had lots of skills for us to practice on. If we wisely applied this experience, we might be able to crudely learn blacksmithing and carpentry.

If not, we don't have to force it. We can pay for lessons. Anyway, I'm free to dream.

As I mulled over this, I heard a coach approaching from afar.

"Sounds like they're here. Let's go out to greet them."

"Woof! (All right!)"

* * *

“Ah…”

I sensed it as soon as I exited the coach. At the makeshift entrance to Asyl—which was really just a gap in a perimeter of wooden stakes—somebody was waiting.

The moment I saw him, from the bottom of my heart, from the depths of my soul, I knew. *Ahhh, that’s exactly the person I’ve been longing to see.*

But that was *precisely* why I couldn’t say anything. I couldn’t run to him. All I could do was stand there, stock-still.

“Yo, Kuzan, what’s wrong with you? You look totally spaced.” Merikur, who’d disembarked after me, snapped me out of it.

“Er, well…” I started, but my legs were firmly rooted to the spot. Merikur ended up dragging me by the arm, and I was finally able to walk again.



The blacksmith's guild leader, Kaus, was already ahead of us and conversing with the person in question. They seemed to be getting along extremely well, so much so that I was feeling jealous.

If only I could just talk to him like that, I thought. Somewhere inside, I felt like I'd abandoned him. I couldn't bring myself to approach him.

But Merikur, who was completely unaware of my feelings on the matter and only knew that I was looking for my friend, had a completely different attitude. She went right up to him and got straight to the point. "Oh hey, are you Noah?"

He replied with a strained smile, unfazed by her extremely impolite form of address. He knew that this was what dwarves were generally like. He'd always had that kind of disposition; he could communicate across species without batting an eye. This was a rare trait. It was all too common for nobles in Oraculum to treat other species with scorn. Of course, House Olipiage was an exception to this, but even *he* could have been corrupted by "common sense" at school. However, nothing changed even after he had started attending school, and he still treated demihumans equally.

This naturally applied even toward Merikur's behavior.

"Yeah, I'm Noah. Do you know me or something?" he responded somewhat cautiously.

His wariness likely stemmed from the Church of Astral. He might've been afraid that the Church had figured out his location and come knocking at his door.

But Merikur just said, "Well, *I* don't, but your friend's been looking for you all over the place. He's been really desperate and totally set on finding you! Go talk to him! That's the guy!" She pointed over at me.

Then, for the first time, his gaze turned toward me.

I had feared this moment. Not a single day had gone by without me searching for him. Why was it that someone of his caliber had been deemed a heretic? Why did he have to give up on his promised position of duke? Most of all, why did he have to be sent to the Purgatory Forest, a monster territory where his life would be in danger? There had been no convincing answers to any of these questions.

If that's his fate, then I'll remain by his side and protect him with my life. I refuse to let him die before me. I'll become his sword and shield, and I would gladly die for him.

That's what I had thought. But my colleagues, my father, and even His Excellency the Duke had stopped me. They threw me in the detention barracks, and I was stuck in there for a while. By the time I could finally see the light of day again, he'd already been exiled from the country and his own father had cast him into the Purgatory Forest.

For the first time in my life, I rebelled against my father and expressed anger toward him. My father was taken aback by this…but at the same time, I think he was thrilled. Because at the very end, he'd told me…

Please, you and you alone must be his ally.

At that time, I acutely realized that none of House Olipiage had wanted to treat him so cruelly. Even so, there was nothing that I could do.

How much had I imposed on others in order to get here? How many people had helped me on my way? I couldn't be sure.

But regardless…

He probably won't accept me, I thought. *I abandoned him. I was of no help to him and just* abandoned *him. Because of my connection to House Olipiage, he must only see me as an enemy.* So I thought, against my better judgment.

But…

"That guy…? Oh? No way…huh?! Is that you, Kuzan?! No kidding?!" he exclaimed joyfully as soon as he saw my face. Then he ran up to me and hugged me tight.

"What are you doing here?!" he said. "Actually, how did you find out where I was? Is everything okay?! Your father sounded gruff, like he never wanted anything to do with me again…though I don't think he really meant it, of course. He couldn't help it, since he's affiliated with House Olipiage. Didn't you just become a squire? Don't tell me you came all the way out here just to see me!"

I couldn't help but break into a smile. "Master Noah…you're not angry? I…*we* abandoned you."

He—Master Noah—answered me.

"Don't be ridiculous. That just couldn't be helped. I can't say I didn't feel resentful about it, but I got over it soon enough.

Besides, they’ve given me a chance to see you again. I understand how my family feels, so I’m not going to hold it against them. Anyway, check out the town! I’ll show you around, so come on! Okay?”

Chapter 6: The Resolution

The Church would be none the wiser.

I would inform them that I'd already exterminated Noah. That way, the Church wouldn't need to devote resources to pursuing him further, and Noah and his companions would be able to live in peace.

However, it would no doubt be suspicious if one of the Holy Maidens were to quit the Church immediately after making such an announcement. That was why I had intended to perform my duties as a Holy Maiden for a year's time, and later come up with a reason to leave. Then Master Noah and I could live happily ever after...

"A clever scheme, wouldn't you agree?" I asked the man who was lying defeated on the floor.

He stretched out toward his ringed staff which was resting almost within reach, so I ground my heel into his hand. It must have hurt significantly, but he didn't scream, only whimpered.

Fascinating. Such is a testament to his character. I must give him credit for that, at least. Nevertheless, it had no bearing upon whether I would forgive his previous mistreatment of me.

Having finally accepted that he could not defy me, he was now inclined to talk. His voice was raspy, indicating that he was not long for this world.

"So you indeed turned traitor. I had made preparations for the worst-case scenario, but...humph. It was in vain..."

So said the highest authority of the Church of Astral...the <Holy King>.

He had the appearance of a white-haired young man with a charismatic air about him. His features and ambience resembled those of Master Noah, but after seeing the genuine article, I found his qualities were somewhat diminished. I knew now for certain that he was a mere imitation.

"I am no traitor. I simply learned that I live wholly to serve that exalted man."

"My case in point...although I suppose whatever I say now will

have no effect. It would appear that the Church means nothing to you now. I made a fatal oversight…”

“Where?”

“I hadn’t expected you to break into my office and attack me. But before that, I didn’t believe the <Holy King> had matured enough to ensnare you, with all your expertise, in just a single encounter. That was why I sent you. Therein lies my mistake. Is the Order of Paladins unharmed? And the other two Holy Maidens?”

“The two other Holy Maidens are my sisters. There was no need to do anything to them. As for the Order of Paladins…they charged at me. I never did like them in the first place. After all, they were so haughty, claiming that the Holy Maidens were superfluous with them around and that they were the strongest members of the Church. So…just as a fun diversion…”

“…You killed them all.”

“Yes, to put it bluntly. Looking forward, it would be more convenient if the entire Church organization were to be dismantled. Its entire scope of operations will be forced to downscale without the Order of Paladins around. I don’t believe that will be sufficient to eradicate it entirely, but be assured that I will rectify that in due course.”

“Aht Heresy, my greatest error was in not realizing what a heinous woman you are.”

“Oh? It wasn’t in attempting to assassinate Master Noah?”

“That…was no error. The <Holy King> skill is a threat to humanity. If I had known it would endure, I would have staked the Church’s entire existence upon…nrgh. Vicious, aren’t you? I apologize. Although, you’re going to kill me anyway, so it hardly makes a difference.”

“I will not permit him to be assassinated. But why is it that you fear the <Holy King> skill so greatly? I spent some time at Master Noah’s side, but nothing so dreadful occurred. His only crime was in sporting around with a delightful little demon cat and kobolds.”

“I see… *That* was how he survived in the forest. He had already awakened to an extent.”

“‘Awakened’? In light of these circumstances, please be so kind as to tell me all you know. After all, don’t I deserve a reward for serving you so faithfully all these years?” I bent over and asked him with a smile.

The <Holy King of the Church> gave a look of utter resignation. “Very well. However, I can only tell you what I know.”

“That’s a surprise. I had expected you would be reticent.”



“Doing so would change nothing at this point. Moreover, you intend to stay always by Noah’s side, don’t you? Then it’s best that you’re well-informed in advance for when it becomes necessary. That includes the Church’s inner workings as well…” he said darkly. “I have no choice now. I’ll entrust everything to you. There’s a hidden drawer on the underside of my office desk. It contains documents outlining how to transfer the title of <Holy King>. You must use it.”

“You truly think of everything.”

“You doubt me?”

“Yes. I assume that there’s some manner of trap which activates when the drawer is opened.”

“Well, I suppose that might be true in any other instance, but you’re the most skilled member of the Church. I freely admit that. Even for me, it would be no simple matter to procure traps or poisons that would be effective on you. Even supposing that a trap *was* sprung on you, I imagine it would only hinder you for a few minutes. Thus, I hardly feel motivated to resist. And besides…this is simply history repeating itself.”

“Would you care to explain?”

“I did the same thing, once upon a time. I usurped the title of <Holy King> and acted as the Church’s central figure…and shepherded it to its present state. My actions made the Church of Astral what it is today.”

“Just a moment, please. You claim to have usurped the title of <Holy King>? That’s… Such a shocking incident has not happened once in the Church’s history.”

The Church had documents on its own history detailing important events. Holy Maidens were required to study these, and therefore I had knowledge of how the title of <Holy King> had been passed down through the generations. But according to these records, the <Holy King>’s status had been perpetually stable. The records only detailed predecessors abdicating due to old age or dying of illness, willing the position to a successor.

The assertion of the young man before me contradicted this. But he said, “The Church history is all falsified. Or rather…everything regarding the <Holy King>’s succession is false.”

“But why?”

“Except for the first one, every <Holy King> has been me.”

"...I beg your pardon?"

"Only the first one was legitimate. All the rest were me, succeeding myself. I've been the only <Holy King> all this time. That's all there is to it."

"I don't believe it. Firstly, your age doesn't match. Do you realize how many centuries old the second Holy King would be if he were alive today?"

"I've lived a long time—775 years, to be exact. Perhaps the time is ripe for my demise."

"You're...completely serious, aren't you?"

"Is there any reason for me to tell such a lie in my final moments? No. Quite honestly, I'm tired. I am tired of protecting the world from the <Holy King>, and of running an organization as large as the Church."

"What exactly do you—"

"You wouldn't understand. On second thought, you may eventually *come* to understand. You worship the <Holy King> now, but one day, you'll realize your mistake. To possess the root skill <Holy King> is...far more dreadful than either you or Noah believe it to be..."

Even as he spoke, the <Holy King>'s eyes became unfocused.

"Come now, explain yourself! The least you can do is tell me everything! You just promised you would!"

"Then you should have restrained yourself a little more... I've lost too much blood already. I can't get into all the details...but you've seen the <Holy King> from up close. You must be aware. It's the power to subjugate monsters. The power to rule over *all* monsters. That's why..."

"You mean..."

"I do. I believe that 'Holy King' is an unbefitting name for such a skill. There is nothing 'holy' about it... I can think of a much better name. Yes... It would be far more appropriate to call it..."

The <Demon King>.

* * *

The <Holy King> only managed those final words before spitting blood and drawing his last breath.

I bore witness to his dying moments and tidied up his appearance, then located the documents for succeeding the title of the <Holy King> on the underside of his desk just as he'd said. They were formal papers designed to go into immediate effect after being signed. I wrote down my own name and placed them back where they had been.

According to the manual that was hidden in the same location, the only other person who knew about the documents would later retrieve them and then carry out the coronation. Evidently the <Holy King> had foreseen that something of this manner might eventually happen, and made efficient arrangements from the very onset. That convinced me that he had been telling me the truth.

"The <Holy King> is a <Demon King>? How utterly ridiculous… No, even if it's the truth, my feelings will remain unchanged," I murmured to myself. The <Holy King> had been placed in a casket and carried away to where he belonged, leaving the office empty.

As far as my skills could tell, there were no magic tools whatsoever in this room, and therefore my words would not be overheard. There was no better place to voice my resolution.

Yes, my resolution will never, ever change. No matter what manner of being Master Noah becomes, I will spend my life alongside him. Even if he truly is the <Demon King>…

"…That is none of my concern. Master Noah shall forever be Master Noah to me."

That was that. I had returned to the Church for this explicit reason and overthrown the Holy King. What I had told Master Noah about reporting his death to the Church had been a mere excuse. My true intent had been to destroy the Church at all costs and make certain that it could not lay its hands upon Master Noah, come what may. Even if this were to cost me my own life.

Now my schemes had succeeded, and I could return alive to Master Noah's side. That alone would surely be enough.

I'll leave the Church's administration in the hands of my sisters and the priests, and then I can live together with Master Noah.

Epilogue: The Collapse of the Church

“Dammit! Why?” I exclaimed at the barbarity of the situation.

Just as soon as we’d gotten used to living in Asyl, one of the houses was destroyed in the middle of the night. I was awoken by a booming sound and rushed out, only to spot a monster I’d seen once before. It was the one which had terrified me in the Purgatory Forest, which I could never have won against. The very same giant was there before my eyes.

The ishkitini.

A cold-blooded, infernal fiend. A powerful and dreadful monster which lived in the Purgatory Forest.

“Are the kobolds—oh good, they’re safe.”

I saw that the destroyed house was luckily vacant. It was one we’d constructed in anticipation of more people coming to live here, so it wasn’t occupied yet.

The sound had woken up the kobolds as well, and they were looking at the ishkitini from a distance, with weapons equipped. Aht’s training to be immediately ready to handle an emergency had come to bear.

Yes, we’d all trained for something like this.

“I’m scared…but not as much as I once was. Not nearly as much as the first time it drove us away from our shelter! Right, Cath?”

“Meow!” responded Cath, who had come alongside me and was crouching low.

To us, the ishkitini was a despised enemy. We had an axe to grind against this beast, which had forced us to leave the cave we’d decided to live in. The first time we encountered it, we’d been no match for it and had to flee in terror.

But this time, I didn’t feel as much pressure from it. Because we’d gotten stronger. We’d trained, fought on the battlefield, gained allies…

And besides, the ishkitini felt like nothing compared to Aht. During our training, Aht was a hundred times scarier when she got serious. At the very least, I could tell that the ishkitini couldn’t last ten seconds against all of us.

Now...we can do this!

"Everyone, we're going to kill it! This is *our* town! We're not gonna let it take what's ours!"

"Meow!"

"Woof woof!"

Cath and the kobolds rallied, and we charged at the ishkitini.

"Like I thought, we've got this!"

The fear I'd initially felt hadn't been misplaced; we were just that much stronger now, both individually and coordinating against bigger enemies. But as we hacked away at it, the ishkitini huddled its huge body and transformed into a giant owl. That was bad news.

"Dammit, it's going to get away!"

We did have some options for an aerial offensive, but we didn't yet have any skills with enough attack power to knock down an ishkitini. We could gradually chip away at it, but nothing more.

If we let it get away, it would come back to attack us in due time. I sensed enough tenacity and vindictiveness from it for that. Judging from how we were faring in this battle, we'd be able to kill it eventually, even if it did escape now. But I didn't even want to think of how many victims there would be in the meantime.

Asyl was still under construction. If *this* horrid thing kept returning, we wouldn't be able to attract immigrants. Depending on the circumstances, the town could become abandoned again...

That was why I made my choice.

"Cath! We're going after it!"

"Meow!"

"Kobolds, defend this point! Mataza and Liber, that goes for you too!"

"W-Woof! (B-But Milord!)"

"Woof! (Master!)"

"There's no telling whether it'll decide to circle back here in a hurry. It's got superior mobility, so this is the only option. Please understand."

"Woof... (If you insist...)"

"Woof. (Please be careful.)"

I nodded to the pair and ran off with Cath.

* * *

Partway, the ishkitini landed on the ground and undid its transformation for some reason. But judging from its expression when it turned around, it could sense us.

“Cath? You look like you’re not sure if the two of us can really win on our own. Have a little more faith.”

“Meow…”

“It was just the two of us back then too. But we’ve changed. We aren’t just running away anymore! Let’s do this!”

And so the battle began.

Because the kobolds had already dealt a lot of damage, the ishkitini’s movements were duller than I’d expected. In addition, we’d grown much stronger. It probably still thought of us as nothing more than its prey. But we really had changed, and the monster was gradually losing its cool.

“This is the end!!!”

“Meooooow!!!”

I stabbed the ishkitini’s stomach, and Cath cut off its head…and at last, the ishkitini crumpled. It hit the ground with a loud thud, but we still approached it with caution. Once we’d confirmed that it was definitely dead, I let out a huge sigh of relief.

“WE DID IT!!! We did it, Cath!”

“Meow! Meow!”

We rejoiced.

Then…

“Well done, you two.”

Someone suddenly popped out from behind the trees.

“Who’s there—Wait, Aht?! Is that you?!”

“Meow!”

It was the Holy Maiden Aht Heresy, whom we had parted with just two months ago.

“It has been a long time. Your humble servant, Aht, has returned.”

“You’re…not an imposter. Your aura is the real deal. But I thought you said you wouldn’t be back for a year?”

“Regarding that…”

Aht proceeded to explain to me everything that had unfolded over the last two months. It was a shocking tale. She had single-handedly overthrown the Church. To be more precise, she’d killed the <Holy King> and usurped his throne. *She* was officially the

<Holy King> now.

She apologized to me for this. “It would be far more appropriate for *you* to accede to the <Holy King>’s throne. I must beg your pardon…”

“No, I really don’t have any interest in becoming the Church’s highest authority at this point…or in the <Holy King> skill. Honestly, what you’ve just told me makes me afraid of it…”

Aht hastily tried to persuade me otherwise. “Good heavens! Master Noah, your <Holy King> skill is by no means wicked!”

“But it could turn me into a <Demon King>, right?”

“That’s…just the claim of a pretender,” Aht said, puffing out her cheeks.

Seeing that, I couldn’t help but laugh. “Ah ha ha!”

“I-Is something the matter?”

“Nothing! I just thought you were cute.”

“Wh-What? I’m…*c-cute?!*”

“You *are* cute, Aht. And you’re my number one…ally. Oops, actually, Cath’s number one. But you’re my number one human ally!” Cath had clawed at me halfway through, so I hurriedly corrected myself.

“I’m…number one? I-I’m so happy to hear that…”



“Hey, don’t cry.”

“Your trust in me makes me feel so, so very—”

“All right, I get it. Well, I’ve got you by my side. I’m not gonna become a <Demon King>. That’s all I wanted to say.”

“Master Noah… You are right. In fact, even if you were to become a <Demon King>, I would remain at your side.”

“Come on, at least *try* to stop me. But I have to admit, being the lord of monsters doesn’t sound too bad.”

“Now that you mention it…simply possessing the title does not necessarily mean that you are obligated to destroy humanity,” Aht said with a look of sudden realization.

“Exactly! Did the Church’s <Holy King> really not consider that? He just decided that the Demon King is a destroyer of humanity. He must’ve gotten more narrow-minded with old age.”

“That could be true… Yes, I’m certain that must be the case!”

“Yeah! All right then, now we’ve got nothing to worry about! We’ll head back for today and have a feast. It’ll double as a celebration for your return, Aht.”

And so we went back to town.

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When we got back, the kobolds were still on alert. But once we showed them the ishkitini’s carcass we’d brought back, everyone was relieved. Kuzan and his companions had become aware of the situation after we exited the town, and were there too. They were dumbfounded when I told them that we’d defeated it, doubly so once I introduced them to Aht. I told Kuzan alone that she was one of the Church’s Holy Maidens and would soon assume the seat of the Church’s highest authority, so he was especially struck.

I talked to everyone else about plenty of other matters as well. The most important thing was the question of what we would do now, but Aht had already taken care of my biggest worry. I was asked whether I’d return to House Olipiage…but I told them that I planned to keep living here.

Although the Church was no longer after me, I’d still been expelled from the Duke’s family once already. Even without the Church’s meddling, my father’s political enemies were sure to have plenty to say if I came back. Thus, I planned to stay here and at

least exchange letters with them occasionally. I could probably even go visit them or have them visit me freely, now that the situation had changed.

I'd told Kuzan that he could head back too, but he said that he would remain here. He wanted to help this town develop so that one day, it'd be as big as Midrogue...

We were free to dream.

In any case, this is how we intend to spend our lives here. Maybe one day, my <Holy King> skill will make me into a <Demon King>...but as far as I can tell, Cath and the kobolds don't want to be enemies with humans. That's why I believe that we can keep making friends with monsters in the future.

Side Story: Liber’s Impatience

It had been some months since Master Noah vanquished the wicked ishkitini monster.

“Things have calmed down here quite a bit. But there’s still a ton left to do…”

Master Noah muttered in the office of an administrative building that was annexed to the town’s chapel. The town development was moving along as planned.

I, Liber, asked him about this. “Woof? (What has to be done?)”

Noah thought for a moment, then nodded. “Hm… There’s plenty, but cleaning up around town comes first. Luckily, our publicity worked out and we’ve gotten a lot more people coming in, but not enough houses for them. Our area just isn’t that big in the first place, so we need to clear some more land. We’ll also have to purchase or build more kinds of equipment.”

“W-Woof… (That certainly sounds like a lot…)”

I shuddered from the sheer number of chores he could think of offhand. I knew that Master Noah’s workload had increased significantly since becoming mayor of Asyl, but hearing the specifics instilled in me a new understanding of how hectic it must have been for him.

Thus I said, “Woof, woof, woof woof! (Master, if there’s anything we can do to assist, please call upon us at any time!)”

We kobolds had survived to this day because we had fought against, been saved by, and then were trained by Master Noah. From my perspective, it was only natural that we should follow his commands and work for his sake.

But Master Noah simply gave a strained smile. “You’re all doing plenty for me already, so there’s no need to push yourself even further. Besides, right now, it has to be humans doing the administrative stuff related to the town’s development. I don’t think I can give you a job there. I could ask you to cut down the forest…but there are still a lot of strong monsters around. The hunts you’ve already been doing are fine, but I’m still leery of having you work on clearing the forest for lengthy periods.”

After that, Master Noah was called away by someone and left the office. But as he was going, he told me, “Give me some time to think about what job I can give you. Right now, the only things for you are hunting for food and taking on adventurer quests. It must be getting monotonous, but I’ll have something for you eventually.”

He said this and exited, leaving me alone there. Of course, I had nothing to complain about…

“Woof… (Is there nothing we can do to aid Master Noah now?)”

…but I couldn’t deny feeling unneeded.

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I suddenly had an idea. *I just have to make it so I* can *be of use to Master Noah!* Not knowing what I should do in order to achieve this, I decided to call upon someone who would likely have sound advice.

“Oh my, if it isn’t Miss Liber. Is something the matter? You appear rather dispirited.”

This was Lady Aht. She was one of the Church’s Holy Maidens, and had just recently become the organization’s highest authority, the <Holy King>. She was a remarkable person. But Lady Aht was concerned about Master Noah. She had apologized to him, feeling guilty that the name of her position was the same as his root skill. Of course, Master Noah was not the sort of person to be distressed over something so minor, so he had insisted that he didn’t mind at all. This only reinforced Lady Aht’s deep reverence for Master Noah.

“Woof woof… (I feel fine, but I just talked to Master Noah, and…)”

I summed up what had just happened. Lady Aht gave a look of understanding. She then gently smiled and beckoned. She had me sit on her lap, then hugged me. She smelled nice, and her softness made me feel relaxed. She patted my head and spoke to me in a lilting voice.

“I understand. However, there is no need for you to be so tense. After all, our greatest worry has already been resolved.”

I instantly knew what she was referring to. “Woof? (You mean the Church of Astral?)”

“Correct. As you know, the Church had been persecuting Master Noah, but all of its workings are in my control now. Therefore, we can all lead a peaceful, leisurely life here.”

“Woof, woof… (I know, but…)”

We had once spent our days in the Purgatory Forest, where tomorrow was never a certainty. Now we could live cheerfully under the open, sunny sky, without having to worry about finding enough food or getting attacked by monsters. I should have been satisfied by that. But perhaps I had become much greedier than I once was. Peaceful living wasn’t enough anymore…

“Woof, woof. (I want to be of use to Master Noah.)”

Yes, that’s it, I was reminded once I put it into words. *My current goal is to help Master Noah however I can.*

Lady Aht nodded. “I see. I am the same way, so I understand how you feel. However, if you were to say the same thing to Master Noah, I’m sure he would say that you and the other kobolds are of great aid to him already.”

“Woof, woof woof. (But Master Noah seems so busy. We must not be helping him enough.)”

“Is that really so? Your group is to thank for thinning out the monster population in the vicinity, and you regularly secure materials from them as well. Maintaining the town’s food supply is still a concern, and your work is crucial in that respect.”

“Woof? (Do you really think so?)”

“Yes. Truthfully, I would like to assist with that as well, but I must go back and forth between here and the Church headquarters. If anyone is not pulling their own weight, I believe that would be me.”

“Woof! (That’s not true!)”

“Eh heh heh, really now? I hope you’re correct.”

“Woof, woof woof, woof. (Master Noah loves you, Lady Aht, so I’m sure he’s happy just to have you near.)”

“Gracious… That is very heartening to hear. But I believe the same can be said for you, Miss Liber.”

“Woof? (Huh?)”

“Master Noah holds all of the kobolds dear. Naturally, he values all the new residents of this town as well, but I believe he still considers Miss Cath and the kobolds his greatest priority. You were the ones who lent Master Noah your strength when he was

alone in the Purgatory Forest, after all. That is my understanding, at least. Miss Liber, you wish to solve this town's problems alongside Master Noah, correct?"

"Woof. (That's right.)"

"I believe you are already accomplishing that…but if you wish to strive further, then it may be wise to start with what you are capable of." Lady Aht made a spontaneous suggestion.

"Woof? (What I'm capable of?)" *What would that be?* I wondered.

"Let me see… You could help everyone else with *their* tasks, for example. Master Noah's job as mayor involves a large amount of paperwork that he must review himself, so that may not be an option. However, there are other people working for the town's sake. You may find it easier to assist Lord Forneus, Sir Kuzan, or Lady Merikur."

"Woof! (That's it!)"

"Other than that, you could surmount a labyrinth with me. As I've told you before, strength comes in many forms. However, it would be wise for you to gain physical strength in order to cut down the forest. If I were able to stay here permanently, I could lead the kobold effort to clear the land, but as I must travel to the Church headquarters each month, that is a tall order at present. I believe it would be best to have you take charge of that mission instead, Miss Liber. Would you care to try any of these ideas?"

Lady Aht had supplied me with a wealth of options. I answered her affirmatively. "Woof! (I'll try them all!)"

"Oh my, you *are* a greedy one. I would think even just one would be sufficient. However, you cannot be sure which will suit you best without trying each one first. In that case, since exploring a labyrinth with me will require considerable energy, we can save that for last. Please try the other tasks first. I must return to the Church for today, but please tell me of your results when I come by again tomorrow."

Lady Aht petted me one more time, then departed for the Church.

"Woof! (All right, I'll try my best!)" I psyched myself up. I had figured out what I needed to do, and I was going to get it done.

* * *

“Woof! (Lord Forneus!)”

The first person (or rather, spirit) I visited was in the basement of the town chapel. This was where Forneus, a being worshipped in this town since long ago, resided.

“Hm? Who is it? …Ah, Miss Liber.”

The artificial spirit who resembled a sheep-horned beastman glanced over at me.

They had a meager presence and apparently could only be seen by Master Noah and us, his followers. We hadn’t been able to see them at all initially, but that had suddenly changed once Lord Forneus became another follower of Master Noah. It had been quite the shock. According to Master Noah, they had a foul personality, but possessed special powers that even Master Noah and Lady Aht couldn’t use. I’d had the opportunity to witness this once, and they were indeed just as astonishing as Master Noah had claimed.

“Woof! Woof! (Yes, it’s Liber! I was wondering if there’s anything I can help you with!)”

“Oh, so you’re here to help out. You kobolds sure are affable…unlike Noah. Okay then. I’m about to go out of town, so you should come along with me.”

“Woof (All right!)”

Just as they had suggested, I accompanied them to a spot in front of the forest.

“I’m going to create a spring for drinking water here. I want you to test the water’s flavor.”

“Woof?! (You’re doing *what*?!)”

“Why are you surprised? You’ve seen me do this before. Like this,” Lord Forneus said, raising their hand. Some of the forest’s trees, as if they had suddenly gained sentience, pulled up their own roots and walked away, heading off to who-knows-where.

Actually, they seemed to be headed to the town’s sawmill, where their kindred were being processed into lumber. The trees were walking themselves all the way over there. It was stunning.

The ground where the trees had formerly been rooted slowly caved in until there was a depression about as deep as I was tall. The hole was quite large, about ten meters long on each side. Then, with a brisk wave of Lord Forneus’s hand, water began to bubble up from the middle of the hole.

This was a miracle that no mere magic could have created. Magic could generate water, but it couldn't produce a permanent water source. Lord Forneus had done the impossible.

"Okay, seems fine. There's a plentiful supply of water around here, so it was simple enough to draw it out. You've all been sending me prayers lately, so at this rate I should be able to open up more land. The town's population will increase, and my faith will flourish. Heh heh heh, it won't be long before I'm more powerful than ever before…" Forneus smiled ominously. But when they saw me staring at them, they said, "Ah, hold on. Don't get me wrong. I don't have the slightest intention of betraying Noah, all right? Because of the contract, I couldn't even if I wanted to. So I'd appreciate it if you don't tell him about this."

"Woof woof woof (Master Noah trusts you, so rest assured!)" I said.

For some reason, this made them look disquieted.

"I hate how much nicer that makes him sound in comparison…though that's an overdue observation. Even I have to concede that Noah is very generous." They sighed. "Well, enough about that. Miss Liber, it looks like there's enough water pooled up now. I've made it so that when enough is pooled, the nonpotable elements will be purged, so it should be safe. Give it a taste and tell me what you think."

"Woof! (All right!)"

I crouched down, scooped up some water, and brought it to my mouth. The cool, clear spring water tasted pure and delicious. I told them my honest opinion. "Woof! (It's good!)"

Forneus smiled. "I'm glad to hear it. This should be fine, then. I'll probably have to get Noah to do one last check, but if this gets me more believers, it's plenty of cause for celebration. I'll negotiate with him about naming it 'The Spring of Forneus.' Well then, Miss Liber, that's all I need from you. You're free to go."

"W-Woof? (Huh? Already?)" I asked, surprised.

Lord Forneus tilted their head. "Hm? Well, yeah. This alone consumes quite a bit of power. I won't be able to perform any more miracles for the rest of the day. Or would you care to laze about the chapel with me?"

"Woof… (I'll have to decline…)"

"Thought so. Okay, I'm going to go sleep in the chapel

basement. If Noah wants to talk, tell him to save it for tomorrow. Phew, I'm so drained."

With that, Lord Forneus returned to their quarters.

"W-Woof... (Oh no, now I'm jobless again...)"

Realizing this, I went out to find another task that would hopefully suit me.

* * *

"Oh? Aren't you..."

"Hey, it's Liber. Wazzup?"

There sat a young man and a dwarf girl. The young man was Sir Kuzan. He was Master Noah's best friend and had once served as an esquire to his family. Sir Kuzan still considered Master Noah as his lord, but as Master Noah had asked him to speak to him casually, he no longer used formal language with him. The dwarf was Lady Merikur, the sole blacksmith in town—and an industrious one at that.

"Woof woof! (I wanted to know if there's anything I can do to help you!)"

But the pair replied...

"Hmmm, I can't think of anything personally. I guess there's this mountain of paperwork, but are you up to it?"

I could see a huge stack of documents atop Sir Kuzan's desk, which he was reviewing and signing.

"Woof... (I can't read human writing that well yet...)"

"Oh right, you're still studying. How about you, Merikur?"

"Me? I've got enough hands already. In fact, a couple of kobolds came to me pretty recently. They want me to teach them blacksmithing, so I'm taking them on as provisional apprentices."

"W-Woof?! (Wh-What?!)"

"You didn't hear about it? Well, they told me that they couldn't fight as well as you kobold soldiers, so they want to at least make themselves useful by crafting weapons. I think they wanted to keep it a secret till they got good enough. But that'll take a while, so it'd only be a matter of time until you found out anyway. Just pretend like you don't know for now. It'd suck for them to lose their motivation so early."

"Woof, woof? (I understand. Is there nothing I can do for you,

then?)”

“Well, it’d be putting them in trouble if you came around now. I’ll ask you some other time.”

“Woof. Woof. (I see. I’ll take my leave, then.)”

I then trudged back the way I’d come.

* * *

The next day, I headed to where I’d agreed to meet with Lady Aht.

“Woof woof… (It’s so hard to be helpful…)” I thought out loud.

When I arrived, she beckoned to me and put me on her lap, as I’d expected. As she stroked my head, she asked, “You still appear dispirited. Did you not find any success yesterday?”

“Woof… (Well…)”

I summarized what had happened.

Lady Aht tilted her head. “I fail to see the issue.”

“Woof? (Huh?)”

“You were of use to Lord Forneus, correct? They’re creating infrastructure for the town per Master Noah’s orders. Therefore, you’ve been of use to Master Noah as well.”

“W-Woof woof… (B-But all I did was sip some water…)”

“Lord Forneus is a spirit, much akin to a demigod. While they are probably able to eat, their sense of taste may be different than a human’s. They also may be immune to things that would be poisonous to a human. Either way, as they seem to be an innately indolent being, they would be loath to seek help. The very fact that they requested your aid is evidence that it was necessary.”

“Woof? (Is that so?)” I had been under the impression that they had just come up with something to keep me placated. But apparently, I had indeed been essential.

Lady Aht continued. “In the cases of Sir Kuzan and Lady Merikur…I suppose there was nothing to be done there. But if Sir Kuzan is aware that you’ve been practicing reading and writing, he must be considering employing your services with his work once you’ve learned more. As for Lady Merikur, ever since she saw you fighting at the very forefront, she’s taken the initiative to study new techniques. Given all this, anyone would say that you’ve been a great help.”

“Woof, woof… (That’s good to hear, but I’m not very strong…)”

“Gracious, you’re not confident in your own ability?”

“Woof woof, woof. (Well, I didn’t come along to exterminate the ishkitini.)”

“True, but the kobolds’ mission of defending the town was just as vital. Therefore, it’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“Woof… (B-But…)”

“But you still wish to become stronger?”

“Woof (Yes!)” I heartily nodded.

Lady Aht thought for a little while, then spoke. “I understand. If that is the case, then we should definitely go to a labyrinth together. It will be just the two of us this time. There are no suitable labyrinths nearby, so we will need to travel a ways out. I’ll inform Master Noah that I’ll be borrowing your assistance for a month’s time. I will provide the necessary equipment and tools. Take this time to gather your things, say your goodbyes, and make yourself ready. We’ll meet here again in one hour,” she said without pausing, then left.

She had probably gone to report to Master Noah, as she’d said. She was *serious*. She meant to do exactly as she’d said. So I scrambled to my feet and quickly started on my preparations.

* * *

“AWOOOOOOO!!!” I howled in the depths of a labyrinth. I held two daggers in my paws, the blades of which were wet with blood. A giant minotaur lay unmoving on the ground. I had been engaged in combat with it until just now.

Someone approached me from behind, clapping. “Well done, Miss Liber. You’ve officially graduated. How do you feel?” Lady Aht congratulated me with a smile.

I responded, “Woof woof. Woof woof. (I feel as if I’ve grown stronger, but at the same time, it feels like I haven’t changed at all. It’s peculiar.)”

She giggled. “Is that so? Well, that’s only natural. Miss Liber, you’ve likely become the strongest of all the kobolds in Asyl. You’re capable of fighting even an ishkitini, to a degree. You’re certainly not proficient enough to fell one on your own yet, but eventually, I would like for you to grow that strong.”

“Woof woof… (I still have a long way to go…)”

“The art of war cannot be mastered in a day. I want you to gradually step up with periodic combat training, as you’ve just done. With that said, Miss Liber…”

“Woof? (What is it?)”

“This alone cannot help anyone.”

Her phrasing sounded callous, but I understood what she meant by it. So I replied, “Woof, woof… (Yes, I think I was mistaken to pursue only strength…)”

“As long as you understand. Still, you’ve been of great aid to Master Noah to date, and I’m certain you will continue to be so. You can return to town with your head held high. You understand that as well, yes?”

“Woof arf… (I still don’t have the confidence…)”

“I see. But it’s all right to take things a little bit at a time.”

“Woof? (Huh?)”

“Nothing good comes from being too impatient. I’ve sped through my life and accomplished many things, but I’ve never been more happy than when I am spending time peacefully by Master Noah’s side in Asyl. I believe you should focus not on whether you are useful or not, but on what makes you content. You are happy to be with Master Noah, correct? Is that not sufficient?”

“Woof? Woof… (Happy? I suppose I am happy…)”

“Then you should strive to preserve that feeling. That’s all you have to do, in my opinion. Asyl has many people with diverse skill sets now. Each person should do what they are capable of. So don’t fret excessively, and simply savor the happiness you have now. That is what I am endeavoring to do as well. Miss Liber, please do the same and be at ease.”

“Woof… Woof. (You’re right… I was probably overthinking things.)”

Lady Aht’s words had thoroughly convinced me. Yes, I had been too impatient. So many onerous events had occurred in sequence that left me feeling as if this happiness would quickly escape my grasp if I didn’t constantly toil away. But the majority of my worries had been dispelled by Master Noah and Lady Aht. That being the case…all I had to do now was enjoy life.

Afterword

Hi, I'm Yu Okano. It's been a while. How are you, readers? I'm doing well.

As you're probably already aware, this second volume concludes the story. While it's saddening, I hope you had lots of fun.

Thinking back to when I first started writing this story, I had aimed to make it about one volume long. Then I came up with more, so it turned out much longer than planned.

Those who have already read through the book may feel that the ending is relatively abrupt, but that was how I had intended it from the start. However, when I was writing the web version, various elements of my initial concept became intertwined and ended up drawing out the story. The plot is a long way off from what I first had in mind before I'd started to write. The published version is closer to what I'd originally planned, and keeps that abruptness, so I don't think it feels out of place.

However, the published version was based on the web version, so there's leftover foreshadowing and unsolved mysteries. While I regret this, I intend to resolve things in the web version. If you have the time, I recommend you take a look there. Regardless, I'm happy to see the story to its tentative conclusion with the release of this volume. This is completely different than the slated ending for the web version, which is still ongoing. I hope you'll enjoy this version in its own right.

On one final note, I'd like to thank all the readers who enjoyed this work and the people who worked hard to get it published. I'm going to keep writing in the future, so if you see Yu Okano out there somewhere, I'll appreciate your support.

May we meet again.

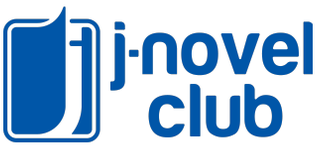

?
Thank you for reading all the way through!
TAPIOCA
The Skeleton King is so cool...!
BONE...

Volume 2 Character Designs




"Meow."
Katarina heard an animal cry, and a moment later, she bumped her nose into an invisible wall. She could tell it was probably some kind of magical barrier. She could also tell that despite being robed, her presence had been detected. Her face turned pale.
She knew that this was the end for her. But then she heard a weirdly nonchalant voice say,
"Cath? What's up? ..Hm? A girl?"
Katarina raised her eyes and saw a boy around her age standing there, looking down at her.


"This will finish you off!"
I couldn't get a clear look because of the armor, but through the gaps I could just barely see that there was a mana stone in its torso. Mataza had noticed it as well. His spear pierced straight through to it. All of a sudden, the skeleton king started to wobble, and its movements lost dynamism. It was as good as gone. Just for good measure, I came up to it and swung my sword.



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The Exiled Noble Rises as the Holy King: Befriending Fluffy Beasts and a Holy Maiden with My Ultimate Cheat Skill! Volume 2
by Yu Okano

Translated by Alex Honton
Edited by Austin Conrad

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