
NOVEL
11
THE Strange Adventure OF A Broke MERCENARY
WRITTEN BY Mine • ILLUSTRATED BY peroshi

Table of Contents

Color Gallery
Title Page
Copyrights and Credits
Table of Contents Page
Prologue: A Wrong Choice to a Reunion
Chapter 1: Hell to the Request
Chapter 2: Acceptance to Consideration
Chapter 3: Laying Web to Spraying Down
Chapter 4: The Problem to Old Sentiment
Chapter 5: Discussion to Pursuit
Chapter 6: Progress to Arrival
Chapter 7: From Funeral to Conjecture
Chapter 8: A Result to Seal Away
Epilogue: An End to Sleep
Bonus Story: From the Notes of a Certain Priest
Newsletter



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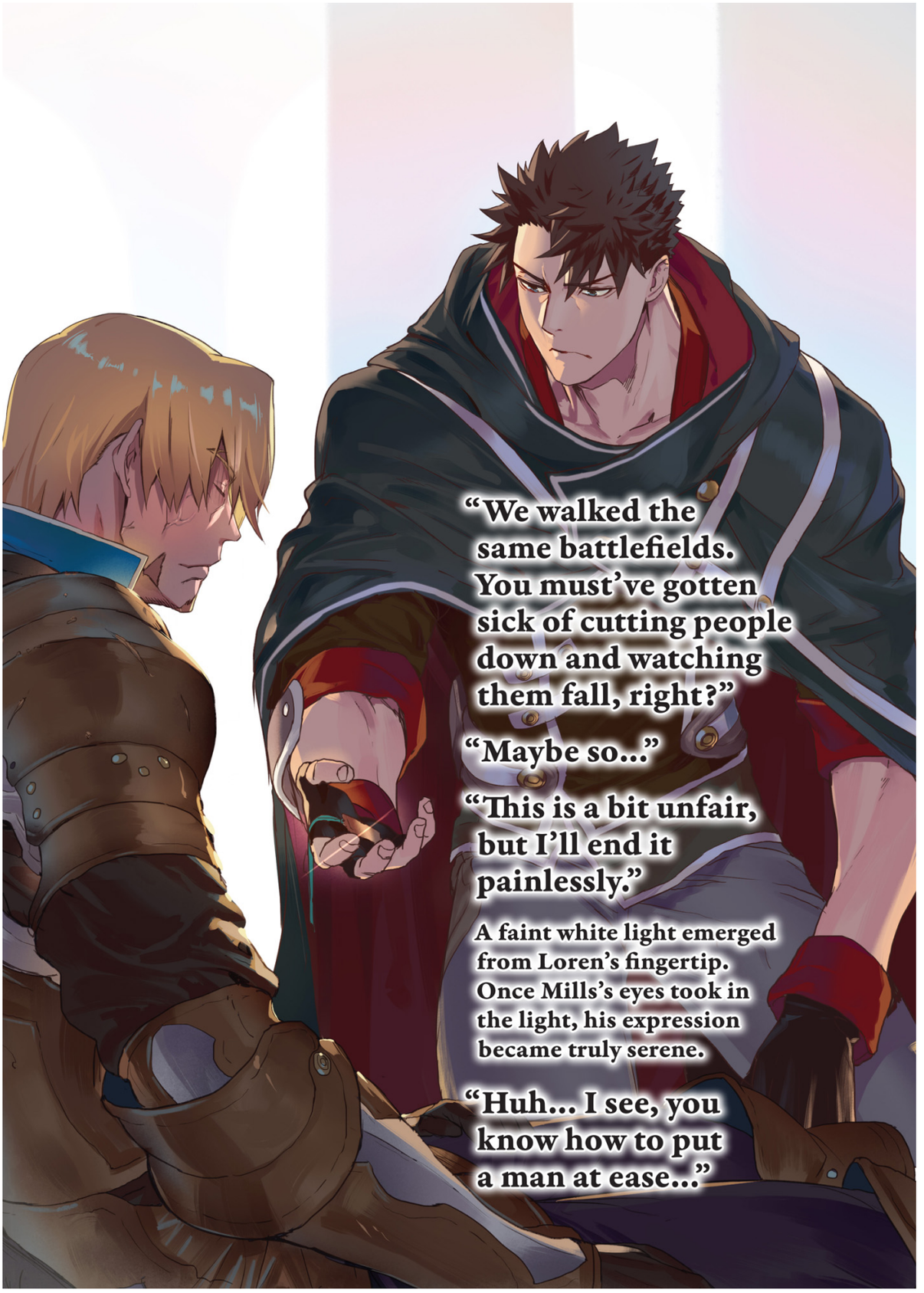
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"You want to ask about Envy Bridgeguard, don't you?"
Loren nodded heavily.
"Well, that's me."
"No, it isn't! I know all our faces!" Gula declared, slamming her glass down on the round table as she thrust a finger at Ivy.
"The Envy I know? She's got short blonde hair and purple eyes that look totally dead. She didn't have a shred of that capable receptionist air you're givin' off."
"You'd really say that to my face! That kinda stings..."
"That's how I remember Envy too. You don't resemble her in the slightest."


“We walked the same battlefields. You must’ve gotten sick of cutting people down and watching them fall, right?”
“Maybe so...”
“This is a bit unfair, but I’ll end it painlessly.”
A faint white light emerged from Loren’s fingertip. Once Mills’s eyes took in the light, his expression became truly serene.
“Huh... I see, you know how to put a man at ease...”

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NOVEL 11

WRITTEN BY

Mine

ILLUSTRATED BY

peroshi



Seven Seas Entertainment

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THE STRANGE ADVENTURE OF A BROKE MERCENARY

Fantasie Geshichte von
Söldner in großer Armut

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE: A Wrong Choice to a Reunion

CHAPTER 1: Hell to the Request

CHAPTER 2: Acceptance to Consideration

CHAPTER 3: Laying Web to Spraying Down

CHAPTER 4: The Problem to Old Sentiment

CHAPTER 5: Discussion to Pursuit

CHAPTER 6: Progress to Arrival

CHAPTER 7: From Funeral to Conjecture

CHAPTER 8: A Result to Seal Away

EPILOGUE: An End to Sleep

BONUS STORY: From the Notes of a Certain Priest

Prologue:
A Wrong Choice to a Reunion

A RUMOR WAS SPREADING—a certain hot spring town, wiped out.

It started with a rumor that the spring water had become murky and toxic. Just as the town's finances were about to take a tumble, this tainted water was replaced by a pure, translucent stream. However, before the whole mess, the water had run milky white, which meant it had lost its special character. The cure had done little to alleviate the problem.

Isn't this unfolding a bit too quickly? Loren wondered.

It was as if the story had sprouted wings and flown across the world with terrifying speed. The tale reached Kaffa far quicker than he imagined possible.

That said, transparent water was still water; the town's facilities still worked, and with a little rebranding, they could rebuild as a splendid bath town. Rumor had it that the governing lord was making every effort to make this a reality.

From where he stood under a distant sky, Loren could only pray for her success. Presumably, he would never visit ever again.

After all, this transformation was a consequence of a job he and his party had accepted. It wasn't like Loren had purposely done anything wrong, and he didn't think the lord was about to extend her reach to distant lands to deliver unto him a smack. But there was no guarantee she would resist the urge if they were to meet face to face.

Even though we seriously didn't do anything wrong, Loren thought. A tapping on his left made him shift his eyes to the black spider Neg, who had made a home on Loren's shoulder. For some reason, the spider was gently patting him with its two forelegs.

For a moment Loren found himself mulling over whether it was acceptable to be consoled by a spider. Still, he appreciated the concern. When he reached up to pat the spider's back, he got a few startled looks from passersby.

Come to think of it, people generally clock that Neg's dangerous, he recalled as he picked up the pace. A slow jog turned into a brisk one. His destination was the Kaffa adventurers' guild.

After all, another rumor was spreading—the guild in Kaffa, wiped out. Fallen to ruin.

I'll believe it when I see it, Loren thought. Word had reached him just as he was released from the hospital where he'd been bedridden thanks to the injuries sustained during his last job.

What was going on this time? He hurried down the streets and alleys to see for himself. Until then, it would remain a complete mystery. At the very least, it seemed to be true that the guild building wasn't in use; the numerous adventurers he spotted loitering around town seemed to confirm this. But when he asked them what had stopped them from working, they just gave him vague smiles.

If the guild was out of commission, Loren had big problems. He had absolutely no savings. Things were so tight that if he couldn't snag even a day's work, he'd have no food on the table—and there'd be no snagging of any work at all without the guild.

Mind you, he could always lean on his companion—a priest to the god of knowledge by the name of Lapis. That would mean falling deeper into her debt, but it was basically a given that she'd lend him money without hesitation. However, if he started turning to her for every little thing, that would be the end. He just couldn't do it.

After turning so many corners he'd lost count, Loren had nearly reached his destination. They said the guild had been "ruined," but a building in town didn't just fall apart for no reason.

It must be figurative, Loren thought. *So if I just get rid of whatever is making people throw that word around, the guild should be back in business.* He turned the last corner with that in mind. Yet what he saw around the bend nearly made him turn on his heel and sprint back down the path from which he'd come. For now Loren ducked back behind that last corner, only peeking his head out to observe.

The entrance to the guild looked no different. The sign still hung upon it, and the surrounding properties looked exactly as he remembered them. However, one feature of the landscape instantly drew his attention.

It was the pair standing in front of the door. Loren suspected it was one man and one woman, but he wouldn't have bet his life

on that. They were both just as tall as he was. What's more, their outfits were incredibly revealing, and their skin glistened in the midday sun with an unnatural sheen—like someone had slathered them in oil. They both had blond hair that was shorn close to the skull. And then there were the masks that covered their entire faces.

Their necks were thick and muscular. Their shoulders were rugged, their chests fearsomely hefty. One of them wore the bare minimum scrap of leather armor, which covered just the tips of their chest—which was why Loren suspected they were female—but the other one was completely topless.

As for their lower halves, both individuals sported leather bottoms so tiny that they only narrowly managed to cover the important bits. The thighs that extended from these hot pants looked like they had been chiseled from boulders. From the knees down, they wore boots, and from the knees to the hem, it was all sheer netting.

Meeting these folks right in the middle of the day induced some unique facial expressions. Meeting them at night might lead the weak-willed and children to squeak. At least, this was how Loren was starting to feel about this striking scene.

But are they really human? Loren rubbed his eyes.

"This is…quite foreboding…" a voice said, and at the same time, he felt a hand touching his back.

Loren turned to find Lapis, who was hiding in his own shadow just as he was hiding in the shadow of the corner. Behind Lapis was Gula, crouching and holding her head. As soon as Loren spied the latter, he strode over and plucked her up by the nape of her neck.

"Explain."

"H-hey there, Loren. It's nice and sunny today, ain't it…"

"Explain?"

Gula made no effort to hide that she was trying to change the subject, a fake smile on her face as Loren closed in. But she couldn't escape as long as he kept her suspended, and though her eyes wandered, she begrudgingly fessed up.

All this was, in fact, Loren's fault. They'd stumbled across something on their last venture—a vacation that had turned into a

job. The something had made Loren ask Gula to take care of something at the guild.

The accidental job had led Loren and his party to the ancient ruins where it seemed Gula and her fellow dark gods had been produced. Those ruins had ultimately been destroyed, but before that, they'd found the names of all seven dark gods, and one had sounded strangely familiar to Loren.

The Dark God of Envy, Envy Bridgeguard.

Loren didn't know anyone with the given name Envy, but he had heard "Bridgeguard" before.

However, Loren only figured out where he knew it from once he was hospitalized. Instead, he'd asked Gula to have someone watch the guild. It wasn't like she'd looked like she had anything better to do.

Surely the individual in question couldn't have realized that Loren had caught on. But if they heard the facility had been compromised, they might well run away before Loren could catch them. As Loren gazed upon the current situation, he realized he had quite clearly picked the wrong person.

"I'll ask, just in case...but who exactly did you send?"

"Luxuria."

"Oh, come on!" Loren dropped Gula's neck only to seize her by the lapels and shake. "Of all the people you could've gone to, why that guy?!"

Actual strength aside, Loren was of substantially larger physique, and there was little Gula could do. Her feet left the ground as she was helplessly jostled.

"Hey! Wait! Loren! My bra's gonna slip! You're gonna see! They're gonna come out!"

"Shut up! You did it on purpose, didn't you?! It must have been on purpose!" Loren howled as he looked at Lapis.

But the moment Gula had dropped that name, Lapis had gone blank. She stared at Loren and the woman in his arms with utter disbelief.

"I didn't mean to!" Gula protested. "He was the only one who looked bored enough to do it—and he actually listened to me!"

Just as Gula was known as the Dark God of Gluttony, Luxuria was the Dark God of Lust. The problem, however, had nothing to do with his status as a dark god. Loren had in fact specified that he wanted a dark god to keep watch.

In hindsight, that was a dangerous request, he realized. But considering who he was on the lookout for, this task was beyond the skills of an ordinary adventurer.

"Sloth won't cut it, and Greed's just a kid, remember? If I don't do it, then Lust's all that's left."

"If you just need a watcher, why can't Sloth handle it?"

"You think *Sloth's* gonna do a proper job?" Gula said with all seriousness.

Point taken, Loren conceded, and decided to leave it at that.

Doing nothing and not *wanting* to do anything—that was the definition of sloth. It was safe to say the dark god of that vice possessed a similar mindset.

"So it was a huge mistake from the get go... But don't you have anyone else? I mean, who are those people at the door?"

"They're probably... Lust's apostles or retainers or something, I reckon."

"Didn't you say they were living the quiet life?"

The dark gods of lust, greed, and sloth had all at one point been at odds with Loren's party. Of her own volition, Gula had gone and gathered and housed them somewhere unbeknownst to him. That was just about all he knew on the matter.

It was a mystery how she'd tracked down Sloth—the first and last time Loren saw him, the god had said he was going on a wander, no particular destination in mind. Perhaps he'd run into Gula along the way.

In any case, Loren had been convinced the dark gods were tucked away somewhere safe, far from the world at large. However, if they were acquiring "apostles or retainers or whatever," that became hard to believe.

"They're keeping *relatively* quiet. Luxuria just founded himself a small cult is all. Compared to what he could be up to, that's positively cute."

"It ain't *cute*. Those two look like they can topple buildings."

“You should’ve seen him in his heyday. It’s cute now, trust me.”

“It ain’t. And I will die before I tell you otherwise,” Loren declared as he released her. He then realized he needed to do something about Lapis, who was still petrified, face pale. “Don’t worry, Lapis. You don’t have to come. I’ve just gotta catch someone who’s made me a mite curious.”

“Huh…?! U-umm, what?” It seemed even Lapis’s mind had frozen over. After a moment of silence, her hollow eyes shifted to Loren, and she finally regained herself.

This is serious, Loren thought. But he honestly couldn’t blame her. As the image of Luxuria surfaced in his mind, he placed a hand on Lapis’s shoulder. “You don’t have to see him if you don’t want to. I’ll tell you about it later.”

But while Loren made the effort to treat Lapis with calm understanding, a throaty voice spoke from behind: “Oh dear, that’s *terribly* rude. What exactly have I done to earn such treatment?”

Loren’s whole body twitched.

Given relative positions, he just *knew* Lapis had gotten an eyeful of what was behind Loren, and without warning. Her eyes widened as far as they would go, and her strength left her body. She would’ve collapsed if Loren hadn’t caught her.

“Finally revealed yourself, fiend…” Loren muttered without turning. Beads of sweat dripped down his face.

“Who’s a fiend?” the individual behind him indignantly protested. “Honestly, just the rudest.”

It’s not rude to be accurate, Loren thought, though he kept his mouth shut. He closed Lapis’s eyes, swallowed, and summoned his resolve before turning.

The man standing behind Loren was both taller and broader than he, and a thin mustache decorated the lips over his cleft chin. Fishnet shirt. Tight, black, leather pants. Wide eyes and a flirtatious look. Loren felt himself die inside.

“You asked for help, so I helped you. I expected gratitude, not this baseless disparagement.”

“Hold up!” Gula yelped. “You’re just making this harder. Can you maybe turn that way for a sec?” She hurriedly swiveled

Luxuria sideways, which did a good job of dampening the impact of his appearance.

Loren did his best to ignore both Luxuria's protests and Gula's scolding and instead focused on shaking some sense back into Lapis. She had, alas, gone completely stiff and had begun to foam at the mouth.



Chapter 1:
Hell to the Request

"SO, MR. LOREN. Is there anything you'd like to say to me regarding this *incident*?"

Lapis only regained consciousness a good bit after. As soon as she was up, she turned on Loren for an interrogation—and her eyes never deviated from his face. She made no attempt to look at Luxuria or Gula, who were also on hand.

Are you that opposed? thought Loren. But when he glanced to the side, he locked eyes with a certain wide stare. Then a wink.

Okay, he kind of understood where Lapis was coming from.

"Well, considering the foes we've faced thus far, I thought we might be up against something similar."

"I understand how you might have come to that conclusion, but *look* at this." Lapis thrust a finger at the guild's entrance. Loren could not find the words to refute her.

Sure, his party was still hidden behind a corner, but they'd been making so much noise that the blonds had to have noticed them by now. Yet their wide smiles never faltered. Were their faces stuck like that?

"Are there more of them inside?" Lapis asked, just barely glancing at Luxuria. Her movements were so stilted that her bones practically grated.

Luxuria had been pinned by Gula and forced to stare into unoccupied space. From that position, he nodded. "Of course. That building is chock full of my adorable pretties."

"I guess the adventurers' guild really was ruined," Lapis concluded, her shoulders dropping.

Again, Loren had no reply. He scratched his cheek, feeling quite troubled.

Sure, Luxuria is pretty striking at first glance, but he's not so bad once you acclimate, thought Loren. He certainly hadn't anticipated Lapis would be so shocked that she'd fall unconscious and drool all over herself. For the time being, he patted her on the back. "It's all about getting used to it."

“I don’t want to get used to it…”

Lapis’s dejected expression drew a wry smile from Loren.

“More importantly, Loren. How about you finish your business so we can throw ’em out? The guild’s gonna sue you for obstructin’ business at this rate,” Gula said.

Loren mustered his courage. He didn’t even want to imagine the hell that awaited within the guild, but unless he moved forward, a hell it would remain. At this rate, he would just be causing problems for everyone.

“All right, I’m off. Lapis, why don’t you go kill time somewh—”

“I’m coming,” Lapis interrupted. As she lifted herself up, she wore a look of desperation and despair. Then she clenched her fists with the eyes of someone staring down her sworn foe. Her gaze was, of course, directed at the adventurers’ guild door. “I can’t send you in there alone.”

“I’m not gonna be eaten or anything…”

“And what exactly will I do if you emerge glistening in body oil, Mr. Loren? I’m not sure I’ll survive it.”

Yeah, wouldn’t want that, Loren conceded.

‹Do you want me to cast energy drain over the whole building in advance, Mister? If there’s someone on par with a dark god inside, they should be able to endure it.›

In his head, Loren heard the voice of the girl who had resided within his soul ever since she’d been turned into an undead being. Owing to the risks entailed by her very existence, Scena didn’t usually rise to the surface, but she seemed to think her proposal was critical enough to warrant it. Though only for an instant, Loren felt himself being swayed.

Sure, letting her drain the building would leave them with a mountain of incapacitated bodies and only their desired target untouched. But Loren rejected the notion.

These men and women had come to lend him a hand. Sure, they looked pretty out there, but it would be far too cruel to knock them out just for that. It was at that moment that Loren realized something: rendering them unconscious wouldn’t even solve the fundamental problem of their shocking appearance. However, he

didn’t want to explain this to Scena—or the talk it might involve—so he just gave her the no go.

“I’m just gonna say it to be upfront,” Loren said to Luxuria. “No funny business, okay?”

Loren had hung around with Gula for so long that dark gods didn’t really register as inherently dangerous to him on an instinctual level. With that said, they were all still worthy of that grandiose title, and their true capabilities defied the imagination.

Luxuria nodded, his face turning just barely meek. “I understand.”

“I’ll give him a stern talking to, don’t you worry,” Gula insisted. It looked like she was going to actually take responsibility for once, and so Loren nodded to himself. He took the first step toward the door.

There was one more barrier he had to cross if he wanted to go inside—a muscular barrier made of man and woman. Loren gritted his teeth, making sure not to look too long at their uncanny, unflinching smiles as he pushed the door open. He still found himself wincing at the air that rolled out from it.

“This is pretty…”

Lapis understandably covered her face. The air was muggy, saturated with the stench of sweat and grease. That alone didn’t bother Loren, but it was mixed with a thick perfume, and the resulting concoction sent a chill down his spine.

He endured the encroaching odor and pressed on. The space was filled with countless men and women who looked basically identical to the ones standing out front. At this rate, even if an adventurer could endure the sight outside the door, they’d probably turn right back around as soon as they peeked inside.

Loren surveyed the dining hall, which was attached to the guild. The waitresses, who usually wove between adventurers while carrying trays of food, were huddled in a corner with white faces. The chairs were filled with pure muscle.

“This is terrible,” he muttered.

“And whose fault do you think this is?”

“Not mine, I’m sure about that.” Loren shook his head. *Yeah, I’m definitely not taking the blame for this one*.

Loren shifted his gaze in the direction he thought might lead him to the individual he was searching for. He homed in on the receptionist counter.

Under normal circumstances, this was where adventurers accepted quests and reported the results of quests once completed. But without a single adventurer to speak of, the receptionists were left idling in their seats and staring at what terror had become of their place of business.

Loren spotted a particular female receptionist wearing a troubled look. He made a beeline for her section of the counter. “Long time no see—well, it hasn’t been that long, I guess.”

“Umm… I’m not quite sure how I’m supposed to reply,” she said with a smile.

This was Ivy Brideguard, a receptionist with whom Loren had interacted with now and again. While her coworkers were by turns pale and petrified, she didn’t seem particularly impacted.

Loren placed an elbow on the counter, bringing his face slightly closer. “Do you know why I’m here?” he whispered.

“I could hazard a guess. After all, I did hear about your adventure into those ruins in the lands of beastkind.”

You’d expect nothing less from a guild receptionist. All sorts of information reached Ivy’s ears.

“You’re not gonna run?”

“I don’t see any particular reason to.”

“I guess not. It’s not like I’m here to nab you or anything.”

Loren didn’t plan on doing anything to a woman just because she shared a surname with the Dark God of Envy. He figured they were just related in some way or another. If she was going to share the info she had without a fight, he wasn’t going to start anything.

“Well, that speeds things up. I’ve just got one thing to ask. Answer, and we won’t have any trouble.”

“Indeed. However, I’m not sure I should answer right here and now.”

Loren scanned his surroundings. Lapis was on hand, and she was watching over the conversation with deep curiosity, as were Gula and Luxuria, who were both staring fixedly at Ivy. Something

felt a little off with the reactions about their looks—but Loren felt like Ivy was implying something else. He landed on the fearful guild staff and waitresses. Everything else was a sea of muscle.

Sure. Not wise to carry on the conversation here*. We'll need a new venue, then,* Loren thought. "Do you have a room?"

"Before that, would it be possible to remove these well-built ladies and gentlemen? I'm having a difficult time encouraging them to head on out… They all paid to register as copper-rank adventurers, you see."

Loren turned to Luxuria, who folded his arms in front of his hefty chest. He didn't seem to feel the least bit guilty. "Can you blame me? How could I possibly fill the guild floor with people who had absolutely no business being in the guild?"

"Maybe this town's guild really is ruined. Hell, maybe it ought to be."

Loren didn't know exactly how many adventurers were registered with the Kaffa guild, nor how many used its services. However, if so many folks had signed up that they now filled both the guild and the adjoining dining hall, that meant a large percentage of the guild's roster were now Luxuria's disciples. Perhaps wiping the guild's slate clean would be a better fate than leaving it like this in perpetuity.

Ivy smiled apologetically. "No, well—we would have a bit of a hard time if we lost our jobs just like that. I'd like to avoid that, if possible."

"If you don't revoke their registrations, you'll be drowning in muscle forever."

"I admit that at this density, it's a little maddening, but it would be perfectly fine if they were mixed in with the other members at a more reasonable ratio."

Is that how it works? Loren wondered. But Ivy sounded like she knew what she was talking about, so he decided to simply accept it, and he prayed that the brawny bunch would stick to their own kind for parties.

As Loren contemplated this future, Luxuria ordered his followers to disperse. They were soon on their way, having done their duty.

“That helps,” Ivy said. “We were having a bit of trouble operating under these conditions.”

“We’re the ones to blame. Sorry.”

“I…don’t blame you, I suppose.”

Ivy gave a few orders to the other receptionists, all of whom looked quite relieved to see their guild returning to usual operation. Then she stood from her seat, walked around the counter, and came straight up to Loren.

“I’ll pick the place, and you’ll foot the bill. How does that sound?” she asked.

“I’m the one with the questions, so it makes sense, but…”

Although Loren wanted to pay, he by no means had the coin to do so. Lapis held his purse strings. But once he looked to her for guidance, she shrugged.

“Nowhere too expensive, if you please,” she said.

“Of course. I’ll choose somewhere affordable on a receptionist’s salary. Shall we get going, then?”

Ivy took the lead and started off. Loren and his party chased after her and out through the doors adventurers’ guild.

Ivy led them to a place that was a touch too fancy for general clientele, but not so high-class that it catered to the upper crust. It was a moderately formal affair.

Loren’s party was armed, so they were stopped at the entrance and asked to leave their gear with the staff. However, the bigger problem was Luxuria’s attire.

“How about you just cover your top?”

Between his tight leather hot pants and fishnet shirt, he stuck out like a sore thumb. The host was rather reluctant to seat him.

Loren told him to comply with the establishment’s request—even if he didn’t care what the other customers thought. Luxuria pouted and embraced himself. “What’s not to love about me?”

“Well, I’d say everything. But I’ll start with the shirt that leaves nothing to the imagination. This isn’t just for the shop’s sake—be a little considerate to us too.”

Sure, Luxuria's appearance made an impression right off the bat, but constant exposure made anyone go numb eventually. The process was slow, but Loren had gradually grown accustomed to the view. He was more concerned for Lapis, whose eyes continuously wandered. At times, they flitted toward Luxuria, and each time, the volume of sweat on her brow increased.

At this rate, she'll conquer her fears sooner or later, Loren thought. But it was a bit much to expect the same from every other customer in the establishment.

"Even if you ask me nicely to cover up, I don't have anything else to wear."

"If we want to get him something, it'd have to be made to order..." Loren muttered.

After all, Luxuria was even larger than Loren, and Loren's large stature left his wardrobe eternally limited. At Luxuria's size, second-hand shops would be completely useless. He'd need something tailor-made. So even if they ran to a clothier, the chances of getting him something decent that fit were awfully low.

"Nothing to do about it," Loren concluded, ready to give up. "We'll have to go on without you."

At this, Luxuria covered his mouth with his palm and shook his head. "You say some terrible things, you know. I went so far to get you all the way to this point, and now you're going to kick me to the curb?"

"Please let me take a swing..."

"Control yourself, Mr. Loren. I understand how you feel, but bloodshed will be quite inconvenient at this stage."

Lapis took his arm before he could reach for the sword he'd handed to the restaurant staff. The first waiter had been overwhelmed by the weapon's weight, and the two holding the blade now could barely handle it. But when Loren reached toward them with a grim look on his face, they hurriedly made off to the room where the customers' belongings were stored.

Loren watched his sword disappear with frustration and regret.

Then Ivy, who had maintained a troubled yet powerless smile all this while, offered a suggestion. "If you pay for a private room, I think they'll let us in."

“That’s a bit…”

“Very well. I’ll cover the cost.”

Loren was well aware of the fact he had no say when it came to money. He deferred to Lapis, who seemed to see no point in loitering at the entrance any longer. She nodded and swept off to negotiate a price for the room.

Finally, when all was said and done, the party was led to a private space at the back of the restaurant. They each pulled up a chair and situated themselves around the table in the center. Meanwhile, Lapis placed an order for drinks and snacks.

“I’d like something especially nice to drink,” Ivy noted. “There are some things I’d rather not discuss while sober.”

“Don’t be greedy. Do you want your guild drowning in muscles again?”

“Ms. Lapis, wouldn’t that be a greater problem for you? I’ll cope.”

“Well if you’re not going to suffer with me…” After a click of her tongue, Lapis revised the drink portion of the order and took her seat.

A short while later, her order was carted in. Loren was impressed to see that the waiters who brought the food and drinks had no obvious reactions to Luxuria. This place had earned its price point—the wait staff was evidently impeccably trained.

Before anyone else made a move, Ivy filled her own glass, stood, and held it high. “Now then, everyone. How about we start with a toast?”

“What are we toasting to?”

Lapis poured a drink into Loren’s mug as Loren glared narrowly at Ivy.

“How about to our reunion?”

“Whatever,” Loren muttered, reluctant to play along.

But Ivy took that as an affirmative. Her glass still held out, she raised her voice. “Then here, to our fortuitous meeting!”

Loren and Lapis raised their cups with as little effort and enthusiasm as possible. Gula and Luxuria kept a firm hold of theirs as they continued to stare at Ivy’s face with expressions of intense concentration.

Paying no mind to these looks, Ivy pressed the lip of her cup to her mouth and downed the whole thing at once. She let out a satisfied sigh as she sat only to fill her cup again. “A fine drink.”

“Hence the price,” said Lapis.

Loren took a meager sip himself. Indeed, both the first sip—and the second—were totally unlike his usual swill. This beverage had a proper fragrance, and a sweetness that rolled over his tongue. He took his time swishing it around his mouth as he pondered the suspicious eyes of the two dark gods beside him.

Ivy was engrossed in her second cup, and he decided he would have to interrupt her.

“Can we get on with it?” Loren asked.

“Yes. You want to ask about Envy Bridgeguard, don’t you?”

Loren nodded heavily. He hadn’t known what he would do if this all turned out to be a wild goose chase, but her answer still took him by surprise.

“Well, that’s me.”

“No, it isn’t! I know all our faces!” Gula declared, slamming her glass down on the round table as she thrust a finger at Ivy.

Despite this rude display, Ivy stared back at her, completely unmoved.

“Are you trying to distract us with this nonsense?” Luxuria added. “Do you think that’ll work? Quit fooling around or I’ll squeeze it out of you.”

“Please don’t. We’ll be kicked out.”

As Luxuria approached, looking relatively serious, Ivy’s face turned cold and indifferent. But Loren didn’t miss the bead of sweat on her cheek—it seemed she still feared the thought of someone of Luxuria’s stature coming at her.

“The Envy I know?” Gula said. “She’s got short blonde hair and purple eyes that look totally dead. She didn’t have a shred of that *capable receptionist* air you’re givin’ off.”

“You’d really say that to my face! That kinda stings…”

“That’s how I remember Envy too. You don’t resemble her in the slightest.”

Loren had suspected that, at most, Ivy might be an acquaintance of the dark god's, or even a relative. Ivy's proclamation therefore came as a shock, and even more of a shock was that the other two dismissed it out of hand. He honestly didn't know how to react.

"Admittedly, I did look like that, once upon a time…" Ivy's gaze went faraway. She spoke slowly, as though gathering old, nigh forgotten memories.

Regardless of whether Loren wanted to believe her, he could only make a decision after hearing everything she had to say—so he shushed the two dark gods, who still wanted to argue.

"Back in those days, as a dark god, I envied everything in the world. And as a servant of the ancient kingdom, I hunted barbarians. But once I was free, I found I envied the kingdom, and so I waged war upon it."

According to Ivy, her authority as Envy was called *Morbid Jealousy*, and it enhanced her own abilities in proportion to how greatly she envied her foe. It was a "strengthening" skill, so to speak.

Relatedly, Gluttony's *Predator* and Lust's *Lust Dance* were "emission" skills. Meanwhile, Greed's *Greedy Robber* was classified as a "special" skill—at least, that was how Ivy categorized them. According to her, the dark gods had been classed into different types.

"Anyways, I fought battle after battle until the ancient kingdom fell. But our powers were so great that we found they were inevitably abused or made us objects of fear and hatred. That was when a certain adventurer persuaded me to let myself be sealed away, at which point I fell into a deep slumber."

"Is that how it went?" Loren asked Gula.

Gula took some sips from her cup while her eyes wandered here and there and she probed her memories. "Huh, yep. Well, you know how it is. Our very existence is pretty dangerous, right? And it was right after we'd taken down the kingdom, so who knows what could've happened. Some of us didn't like the idea, though, so they got real fussy about it."

"It's so long ago, I can't remember," Luxuria said with an idle tilt of his head.

This was, however, rather inconsequential in the grand scheme of things. So Loren left them to their thoughts and urged Ivy to go on.

“I’m no special case, really. My seal was released quite recently—I suspect it simply wore out. I woke up in the current era, but the world had changed considerably. I figured, in that case, shouldn’t I grow up too? I can’t just go around proclaiming myself a dark god forever, can I?”

Yeah, but is that something you can just stop being? Loren wondered.

At which point Ivy revealed something that made his eyes widen in shock.

“So, I went to some ruins I remembered and used my body to generate my current form, into which I transplanted my soul. With that, I managed to obtain a totally brand-new identity. Seeing as I had a new face, I decided to change my name too. From Envy to Ivy.”

She explained that she’d wanted to alter the Brideguard part too, but a dark god’s name was magically bound to their powers. It was then that she realized if she changed her name *too* much, she would no longer be able to control herself. But she also couldn’t just keep her old name, fearing it was still known and remembered. What she *could* do was alter it just a bit…and so Ivy it was.

“Making a body and transplantin’ a soul? Is that sorta thing even possible?”

“Yes, quite possible.”

“Hey, Ivy. For now, I don’t care that you’re a dark god or whatever. Can you give me some info on that ruin?” Loren asked, a grim look on her face.

The sudden change in topic, alongside Loren’s determined expression, left Ivy looking entirely bewildered. No one else seemed to know what he was thinking either, and they all turned to him as he continued to stare at Ivy, his face deadly serious.

Ivy wondered if she had misheard him. “Huh? That’s quite strange. I believe I just divulged something of incredible import, but you really don’t care about that?”

“Say you *were* the Dark God of Envy,” said Loren. “You changed your looks and name, right? So what does it matter now?”

“O-oh? I still have quite a bit of power left, you know… Admittedly, I can barely use my authority. I don’t really harbor much in the way of envy these days either.”

“See? It doesn’t matter. You’re at least less of a threat than these two. But that ruin you used to remake yourself is important. It, well… You’re saying that as long as you have the materials, it can make a new body and transfer a soul into it, right?”

“Yes, well, do you happen to know someone who would require such treatment?”

The moment Ivy spoke of this at all, Loren’s mind had turned instantly to Scena, the girl whose soul resided inside him.

Scena had once been the daughter of the ruler of a certain city-state. Unfortunately, during a certain incident (that Loren had unwittingly found himself involved in), she had been remade as a Lifeless King, the highest form of undead. At the end of her battle with Loren, she’d lost her physical form.

Since her astral self would have faded alongside her physical self, she’d hitched a ride in Loren’s body and now shared the space within him to maintain her being. But if Ivy’s ruins were still usable, perhaps Loren could build Scena a new body and transfer her into it.

“Sounds like you’ve got a lot on your mind. Does it have something to do with the strange aura you emanate from time to time?”

“What’s that got to do with it?”

Ivy studied Loren for any changes in his expression, and he raised his guard as soon as he noticed this. However, after staring at him a while, she shook her head. “It might not have anything to do with it. But I wouldn’t dare share anything about these ruins with anyone who might misuse them.”

“There’s a kid I want to revive. I’ve got her astral body right here.” Loren prodded his index finger against his chest. “It seems like she can keep herself going as long as she’s in there, but who knows how long that’ll last? If she can have a body, I want it for her.”

“I see, I see. But that kid inside of you…” For a brief moment, Ivy’s inquisitive eyes flashed purple, and Loren flinched back. Ivy pointed at Loren’s chest with a wry smile. “She’ s undead, right? And quite powerful too.”

“You can tell?”

One look and she was right on the money.

Proud that she’d managed to take Loren by surprise, Ivy triumphantly nodded. “I always strive to improve my own abilities—it goes with being a strengthening type. That includes my knowledge and insight.”

“Hey, did you hear that, you two?”

Gluttony and lust both had more to do with seeking external pleasures. *Maybe that’s why they don’t focus on themselves as much as Envy,* Loren thought as he turned to them.

“I’m an emission type. Don’t look at me,” Gula nonchalantly replied.

“I’m an emission type too,” said Luxuria. “We’re completely different. Don’t look at me like that.”

Neither seemed the slightest bit moved. Loren felt a tinge of anger, but he doubted he’d inspire either of them to pursue self-reflection even if he pointed out their shortcomings. It would be a waste of effort, so he returned his attention to Ivy.

“Even if you make a body and transfer the soul, I don’t think that can revive an undead… Ah, wait, I’m not really sure. The body would be a living one so… Umm…?” Ivy fell deep into thought.

“What’s wrong?” Loren asked.

Lapis answered in her place while taking a swig of liquor and a bit of a snack: “From what I can glean, the bodies this ruin produces are living bodies. Otherwise, there’d be no point to soul transplantation.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Undead entities possess no life force. They’re dead, so that should be obvious. The point is, if you insert one into a body that *does* have a life force, what do you think will happen?”

Loren had no way to know. As a mercenary turned adventurer, these technical queries were completely outside his

field of expertise. He didn't even have a cursory amount of relevant knowledge.

"This is just my estimation, but worst-case scenario, the body and soul will cancel each other out. They might erase one another."

"Rather," said Ivy, "isn't there a higher chance that if the undead entity is too strong, it'll only annihilate the body?"

"Yes, but that is not the *worst* case, as the spirit would still survive."

"But either way, I see no way to resolve this imbalance."

Closing her eyes, Lapis placed her cup on the table. "If the spirit is too strong, the body will fall apart. If the body is too strong, an undead's spirit will be destroyed. And if they possess equal strength, they'll quite possibly erase each other."

"Damnit... I guess it's never that easy..."

"But there won't be a problem if you implant her in a corpse."

Lapis explained that a corpse had already been depleted of its life force would therefore be compatible with a similarly lifeless soul. That said, the result would be a powerful undead being.

"That's not quite what you want, is it?" Lapis confirmed with Loren, who nodded.

Loren wasn't looking to kick Scena out or forge an independent Lifeless King. If possible, he wanted to return Scena to how she had been in life.

"If there is a chance..." Ivy said, turning to Loren. There was some unspoken thought behind her eyes, though he couldn't decipher it. She went on, "You see, I've never heard of an undead being preserved within the soul of a mere human. There's a chance this coexistence may have altered the nature of your undead companion's soul."

"You have a point. If the astral body within Mr. Loren were an ordinary undead, she would have the drive to feast on the living shared by all her kind. They would leave destruction in their wake no matter where they went."

As far as Lapis could tell, Scena had been incredibly docile while sealed away within Loren. Even when her powers did rise to

the surface, she didn't go on a mindless rampage; she deployed her abilities with a degree of rationality.

This proved that Scena still possessed some reason. It was entirely possible that she couldn't quite be defined as the same undead who indiscriminately devoured the warmth of the living.

"To be perfectly honest, we won't know until we try." Ivy leaned in a little closer, peering at Loren's complexion, her elbows pressed into the round table. "Knowing that, do you still want me to tell you about those ruins?"

"I do."

His immediate reply earned a surprised blink from Ivy. "Huh? Umm? Just like that?"

"I'll ask her personally whether she wants in, but for that, I need the info. How am I supposed to ask her what she wants if we don't have something to give?"

As it stood, if Loren asked Scena what she wanted, he feared she would demur so as not to cause trouble for Lapis or Gula. He needed the mechanism itself—needed to be standing right in front of the possibility. How would she answer if she stood in a place where she really might regain her body?

If, while standing there, she said she didn't want to go through with it, he'd simply have to keep searching. He would respect her choice either way. But before they could go anywhere, he needed the possibility to be tangible.

Meanwhile, Ivy had expected him to dwell on it longer, only to fall into silence at his rapid reply. Eventually, she realized just how dedicated Loren was to the matter. Her elbows left the table and she stood.

"Very well. Then I'll tell you. But I will be taking a fee for the information."

"I won't ask you anything else about dark gods. How about that?"

"That won't cover it. I'll answer any question you have on that count—that won't bother me whatsoever."

"So you want money?"

If she demanded coin, Loren would have to turn to Lapis again. Thankfully, Ivy did not nod.

“What I require at this juncture is labor. That’s how I’ll take my payment.”

“Can you be a tad more specific?”

“I’m telling you to pay with your body,” Ivy said with a smile.

At that instant, two things happened at once. To Loren’s left, Gula grabbed Luxuria by the neck and forced him into his chair before he could shoot to his feet. On his right, Lapis grabbed the fork she’d been using to eat—her movements so fluid and natural even Loren nearly missed them—and hurled it straight at Ivy.

Had the silverware continued its trajectory, it would have stabbed straight into Ivy’s brow. But Ivy’s movements were just as unnaturally fluid as she blocked the projectile with the glass in her hand.

The glass, a fork now sticking out of it, was returned to the -table. Ivy looked at Lapis, whose expression had turned grim—and Luxuria, whose face had, for some reason, also turned grim.

With a sigh, she murmured, “That was on me. My phrasing might have been a bit misleading.”

Ivy’s expression remained calm and composed, yet Loren detected a slight quiver in her fingers as she set the glass down. Lapis’s attack had been entirely in earnest.

“Spell it out for me,” said Loren. “As you can see, I can’t save you from yourself.”

“I would like you to take a quest from the adventurers’ guild. This one has been sitting around for a while, you see. I was just searching for the right person to assign it to.”

“Depends on the details. I’m not taking any jobs that ride on theft or murder.”

“The adventurers’ guild does not mediate crime,” Ivy pouted, looking genuinely offended. “The request is to investigate and search a particular town. If you take the job, I’ll provide you with information on the ruins on top of the reward offered by the guild. How does that sound?”

Loren, for one, had little choice but to accept. And Lapis didn’t seem keen on stopping him.

Chapter 2:
Acceptance to Consideration

"To wit, the quest I want you to take involves resolving an unusual incident in the town in question." After confirming Loren intended to take her request, Ivy dove into the details. "Are you aware of the blue desert that lies three days north of Kaffa by carriage?"

"Yeah, I know it."

The blue desert she spoke of was a place Loren had passed through before. His party had ventured there on the way to demon territory.

Apparently, it had been a testing ground for the ancient kingdom, and this experimentation had left the vast area buried in blue sand. Additionally, the sands concealed an ancient kingdom facility that Lapis used as a base of operations.

"If you head west for one more day after you reach the desert, you'll find a town called Suest. That's where I want you to go."

"And what are we supposed to do then?"

It would take four days just to get there. That distance was nothing to scoff at, and hopefully the request was pressing enough to warrant the time investment.

Ivy's face grew conflicted as she fell into thought.

Don't tell me she hasn't even decided what she'll make us do, Loren thought, glaring at her.

Ivy frantically waved her hands. "Oh, don't worry, your objective is clear. I was just mulling over how best to phrase it."

"Then let's start with the goal."

"Well, for starters, this quest was issued by the guild branch in Suest."

In short, Ivy explained, the quest hadn't just been sent to Kaffa. While it had originated in Suest, it had been issued to every branch in every decently sized town within a sizable radius.

The quest was related to frequent disappearances in Suest of both residents and adventurers. The local adventurers had tried to

resolve the incident themselves, but to no avail. Having determined that the issue was likely beyond their capacity to handle alone, they had requested support.

Seeing as Kaffa was four days from Suest, the Kaffa guild had originally wanted nothing to do with the quest. However, the adventurers sent from the nearer towns had to a one fallen out of contact—as if they had entirely vanished. At this point, they couldn't even contact the Suest guild.

Upon realizing the gravity of the situation, the adventurers' guild headquarters had sent out a notice for all towns a certain distance from Suest to send people to determine the situation. Even so, with the distance and the lack of information, few adventurers wanted to take the job, and none from Kaffa. The quest had been posted for a decent amount of time and was as yet untouched.

"So you want us to do something about this?"

"If I send an adventurer who just so happens to resolve the incident, my status within the guild will rise, don't you think?"

As of yet, no one above iron-rank had gone to investigate. But if the situation continued to drag out even with the cooperation of so many guild branches, HQ would be forced to take action. Inevitably, they would need to use one of their valuable silver or gold teams.

If Ivy were to find a resolution before it came to that, she would demonstrate her value to the organization as a whole. This would strengthen her position, and possibly lead to promotion.

"This is directly tied to my salary," she said.

"I'm not saying I don't understand your logic."

"If I want to live as a human, then I require funds. That's just how the world works."

"I get that. It's a harsh fact, but a true one."

Loren understood Ivy's argument, but that didn't make the quest any less off-putting. People were going missing without obvious rhyme or reason, and the adventurers who'd sniffed around for a cause had never returned. Ordinarily, this was the sort of thing he would never stick his head into.

But if the reward was information he absolutely required, he had no choice but to accept.

“Actually, I ought to note that the ruins you’re so curious about are near Suest.”

“So I was never gonna wriggle out of this.”

“You could say that,” Ivy replied with a chuckle.

For a while after that, Loren glared at her with narrow eyes. But at length, he spat out a sigh and shifted his gaze to Lapis and Gula. “You heard her. I’m taking the job. What about you two?”

As far as this request went, Loren was taking it because to him, it was necessary. However, he couldn’t drag either Lapis or Gula along on his account. Worst case, he was prepared to take it on alone.

“I’ll accompany you,” Lapis replied first. “You really needn’t ask.”

“I’m goin’ too. You can’t have all the fun.”

“Then I’ll—”

“I didn’t ask you.”

Swept along by the mood, Luxuria had been about to answer the call as well, only to be cut off at the knees by Loren’s cold words. Loren didn’t care what Luxuria wanted—he wasn’t about to even humor the idea of taking him along.

The power of lust was indiscriminate, for one, to say nothing of Luxuria’s pastimes. Loren didn’t for a second imagine that the man could contain himself. Worse, if he began to influence his surroundings again, he would be the nexus of an event to which Loren would be unable to bear witness. He needed Gula to haul Luxuria back to wherever she was sheltering the dark gods—no matter what.

“You’re dreadful. After dragging me into this, you’re going to kick me out just like that?!”

“Wouldn’t you say that it was more a mistake to involve you at all?” Lapis asked coolly.

Loren took his cue to stare levelly at Luxuria. “Your job’s to look after everyone you made register with Kaffa’s guild. At least keep them in check.”

“They’re adorable! What are you accusing them of?!”

“Well, everything, really. How about you take a look in the mirror?”

“What have I to learn from gazing upon my beautiful visage?”

Loren and Lapis were in fact wondering the same thing: *Is this bullshitting or what?*

But Luxuria’s face was utterly serious. They shared in a deep sigh.

“Anyways, you can’t go. I’m not about to cause trouble for another town.”

“You’re making it sound like it’s all right to trouble Kaffa, Loren,” Ivy scolded, but Loren saw it differently.

It wasn’t that it was fine to make a mess here. Rather, the damage was already done, and it was too late for Kaffa. At most Loren could ensure that Luxuria’s influence was contained. Thus, taking him along was out of the question.

“So, as I understand it: you, Lapis, and Gula will be taking the quest. Should I proceed with that assumption?”

“Gula, can we bring that sloth guy along? I get the feeling he can fight.”

“There’s no way Sloth would work. It would be hard to convince him, even harder to drag him, and he’d be totally useless. I’d say Greed’s better, but I don’t wanna babysit.”

“The dark gods are kind of a disappointment, huh. Fine, it’ll just be us three.”

If you turned a blind eye to appearance and personality, the most useful dark god was probably Luxuria. But that would mean ignoring some pretty pressing issues. Maybe Loren would be more able to put up with his nonsense once he’d grown used to hanging around the guy, but they definitely weren’t that close yet.

“Very well. Then on the recommendation of Ivy Bridgeguard, the iron-rank adventurer Loren and his party will be undertaking this quest. Furthermore, as this is a quest issued by a separate branch of the guild, a guild staff member will be dispatched to act as intermediary. You will be responsible for their protection.”

“Don’t tell me.”

“Why, yes. I’m the one arranging this sojourn, so I shall be the one to accompany you. I do hope we get along, Loren.”

Overcome by the knowledge he would now be wrangling a demon and *two* dark gods, Loren wearily shook the hand Ivy offered.

After that, Ivy returned to the guild—she said she needed to submit the quest form and complete the paperwork that would allow her to personally set out. Luxuria complained until the very last second, but he seemed to realize that Loren's opinion was immovable. At length, he gave up and returned to his subordinates—that herd of newly registered adventurers.

Meanwhile, Loren had a few things he needed to do in a hurry.

"We need to buy supplies for eight days on the road."

As it was a quest that had been lingering untouched, Ivy wanted it handled as quickly as possible. But it would be rather idiotic to fail because they had prepared too hastily, so Loren's party allotted a day to get everything in order. In that time, he would have to buy and pack all their supplies and ensure it was ready for transport.

"This time, I believe we can take the bare minimum. After all, the guild will supply our daily necessities as well as the means of transportation," said Lapis.

Since the client was the adventurers' guild, they would receive some degree of support. Just as Lapis said, Ivy arranged for most of it. That left ointment, bandages, weapons, and armor on the shopping list. Food and other miscellaneous items could be ignored for now.

‹Are you sure about this, Mister? Even if we make it there… I might not even be able to use those ruins.›

Neither Ivy nor Lapis had suggested the chances of Scena being revived in a new body were particularly high. Scena had heard this as well, and naturally, this meant she placed little hope in this endeavor. She was quite apologetic that Loren had taken on such a cryptic request just to acquire information that might benefit her.

"You might have a change of heart. Besides, if we give those ruins a proper look-through, we might find something else that'll fix your problems. I mean, you can't just live inside me forever."



‹Am I a bother?›

Sensing a touch of sincere anxiety in her words, Loren awkwardly scratched his head.

“You’re not. You can stay as long as you want. But you’d want to get your body back if you could, right? That’s what this is about.”

“Mr. Loren,” said Lapis, “when you talk to yourself like that, you seem like a rather concerning individual.”

When Scena and Loren conversed, he usually didn’t have to actually say anything. But Loren wasn’t accustomed to transmitting his will without verbal communication, and it seemed he’d been muttering out loud.

Now that she mentions it… His cheeks flushed slightly as his lips pulled into a frown. In his head, he could hear Scena giggle.

At dawn, they boarded the wagon Ivy had arranged and left through Kaffa’s north gate.

It was a straight shot north, down the highway. If this had been their first time on this road, the sights would have been fresh and new, and perhaps there would have been some entertainment to find in that. But Loren’s party had already traveled this route, and not even that long ago.

As a result, it was a boring trudge through familiar territory. This seemed to be the case for their new temporary member as well, so all day long, they simply lounged in the rattling wagon, yawning the hours away.

“This is my first time accompanying an adventurer on the job, but I guess it can be pretty tedious.”

“Well, if nothing happens, we’re just riding a wagon. Can’t be too excited about that.”

The only events of any passing note came in the form of passing merchants and travelers who were bound for Kaffa. Without those brief happenstances, they would have been stuck staring at a monotonous eternity.

Time passed in a kind of malaise. Still, Loren kept a close eye on his surroundings and remained ready for any attack that might befall them, whether it came from a bandit or something worse.

“Would a monster stave off a bit of the boredom, I wonder?” Ivy mused.

“Don’t even joke about that. There’s nothing better than getting to skirt that kind of problem,” Loren replied from the driver’s seat, not even turning back to look at her.

Monsters, bandits, and the like—defeating any such thing would net you a tidy profit. However, Loren wasn’t the sort of person to purposely invite danger for the sake of mere coin. He was especially uninterested if the only motive was killing time. He couldn’t even humor Ivy’s suggestion.

“Bandits aside, I doubt any monsters will bother us.” Lapis entered the conversation from the seat beside Loren’s. “This wagon is carrying two entities known as dark gods, you know? The lowly creatures that lurk along these roads are surely running as soon as they feel your presence.”

Lapis rather pointedly excluded herself from the list of intimidating persons. She looked human enough, but she was actually a member of the powerful demon race, who were feared and hated across the continent. In order to conceal her power and presence, her eyes and limbs had been stolen away by her parents, and she had been practically feeble when she first encountered Loren.

So long as she’d been in that condition, she hadn’t needed to worry about her arousing suspicion, but now she had recovered both her arms and eyes. In short, she had regained a healthy chunk of her demonic power, and she had to devote a good bit of focus to concealing her presence.

Of course, Lapis had acquired a healthy dose of experience by now, so she was pretty good at containing her power. Even so, if she let her guard down, her aura would doubtless make weaker monsters turn tail and flee on the spot.

“It’s a relief to have regained my powers, but on the other hand, it’s quite troublesome having to be on my toes every waking hour of the day.”

“I guess you’ll have to keep at it until it’s second nature.”

“Is this really the sort of thing one grows accustomed to?”

Loren’s party chatted about this and that as they passed a third day with no sign of monster attacks, let alone bandit-shaped

obstacles. At last they arrived at a landscape dominated by dunes of blue sand.

Once again, Loren was shocked by the alien sight, but his fellows weren't nearly as impressed.

"My base is here, so I see it all the time."

"In the days of the ancient kingdom, such a sight would have been considered nothing to write home about."

"You can't even *eat* sand. What's the point?"

‹I'm *surprised, Mister! Shocked! You're not alone*.›

At least Scena's response wasn't upsetting.

I couldn't have asked for worse travel companions, thought Loren as he patted Neg, who for some reason was bouncing and lifting his legs excitedly. He instructed Lapis, who was holding the reins, to direct the horses to turn west.

Only moments before, they had been coming up on a desert. But a little ways westward, they were back on the pains, surrounded by an increasing number of trees.

According to Ivy, Suest had carved out a niche for itself in the middle of a forest. Naturally, the view would be greener and greener the closer they got to their destination.

"Location-wise, it's about on the western tip of the continent, right?"

"Aside from the occasional village or smaller settlement, you'd be hard-pressed to find anywhere farther west."

"I'm surprised they decided to build a town there at all."

"It's like a relay point for its neighbors. Also, being in a forest means a high density of monsters. The town's got quite the flourishing adventurer industry."

The information on their destination came entirely from Ivy, who had hooked them up with the quest. Although Lapis knew a few things as well, she wasn't quite as well-informed as Ivy, who worked for an organization of international import. For once, she was on the receiving end of the briefing.

"The forestry business is also prospering, and they export a considerable amount of lumber. Additionally, exports from the surrounding settlements all pass through Suest, so the food is excellent, and there's plenty of variety."

“Sounds like a fine place.”

“Unfortunately, there’s no river nearby, so there isn’t much in the way of fish. Any seafood they have is mostly dried and salted to last.”

“Hey, I’m fine as long as there’s meat.”

Loren preferred most other meats to fish. Not that he had anything against fish, per se, but if he were presented with fish, pork, and beef, fish would always be his third choice.

“I prefer my meat to come from land animals as well,” said Lapis.

“I don’t mind either way.”

“Why Gula, you’d be content with a goblin so long as it fit in your mouth,” Ivy said with a giggle. Gula silently tried to pounce on her for that, but got nowhere.

The party proceeded from the blue desert to its destination without encountering any difficulties.

Ivy pointed. “That should be Suest over there.”

On the fourth day from Kaffa, they came upon a high stone wall, made to protect whatever lay beyond it from enemies at the gate. It ran all the way into the nearby woods, its full extent shrouded by the many trees.

“Halt. Present your identification.”

The voice that stopped them was less intimidating than it was businesslike. It came from a dead-eyed soldier who stood at the gate; this was standard procedure.

He and his fellow soldiers were fitted in plate armor and equipped with long pikes, but they didn’t point their weapons at anyone. They remained standing at attention as they looked up at Loren and his party aboard the wagon.

Since they were adventurers, their guild tags served as their identification. Loren always kept his hanging around his neck. He pulled it off and was about to step down to hand it to one of the soldiers, but the moment the iron tag was visible, the soldiers seemed to lose interest in them. They no longer looked at Loren.

“You’re good. Go in.”

“You sure about that?”

“You’re good. Go in.”

On repetition, Loren realized there was no further need to present proof of his identity. He returned his tag to its usual spot as he urged Lapis to drive the wagon forward.

As they passed through, he thought, *Perhaps they’ll call us back*. But the wagon rolled into Suest without earning another glance from those soldiers.

“That’s some shoddy security,” Lapis said tiredly.

Loren wholeheartedly agreed. He’d flashed his ID, but only barely. What’s more, he hadn’t even left the wagon. The soldiers had been standing at a good distance, and it was hard to believe they had gotten a real look at any of the letters printed on his guild tag.

“Are adventurers’ guild IDs really such a guarantee?”

Sure, a brief glance identified them as adventurers. If the guild carried significant credibility, it was possible that knowing they belonged to it was enough.

But they had a guild employee on deck—the perfect individual to refute this hypothesis. “As guild personnel, I know I’m in no position to say this, but our organization isn’t especially *reliable*. Ill-bred adventurers are a dime a dozen, and you can find them in every corner of the continent.”

“Then are these soldiers just lazy?”

There was also a chance they were so disinterested in their duties that they didn’t bother to verify the identities of anyone who passed through. Suest seemed to be a decently large town, but it was located on the western tip of the continent and was practically in the middle of nowhere to boot. It wasn’t exactly strange for the local soldiers to be poorly disciplined.

“It’s not uncommon for soldiers assigned to these remote regions to lose all semblance of motivation.”

“Sounds like the kingdom’s problem,” Gula retorted. “Why should we get hung up on it?”

The party exchanged a few looks before conceding the point. At the very least, none of them had reason to be concerned with the internal affairs of a random garrison.

“Then for starters, let’s find an inn with space for the wagon.”

Leaning out from his seat, Loren took in the sights. They'd entered a rather large town with various shops lining both sides of the main road, and as if the stores weren't enough, stalls filled the spots between them. A great many people walked to and fro, some of whom Loren assumed to be the town's residents. Others were travelers and merchants who had only just arrived.

"How should I put this… It's just a normal town."

Ivy's report had included the loss of contact with a whole branch of the adventurers' guild. Loren had dreaded finding that the entire town had been wiped off the map for some reason or another, but he saw nothing amiss.

"Meaning the problem has to be localized to the guild?"

"Generally speaking, outside of an emergency, contact between branches is conducted via messengers on horseback. Considering the idyllic journey we had, I doubt they've been running into an issue along the way. So it's quite likely this is indeed the guild's problem alone."

If, along the road to Suest, they had encountered some massive monster or a large bandit gang, they would have had their explanation as to why no horseback rider had yet made contact. But the doldrums of their journey had Ivy doubting that.

Sure, thanks to Gula and herself, they would have been avoided by just about all beasts, but Kaffa had already sent several riders to Suest. If those poor souls had been killed on the way, surely Loren and company would have spotted a trace somewhere.

"So it's still a mystery as of yet. I'm sure we'll learn something if we go to the guild."

"I'm just hoping it's not the messengers being lazy too."

They'd come quite far to be thus disappointed. *If that ends up being the punchline, the effort just won't add up,* Loren thought with a cynical smile.

Even so, a part of him hoped it would end like this—without incident. There was nothing better than a day when everything worked as intended.

For now, they continued searching for an inn where they could tether the wagon.

“A gold per head. There’s four of you, so four gold.”

“What?!”

They managed to locate an inn that would let them park the wagon by asking passersby. But as soon as they tried to book a room, the innkeeper presented them with a ridiculous price. Gula, who had been the one negotiating, let out an exclamation of anger and shock.

Loren didn’t make a peep from his place on the sidelines, but he scrutinized the innkeeper’s face, questioning his sanity. Two silver would be more than enough to cover four people at a normal inn, including meals. Sure, you’d charge a bit more for posting the wagon, but surely you’d top it at four silver. And yet the balding, middle-aged innkeeper had named a price literally one hundred times that. It would have been stranger not to be surprised.

“Now listen here, you old scoundrel. Are ya sure yer head’s screwed on the right way? Did you seriously just tell me *one gold* per person? Is this homey little inn used by the king himself or what?!”

“Is that too much?”

“Of course it’s too much, you fool!” Gula howled, smacking her fist on the counter. Although the wooden counter rocked on impact, it didn’t break.

She’s still got the sense to hold back, thought Loren.

“Then one copper.”

“Pardon?” Gula’s face contorted. She could’ve sworn she’d misheard him.

Yet the innkeeper indifferently repeated those same words. “One copper. Is that too much?”

“No… That’s ridiculously *cheap*. How’re you supposed to run a business like this?”

“Then one copper.”

The innkeeper repeated himself again. Gula now knew for sure that she hadn’t misheard, and she loosened her clenched fist.

Sure, the cheaper, the better. But considering the average price point for inns, this was far *too* cheap. It was, in fact, a ten-

thousandth of the original price—an outrageous discount. Gula looked less suspicious than anxious.

"Four coppers for four people. Meals included. How about that?"

"Oh, well, sure..."

It was like Gula had lost both her bark and her bite. She slid four copper coins across the counter, which the innkeeper took. In exchange, he slid four keys to her.

"Wait, four *single* rooms?!"

"All of our rooms are for individual occupants."

Gula's disbelief was met with nothing but further indifference.

The fact that they were a party of adventurers would have been clear when they entered together, and how three of them had stood back while Gula handled the negotiations. In the worst-case scenario, depending on the inn's quality, a party might be forced to squeeze together in a single room.

Even in better scenarios, it was normal to ask how many members would be sharing a given room. It was up to the client to ask for private accommodations, and this always came at a hefty premium.

And here this innkeeper was charging substandard rates while offering a room for everyone. The situation had become so dubious that Loren could no longer hold his silence.

"Hey, innkeep. Don't take this the wrong way, but this reeks. All of it."

"Is your food spoiled, perchance?" Lapis asked. "Or perhaps someone died in the rooms in question? Or are the undead prone to popping up in your halls?"

The innkeeper didn't seem remotely offended by their suspicions. He answered calmly, never raising his level voice. "I have no idea what you are referring to."

Though something weird was clearly going on, the innkeeper had already taken Gula's money and handed out the keys.

Looks like it's up to me to make the call, Loren thought. He took the keys on the counter and turned to the owner. "We'll take

the rooms. Don’t worry about the food. We’ll nab a bite outside.”

“You will not get a discount,” replied the innkeeper. Once again, a normal inn would have reduced the overall cost for that. However, it would have been presumptuous to demand a discount on what were already rock-bottom rates. If they dropped any lower, the whole affair would just get that much weirder.

“Where can we post our wagon?”

“In the yard. Tie it wherever you want.”

The inn was furnished with a substantial yard. With the innkeeper’s permission, they got to work moving the wagon to an appropriate spot.

The property was surrounded by walls, and it seemed secure enough. But with the inn being so odd, they couldn’t help but be a little concerned for their supplies.

“Don’t leave anything valuable there.”

“We should probably take the food as well. There’s no telling what they might do to it.”

Unloading everything and dividing it between their rooms was a four-person job. Rather than keeping it all in one place, they figured dividing the goods also divided the danger.

For what it was worth, they all inspected their individual rooms one by one, and they all confirmed the absence of any suspicious contraptions.

“For now, let’s lock up and head to the guild.”

“Wouldn’t it be better to leave someone on watch?” Lapis asked.

After thinking a moment, Loren shook his head. “I’ve just got a feeling we should stick together.”

“Is that your mercenary instinct? Then I won’t argue.”

“Me neither,” said Gula.

“When it comes to these things, I leave the decisions to you, Loren,” said Ivy. “You do seem to be the party leader.”

Loren wondered if any other human on the continent had this much trust from two dark gods and a demon. He set his sights on the guild—their ultimate destination.

“The mood here is a tad strange, but it doesn’t seem like a *bad* town…” said Lapis. “Ah, excuse me. How much is this fruit?”

“One gold.”

“You too…? Umm, don’t you think that’s too expensive?”

“Then one copper.”

“Four, please,” Lapis tiredly conceded. She accepted four palm-sized fruits from a middle-aged woman running a stand, handing over four copper coins in return. “What’s become of the economy? Good grief.”

“Is asking for gold coins a trend or something?”

It sounds like a game kids would play, Loren thought as he accepted the fruit from Lapis.

Or, he was about to—when Neg lashed out from the side with legs and thread and snatched it away. Surprisingly, Neg went on to snatch the remaining three fruits from Lapis. Once he had claimed them, he skillfully wrapped them up in his webbing, and—clinging to Loren’s shoulder—sunk his fangs into the stiff balls of thread.

“They a favorite of yours or something?”

“I didn’t know spiders ate fruit.”

Lapis seemed a bit reluctant to part with her harvest, but Neg was enjoying himself so much that she patted him on the back and let him hoard his silk-wrapped prizes.

Does he just really like fruit, or am I not feeding him enough? Loren wondered as he passed through the guild doors.

Ivy headed straight for the counter—which had not a soul lined up before it—and struck up a conversation with the receptionist sitting there. From what Loren could hear, it didn’t seem to be going well.

“What do you mean the staff member who submitted the quest isn’t here?”

Ivy was asking about the quest that had been sent to the branches in the nearby towns. Though the receptionist admitted that the quest had been submitted from Suest, she also quite incomprehensibly went on to say that the original submitter was no longer around.

“The quest certainly came from Suest. There is no mistaking that. However, the staff member who processed it is no longer with our branch.”

“Do you mean they quit?”

“I couldn’t say. All I know is that they aren’t here.”

“But that doesn’t cancel the quest, does it?”

Since the guild itself was the client, the quest was still ongoing. But if this missing person was the technical client, then their disappearance meant they had reached the end of a rather fruitless journey.

Ivy was asking to make doubly sure, and the receptionist replied with an oddly unchanging expression, “Yes, and that has proven incredibly troublesome. The guild itself was identified as the client, so only the person who initially processed it is able to cancel the quest. We have no way to do so.”

“You don’t look particularly troubled.”

At least, Loren detected no such emotion in either her tone or expression.

Even when Ivy implied she was hiding something, the receptionist’s brow didn’t so much as twitch. She tilted her head. “Does it look that way to you? I am very troubled.”

Determining that she would gain little by continuing this line of conversation, Ivy cut it short and changed the subject. “Never mind. So the quest is considered ongoing. If it is, then we’d like some information on the people who have disappeared.”

However, the receptionist’s reaction was less than helpful. “Missing people? There aren’t any.”

“Huh? But the quest… And you *must* have seen some of the adventurers dispatched by the other branches, right? Do you have any information to share about them?”

Ivy was growing a bit flustered, but the guild receptionist’s calm expression never shifted. She indifferently replied, “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Their branches must have sent messengers too! If you don’t know anything about them… Exactly how bad are you at your job?!”

“My apologies. I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Uh… Umm…”

“Does that conclude your business today?”

Since Ivy looked to be at a loss for words, Loren placed a hand on her shoulder to get her attention.

Ivy whirled around to stare at him and saw Loren pointing at the entrance. She reluctantly stepped away from the counter and exited the building.

“What exactly is going on here?” Lapis asked, having watched the entire exchange.

But Loren was more worried about something else. “This whole branch is strange.”

“Well, given the treatment we just received, I’d certainly say so.”

“Not just that. First off, there was no one lined up at the counter. Have you ever seen it get that dead in Kaffa?”

“Well, no…”

Ivy thought back to her own place of employ. When the counters were open, the receptionists got no more than a minute of idle time now and then—more often than not, there was at least one adventurer to attend to. But even after watching the Suest guild operate for a while, they hadn’t seen a single adventurer approach the counter. That wasn’t to say there were no adventurers in the *building*, but they were such quiet non-entities that it was like they didn’t exist.

“Then there’s the fact that some outsiders suddenly showed up and snapped at the guild staff. But no one said a word to you. That’s pretty unusual, right?”

“That’s, well… Yeah…”

At least, Ivy didn’t look like the sort of person an adventurer would want to avoid messing with. It might’ve been different for Loren, who was well-built and carried a massive weapon on his back, but Ivy…

“Anyways, let’s not be careless so long as we don’t know what’s going on. Let’s return to the inn for now and make a meal out of our supplies. We can talk about our plans there.”

“We’re not eating out?” Gula asked, sounding awfully disappointed.

“This place is weird,” Loren said bluntly. “Until we know why, I’m not putting whatever they eat in my mouth. If you really want to give it a go, I won’t stop you.”

But that made even Gula lose her desire to peruse the local eateries. With that, the party gave up on gathering information for the time being and made haste to the inn.

Chapter 3:
Laying Web to Spraying Down

BACK AT THE INN, they went out of their way to carry all the supplies they'd hauled to their rooms back to the yard, which they had secured the innkeeper's permission to use.

Though these were road rations, some required cooking to eat. They could've borrowed the inn's kitchen, but Loren felt it was somewhat shameful to decline an establishment's food only to cook their own in the same facilities.

He worried cooking in the yard would also be considered a form of harassment. In that case, he decided he would give up his culinary ambitions and eat only what was edible as-is, or perhaps find some empty lot in town. As per usual, however, the innkeeper expressed the same disinterest, offering only absentminded replies. It was honestly pretty hard to figure out what was and wasn't off-limits.

Even so, the innkeeper had not clearly rejected the proposal, so Loren interpreted it how he liked. The party gathered stones near the wagon's lot, constructed the simple table they carried with their stores, and got to work.

By the time the sun had begun to set, their set up was mostly complete. Loren intended to draw the necessary water from the well on the premises but when he looked toward it, he was astonished.

A well was certainly supposed to be there, but at present, it was enveloped in a massive white cocoon.

Loren glanced at his shoulder and saw that Neg had left his usual perch. Neg was, after all, the only being on hand who could cover an entire well in thread, and this was clearly his doing. But Loren had no idea what he was trying to accomplish.

"What are you looking at, Mr. Loren...?" Lapis called as she prepared to cook. Upon realizing what he was looking at, she fell silent.

The cocoon was composed of quite a number of hefty layers. Loren placed a hand on it, wondering if he should peel it away.

But upon feeling the thickness and the strength of the threads, he gave up on his ambitions.

Perhaps it wouldn't be completely impossible, but Neg had clearly done this on purpose, and he didn't want those efforts to go to waste.

"Did we have any water in the wagon?" he asked.

"I believe so. But won't this cause trouble for the inn?"

With the well out of use, the inn wouldn't be able to pull water either. Naturally, this meant they could no longer cook for their clientele, nor provide warm water for guests to wipe themselves down. The establishment would definitely incur financial losses.

Loren decided he would have to find Neg and make him deal with his web. So he headed for the inn—only to be left dumbstruck once again.

For some reason, Neg hadn't limited his web-spinning to the well. He had plastered the entrance and the windows as well. If this kept up, no one would be able to leave—they couldn't even get fresh air.

At this point, Neg's intentions no longer mattered. If they left the webs alone, the innkeeper would be livid.

Or so Loren thought, but though he strained his ears, he heard not a peep from inside the inn. He expected at least a gasp, more likely an angry yell or two. Yet the inn had fallen into utter silence.

"What's going on?" Loren muttered.

"I would have expected to hear someone shouting, 'Let me out!' right about now."

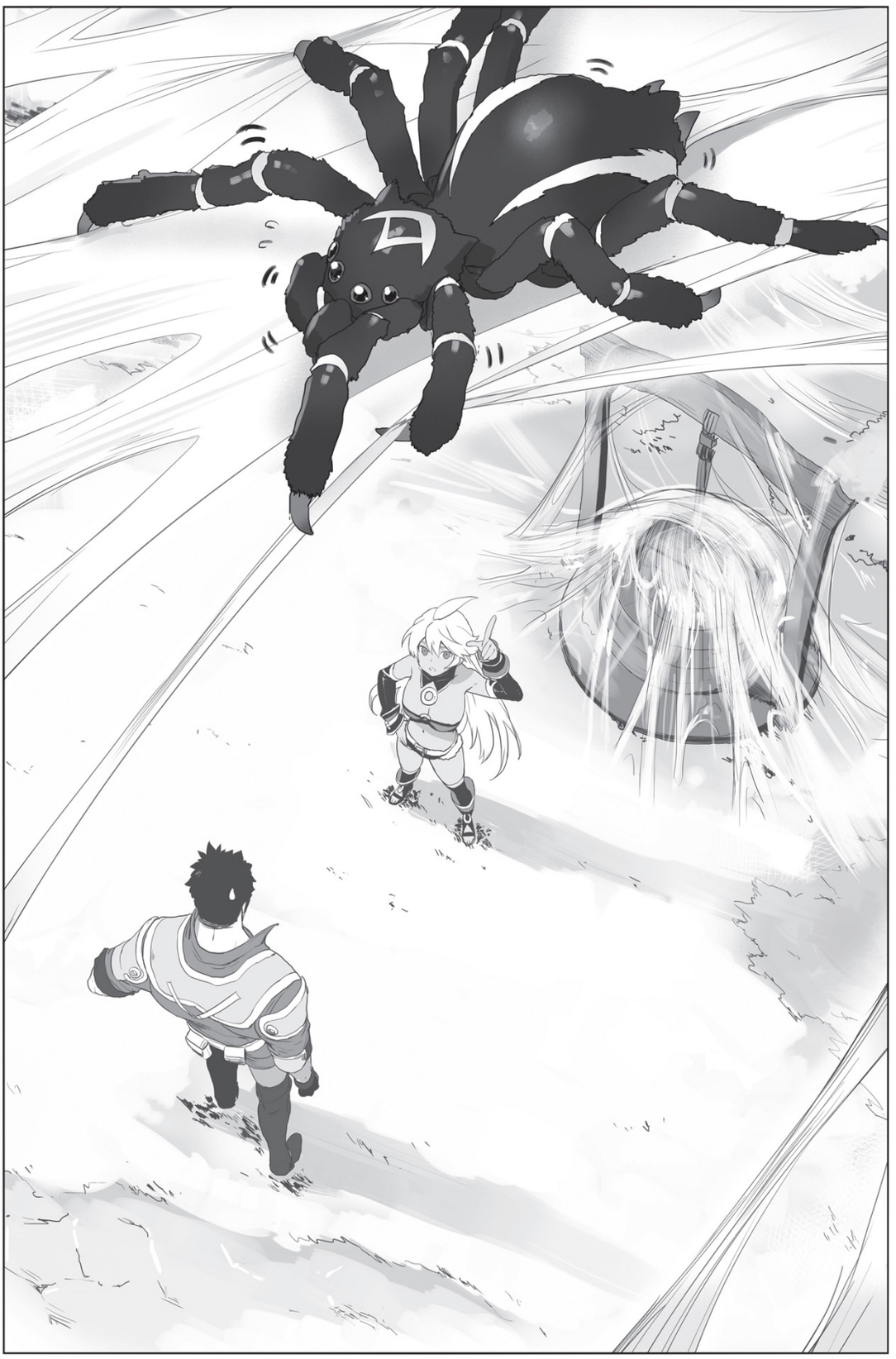
Loren tilted his head curiously, and so too did Lapis. But all the inn's doors were closed, and they couldn't see whatever might be going on inside. Loren could understand Neg to some degree, but it wasn't like the spider could explain himself. He had no way of knowing what was going on in his arachnid mind.

"So where did Neg go, then?"

"If you're looking for lil' Neg, he's over there." Gula didn't look up from where she was working but gestured vaguely overhead.

Loren looked where she directed—to the tops of the trees planted in the yard. There he caught sight of a palm-sized black thing using a slender thread to swing to the neighboring tree.

What's he doing? Loren wondered as Neg slingshotted himself from tree to tree, passing his threads between them as he went. Soon enough, a silk screen had been woven right over their cooking area.



“Is he trying to make a tent or something?”

“Well, I’d say he’s working a bit too high for that.”

As Neg swooped from tree to tree, his threads had come together into a cloth of sorts, draped directly over their heads. As Lapis pointed out, however, they were far too high up to work as a tent.

“What do we do about this?”

“We might be able to remove the webbing from the well, but…we might damage the building if we try anything there, and the sun’s about to set. It sounds like no one’s upset, so why don’t we figure it out tomorrow?”

“You sure that’s all right?”

“Well even if it isn’t, there’s nothing *I* can do about it.”

It wasn’t like Loren knew how he’d stop Neg either, or how he’d go about dealing with the spider’s work. Perhaps Neg would comply if they talked about it, but the lofty creature was hard at work and far out of reach.

“With that said, how is Mr. Neg producing all that webbing, anyways?” Lapis said, sounding quite impressed.

This had occurred to Loren too. A single string was relatively small, compared to Neg’s body. However, he’d produced enough of them to envelop the well *and* seal the inn’s doors and windows. That had to add up.

In fact, it seemed like Neg had expelled far more than his own body weight. And if he could do that, one had to wonder where exactly he had acquired the sheer mass of *stuff* to do it with.

“Thinking about that one’s not gonna lead to answers any time soon.”

“How quick to accept defeat…”

But Scena was ready with an answer, even so: *‹Mr. Neg is producing thread while digesting something. A small animal, perhaps. It’s about the size of an adult human thumb, and he seems to be eating it while he works.›*

Loren looked down at his own thumb. It was certainly bigger than a child’s, but when he thought of a “small animal” of similar size, the only thing he could picture was a mouse. And only a very

small one at that. And how could that produce enough body fluids to match the amount of thread Neg was spewing? You'd need way more than one mouse for that.

"It's good that he's eating well," Loren concluded.

"I don't think that's the problem here," Lapis retorted.

Loren had tried to move on because he still didn't really understand what was going on, but Lapis didn't seem keen on taking initiative; she was relying on Loren to make the call.

Though the very idea exhausted him, Loren gave in for now, allowing himself to be lax enough to put off dealing with the problem until later. After dinner, they would decide who would keep watch, and then go to bed.

There was something strange about the townspeople's reactions to everything; there was something strange about Neg's behavior ever since they'd entered the town. Surely there was a reason for all of this. But even if Loren wanted to mull it over, he had nothing to mull—he couldn't draw any decent inferences out of nothing, and so the time he spent thinking about it was time wasted. For now, his top priorities were eating and sleeping.

He didn't know if this was a good strategy or not. But it was all he could think of at the moment.

They ate, cleaned up, and decided on the order of watch. After entrusting the first shift to Gula and Ivy, Loren dozed off, sitting cross-legged in the wagon, only for Ivy's voice to snap him to his senses.

"Loren? Hey! Wake up."

Loren didn't know how long he had slept. When he poked his head out and looked at the sky, he could only see Neg's threads, illuminated by the campfire.

Rubbing his eyes, Loren tried to stand, only to realize there was a weight on his legs preventing him. He lowered his gaze. Right around his thighs, he found Lapis resting her head. She was soundly asleep, one hand firmly gripping the sleeve of Loren's jacket.

I'm not going anywhere like this, he realized. He felt sort of guilty for waking her when she looked so at peace, but he prodded a finger against her cheek anyways.

She didn’t wake up at first. But after a few pokes, she knit her brow and screwed up her face. A few more pokes later, she faintly cracked open her eyes.

“Get up. Looks like something’s going on.”

“There goes my paradise.”

Releasing her grip on Loren’s jacket, Lapis placed a hand on his knee to lift herself up. *My legs are too hard to serve as a decent pillow,* Loren thought as he stepped out. “What’s up?”

“It must be outside.”

Gula had pressed herself against the wall that surrounded the inn’s property and was carefully peering around it. Loren figured he should ask her for the specifics, but before that, he took a glance at his shoulder. Neg had been hard at work when Loren fell asleep, but he was back now, clinging to Loren’s shoulder as he always did.

After confirming this, Loren fastened his greatsword to his back and took care not to make a sound as he approached Gula in the shadow of the wall.

“What’s going on?”

“Can’t quite say. It’s just, there’s a lot of people out there, given the hour,” Gula said as she pointed. But night had thoroughly fallen, and there wasn’t a single light on the streets. The people Gula was referring to weren’t carrying lights either, and Loren was unable to perceive them.

‹I’ll share my sight, Mister,› Scena said, having foreseen this. Just like that, Loren’s eyes could penetrate the darkest night. He could clearly see Gula pointing, and he could see all the people her finger directed him to. They’d come together without a single torch among them.

“What are they doing?”

“Can’t say that either. All I know is that the horde’s gatherin’ without a light in the dead of night. That’s definitely strange, right?”

The crowd didn’t seem to share any trait in common, as far as Loren could tell. They were of all ages, men and women alike. He even saw the older woman Lapis had bought fruit from earlier that day.

“For now, let’s put out the fire—though it might be too late for that.”

He didn’t know what had brought these folks together, but he wanted to eliminate anything that might draw their attention. On Loren’s order, Ivy quickly doused the campfire with water. Once the flame was gone, he was left in pitch blackness.

Gula whispered, “They’re moving.”

“I’ll follow them. Someone come with me.”

“In that case, I’m the only option,” said Lapis.

The townspeople hadn’t just gathered, they were moving as a group—meaning they had a destination in mind. Perhaps it had something to do with the town’s oddities; perhaps not. This was something he needed to confirm either way.

“Then Gula, Ivy, you look after the camp.”

“Don’t push yourself, Loren.”

“Don’t worry. I’ve never been good at these sorts of jobs. I’ll call it quits if it gets too hot.”

Loren’s weapon of choice made him unsuited for stealthy operations. Still, he had no intentions of sending anyone else to tail these people. He had to be the one to go.

“Is there any point, then?” Ivy asked curiously, only for Lapis to reply with something that wasn’t an answer at all.

“I’d imagine the point will establish itself later.”

“We’ll at least get a smidge of info. It’s better than nothing. I’m off, then.”

Leaving with those words, Loren swiftly slipped from the shadows and raced down the main road. Lapis dashed away, right on his tail, while the other two saw them off.

Until their companions returned, the dark gods would protect what had become the party’s base, and they began preparing to do just that.

The group that had gathered near the inn consisted of—at a rough guess—around ten-odd individuals.

That wasn’t a particularly large group, but it was still a lot of people to see amassing in the dead of night. None of them took

the lead, but they nevertheless slowly moved in the same direction at the same pace.

Following them at a distance, Loren and Lapis hid in the corners of buildings and behind roadside trees, trailing without ever getting close. They stifled the sounds of their footsteps as much as possible, though the group ahead seemed to care little for muffling their own sounds. There were a few armed individuals among them, and they raised quite a racket with the clanking of their weapons and armor.

That would be a lot of noise for most people, Loren thought as he looked around. But he couldn't see anyone peeking out of the windows or doors of the surrounding buildings.

"This must be a town of deep sleepers," noted Lapis. The sleeves of her vestments billowed as she practically slid along the ground, making no sound he could detect. Sure, she didn't usually wear anything particularly noisy, but she handled herself splendidly, leaving not a single footstep or rustle of fabric in her wake.

Meanwhile, Loren was using his knees to stifle his footsteps as much as he could, but he couldn't totally muffle his footsteps. The dagger in his jacket and the sword on his back let off noise as well, and he had by no means reached Lapis's level of dexterity.

"I should've at least left the sword behind," he grumbled.

When he was equipped with his sword—the heaviest thing he owned—his movements were fairly restricted. Any excess gesture let off a sound.

Yet without a weapon, he would be unable to help if things went south. It was indispensable, even if it felt like a nuisance in these situations.

"Do you really have to worry about it that much? Our friends up ahead don't seem to have noticed us."

It was as Lapis said; the group ahead never showed the slightest interest in turning around. Their eyes were trained straight ahead as they proceeded ever forward at the same constant pace.

This total lack of hesitation in the same direction and with no light was quite a peculiar scene to Loren. It was so dark that, without Scena's assistance, he feared he would have bumped into

all sorts of things. Given these conditions, it was strange that these townsfolk, who didn't seem particularly trained, were able to walk so decisively.

"Where are they headed?"

Loren voiced the question that crossed his mind, but as newcomers to Suest, neither he nor Lapis knew the lay of the land. The question had therefore been rhetorical, but surprisingly, Lapis had a response.

"It seems like they're headed to the west side of town."

"I'm surprised you can tell," said Loren.

Lapis pointed at the sky. "The position of the stars can give you your general bearing."

Come to think of it... If you tried to nail down the finer details, you'd be out of luck, but as long as you remembered a few notable constellations, it wasn't too difficult to figure out the cardinal directions. "I see. So what's west of town?"

"I don't remember anything particularly noteworthy..." Lapis said uncertainly as she probed her memories. She was a priest of the god of knowledge, but evidently, she had yet to amass much information on this town she was visiting for the first time.

For some reason, this put Loren a bit at ease. "So nothing important enough for you to know already."

"Correct. Although I do recall there being the west gate, which leads out of town, as well as an entrance to the sewers."

"Oh, so you did know." The question, *And what were you planning to do with that information?* did occur to Loren, but he didn't feel moved to ask. One of Lapis's tidbits was bothering him. "The sewers?"

"It's one of the many entrances around town, accessible for cleaning and maintenance. Suest's wastewater and refuse passes underground and gathers in the sewer system. The west entrance connects to the sewer line that runs out of town, so it seems it's the largest line."

"Sounds like a suspicious place to me."

To Loren, the sewers sounded like just the place for a group with unknown intentions to gather at night. However, Lapis made no effort to hide her scowl when she heard that.

“They don’t intend to trudge through sewage, do they?”

“Well, I mean…if they’re headed west, they’re either going out of town or into the sewers, right?”

“Were you listening to me, Mr. Loren? The west entrance leads to where the town’s sewage gathers before flowing *out* of town. It leads to a river a fair distance away and is the largest line in town.”

Loren suddenly realized why Lapis was making that face. In short, this was where all the town’s water flowed. Of the many filthy corners of the sewer system, this would, without exaggeration, be the filthiest one of all.

Lapis was wearing priest vestments that predominantly featured the color white. It wasn’t hard to imagine what might become of her if she set foot in the sewers.

“If you *really* insist, I could give up on salvaging this outfit…”

Even if by some stroke of good luck, Lapis’s robes remained unsullied, the foul stench they would doubtless find in the place would seep in. Without a powerful deodorizer and detergent, she would still end up reluctant to wear these clothes again.

The same could be said for Loren. If it was absolutely necessary, Loren would dive into sewage without hesitation, but he didn’t exactly have a ton of clothing to spare. His jacket was also his only piece of armor, and he wanted to avoid dirtying it *or* letting it pick up an odor.

“It’ll depend on the situation. It’s not like I want to go down there either.”

“But in these situations, the worst scenario we imagine generally tends to come true…” Lapis said with a powerless smile.

She’d jinxed them—not that she had cast a spell of any sort. But as the group continued their single-minded trek through town, they soon reached the western edge and came to a stop before a building that had been erected some distance from all its neighboring structures. It was a completely unornamented stone affair with no windows to speak of, furnished with a large door.

Though Loren didn’t know its purpose, he had a terrible feeling about this. Beside him, Lapis’s face was sour, so he hazarded a guess.

“Don’t tell me.”

“Yes, that’s, well…*that*.”

Reality really does love to throw its worst at me, thought Loren as they watched the group press up against the door. It took a few members pushing together to slide open the heavy iron; then, at the same pace with which they had arrived, they walked in. Presumably there was quite a stench leaking through the open doors, but that gave them no pause whatsoever. Soon, they had all disappeared inside. The last few pulled the door shut behind them, and then it was silent.

“Looks like no one’s around.”

Since the group they were chasing had gone, there was no longer any point in hiding. Loren left the shadows of the building where he’d hidden and slowly approached the entrance to the sewers. As it had been opened moments before, foul odors still lingered in the air.

Lapis cupped her hands over her mouth as she followed, but as she got closer, she began to cough. Once she was only a few steps away, she could no longer bear it. She pressed her forehead to Loren’s back and clung tightly to him.

I can’t even blame her, Loren thought as he endured the smell.

These scents were far from uncommon on the battlefield, so he had developed some resistance to them. Even so, after being hit with the stench of an entire town’s refuse, he worried his nose would never work properly again.

The smell will get into my clothes if I stick around too long, he thought as he dragged Lapis the last few steps. Then he was standing right before the door. He placed a hand on it.

“Make sure you wash your hands thoroughly after this.”

“You don’t need to tell me twice.”

Loren had no fondness for filth or odor. It wasn’t like the doorknob was dirty, but there was a mental barrier. He swore to himself he’d wash as many times as it took to be clean.

“So you’re going to open it, right?”

“How’re we gonna know what’s in there if we don’t?”

“Well, if you do, the smell will be unspeakable. And it won’t be enough to just peek through. The sewers are underground, so we’ll have to climb down to get there. The stench will have settled down there.”

The door had only stood open long enough for ten-odd people to pass through, but it had already emitted such a potent stench that Lapis was sick. If Loren threw open the doors and headed straight in, the stench would no doubt be tremendous. However, they’d followed the group this far. It would all be for naught if they turned back now.

“You can stay behind, Lapis. You don’t look like you’ll be able to stand the air in there.”

“That’s, umm… I’m sorry. For once, I think I’ll take you up on that.”

Come to think of it, Lapis’s mother was a demon lord. Her stature was equal to that of a king in a human country, and so—though Loren was unsure whether demons practiced such customs—Lapis was essentially something akin to a princess.

In that sense, it was no surprise that Lapis couldn’t withstand the smell of rotting sewage. In fact, it was incredible that she’d managed to accompany him all the way to the door.

Lapis scampered away—Loren could hear her flurried footsteps—and once she was far enough, he poured his strength into his hand to open the door.

This released a wave of stench so great, he felt for a second like it was physically pushing him back. He nearly bolted on the spot, but pushed past the urge and tilted his body slightly forward. Sure enough, a stairway led straight down, seeming to lead in turn to a vast space beyond.

Of course, there were no lights to speak of. But while Loren was borrowing Scena’s eyesight, he could make everything out as well as if it were midday. Reluctant though he was, Loren began the climb down the stairs.

It was only around twenty steps. Once he reached the bottom, the air grew slightly warmer, though the smell had somehow grown even worse. Loren swallowed his nausea as he stepped into the opening, where he found himself right beside a waterway.

This was presumably where all the filth flowed. Raised walkways on both sides enabled cleaning and maintenance crews to maneuver around. The waterway extended into the distance, due west. The opposite direction linked up with a more complicated network of waterways.

Loren's enhanced sight allowed him to perceive the frothing filth of the sewage in great detail. *Maybe having good eyes isn't all sunshine and rainbows,* he concluded.

He focused his gaze farther down the waterway. It hadn't been that long since the other group entered, and if they were following the path, he assumed he would at least be able to see their backs. Yet he could detect not a single humanoid figure. Even when he shifted his gaze upstream, he found no one.

I know I didn't lag so badly as to miss them, thought Loren. But try as he might, he saw nothing moving. He was simply alone.

"They didn't dive into the sewage, did they?"

It had been quite a peculiar gathering. He couldn't deny the possibility of more peculiarity, but neither did he have the means to check the water. He certainly didn't want to enter it himself.

As the thought crossed his mind, he heard Scena's voice. *‹I don't detect any life signals.›*

Scena was able to detect metaphysical signs of life. This came with the undead package, and as of now, Loren owed her everything for it. In short, there was no chance that anyone was inside the sewage water, so he was off the hook for checking it.

"Then where did they go?"

‹Well… There are numerous small signals down this passage, but none large enough to be human. I couldn't quite tell you what they were, though.›

"Rats, maybe? They're common enough in sewers."

‹My detection is not that precise.›

What to do now? Loren wondered. He considered going a little farther down, but he could barely muster the motivation. To make matters worse, while he had brought his sword, he had no tools he'd want for a proper investigation.

It's dangerous to dig too deep without proper preparations, he thought. After that, it didn't take long for him to decide it was time

to pull back. Though he remained wary of his surroundings, Loren retraced his steps and emerged aboveground.

“Honestly, I shudder at the thought of investigating that place…”

Even if he told Gula and Ivy about the suspicious sight, he knew they would be less than keen to follow up. In any case, he stepped out only to be greeted by Lapis, who was holding a spray bottle so large, he was baffled by its sudden appearance.

What came from it was a harsh, citrusy scent—it seemed to be perfume.

“So I do smell…”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Loren. I do know this is rude, but I beg your forgiveness, given the circumstances.”

He hadn’t been down there for long, but the smell had already begun to cling to him.

As Lapis sprayed him down with an incredibly apologetic look, Loren sighed and resigned himself to his fate.

Chapter 4:
The Problem to Old Sentiment

AFTER RETURNING TO THE INN from the sewers, Loren and Lapis spent the rest of the night entirely sleepless. As soon as the sun began to light the sky, they got to work removing the webbing Neg had woven over the inn.

They still didn't know why he'd done it, but as long as there were people inside, they couldn't just leave it. As they worked, Neg left them to it; as per usual, he stood immobile, stuck to Loren's shoulder.

The threads were incredibly sturdy and difficult to cut. Loren had to soak his dagger in oil, then set it alight to generate the heat to cleave through. He finally managed to open the front door, which he opened—only to find the innkeeper behind the counter, exactly where they'd last seen him. Their eyes met.

This is where he gets mad, Loren thought.

But it was as though the innkeeper had absolutely no idea what had happened to his inn. He stared at Loren where he stood in the doorway, saying nothing.

"Umm… You mad or something?" Loren called out when the innkeeper went on saying nothing.

The innkeeper's response was short and to the point: "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"No, uh… Because the doors and windows won't open, right?"

"I don't know."

The man's voice was cold, emotionless.

Loren scratched his cheek, not quite knowing what to do. "So you're *not* mad?"

"I don't know."

"This feels pretty hopeless."

At this point, Loren realized the innkeeper wasn't normal. For whatever reason, you couldn't reach this guy with words, and further conversation would be pointless. So, Loren gave up on

that and abandoned the inn for the time being. Next, he headed to the garrison in town.

Suest was in the middle of nowhere, but soldiers had still been dispatched from the heart of the kingdom to maintain the peace. Generally, soldiers stationed in this kind of place were in charge of looking into any criminal activity. They investigated and apprehended any perpetrators. Loren figured he should report the group they had watched disappear the night before.

As an adventurer, he was worried about how much his testimony would be taken, but the facts were the facts: ten-odd humans had vanished without a trace. Surely that would get the soldiers moving.

If the garrison soldiers couldn't handle it on their own, they would request assistance from their higher-ups. And perhaps the people up the chain would be able to figure something out about these mysterious disappearances.

"And I'm telling you, I haven't seen our priest since last night!"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Our party's priest! He's gone, I tell you!"

"I don't know."

"What don't you understand about this? Agh, you're useless! Get me your superior!"

The garrison had an office dedicated to hearing out the grievances of the townspeople, and that was where Loren had gone. He entered the room only to find three men who looked like adventurers already at the counter, behind which sat a soldier.

The adventurers seemed to be frothing at the mouth with rage, and they looked to be just a few choice words short of pouncing on the soldier. But the soldier remained completely unmoved. His composed stare never faltered.

"The guard captain is absent," he said.

"Then whoever's next in line!"

"The vice-captain is also absent."

"Then who *isn't* absent?!"

"I don't know."

"Do you think I'm stupid or something?!"

The man who lunged across the counter and tried to grab the soldier's collar was dressed like a swordsman. He looked to be maybe a few years older than Loren. If no one stopped him, he would likely climb over and manhandle the soldier—and if he did so, they'd all be in for it.

The two beside him—one a thief, the other a magician—seemed to understand this, so they grabbed the swordsman by the arm and the shoulder, pulling him back.

"Let me at him! That bastard!"

"Quit it! You're just gonna get us thrown in the slammer!"

"Shut up! I'm not stopping until I give him a good sock in the kisser!"

Though two whole people were trying to stop him, the swordsman was so strong that he practically dragged them along. Even so, they desperately tried to restrain him.

And despite this furious display, the soldier behind the counter never winced nor showed any signs of fear. Loren was overcome with déjà vu.

But more surprising than that was the swordsman who was trying to have a go at the guy.

"Haven't I seen him somewhere before...?" Loren muttered.

"Do you even have any male acquaintances, Loren?" Ivy asked, theatrically shocked.

"What's that supposed to mean, huh?" Loren reached to smack her, but Ivy was quick to flee behind Gula.

"Hey, don't use me as a shield!"

"Don't worry, I'm sure you'll be just fine."

"Don't screw with me! I'm not coming out fine when it's *Loren*!"

I don't think I'm strong enough to do anything to a dark god on my own, Loren thought, and he wound up staring down at his palm.

Ivy and Gula continued to squabble, and just as Loren thought it was high time to intervene, the swordsman, who was still wrestling with his comrades, let out a roar. The thief had managed to pin him down.

“Quiet down, why don’t you?! This ain’t a show! If you don’t got nothing to do with us, get lost!” The swordsman was already frustrated, and he understandably exploded with frustration when a senseless ruckus broke out right next to him.

Loren glared Ivy and Gula into silence before lowering his head to the yelling swordsman. “Sorry if we’ve rubbed you the wrong way. We’ll pipe down, okay?”

After all, they were at fault. For the time being, an apology did seem to be in order. However, once Loren lifted his head, his eyes met the swordsman’s blank stare.

The man’s expression clinched it. Loren was convinced. They definitely knew each other, somehow or another.

“Say, have we met before?” he asked.

“Somewhere… Wait, you’re Loren, right?”

The swordsman stopped thrashing, and the thief released him. Once freed, the man remained petrified, eyes locked onto Loren’s face. As Loren stared back, he did feel like the guy was a bit familiar, though he couldn’t yet recall exactly where he knew the fellow from.

“So you forgot all about me, you bastard!” said the swordsman. “At least, that’s what I’d like to say, but I can’t even blame you. You and me, we’re nothing more than grunts of the Muttschild Company.”

Is that what we were called? Loren thought. He’d never paid much attention to the name of his mercenary company, though he’d perhaps heard it in passing once or twice. Even now as it was presented to him, he had his doubts.

“So he’s from your old mercenary company, Mr. Loren?” Lapis asked.

At long last, Loren realized something. If he recognized this man, there really was no other possibility. He had to have known him in his mercenary days. He mostly remembered all the faces of the folks he’d met since becoming an adventurer. He wouldn’t have had to ponder over them to recall their names.

“So you became an adventurer too?” the swordsman said. “Though I’m more surprised you’re still alive.”

“Well, same to you. Umm…”

Though Loren knew the man hailed from his old company, he still couldn't recall the fellow's name. Perhaps he'd only ever known the man by his face and never known it in the first place. After all, the company had been quite large, and it wasn't as if Loren had known every single member.

"It's Mills. And yeah, I'm an adventurer now. For men like us, who only know how to fight, well…this is about the only way we can put food on the table, right?"

I guess we had the same general idea, Loren thought. Though it did make him ask, "Though if you behaved yourself well enough, couldn't you become a soldier instead?"



“Are you stupid? Just how many of us had that kind of control? I could count them on one hand…” Mills said. “Well, maybe you coulda made it? Yeah, I should be asking *you*. What are *you* doing as a lowly adventurer?”

“Lowly? That’s your line of business you’re talking about. Anyway, it’s not like I’ve got any manners to speak of. You’re barking up the wrong tree there. But tell me, what are you arguing about?”

However much self-control his old peers did or didn’t have, Loren had a hard time believing any of them would lash out for no reason. Something must have happened to warrant Mills’s frustration.

Mills’s reproachful eyes turned toward the soldier who was passively watching over them. “Truth be told, one of our party members vanished last night, so I came to report it. But this bastard just keeps saying he doesn’t know anything.”

“There were no signs of a struggle in the room we booked,” the party’s magician added. “And he isn’t the sort of man who would go somewhere without telling us. It’s concerning.” He took a few glances at the soldier and added in a whisper, “It’s troublesome to see such ineptitude in these frontier soldiers.”

“Can I get a few more details on all this?” Loren asked. This sudden disappearance of a comrade sounded similar to the events he had witnessed the night before.

Mills nodded. “Sure, why not. But not here; this place makes me sick.”

He said the last part with purposeful volume, making sure he was heard. But the soldier, who definitely heard him, remained unfazed. His face was like an expressionless mask, his gaze leaving them uncertain as to whether he could even see them.

“It’s not like we didn’t know anything before we came. We heard strange things were afoot in Suest.”

After Mills declared he needed a change of scenery, he led them to a plaza nearby, where a street stall had opened shop. Evidently, the peddler running the stall had come from outside of town—they didn’t act as unnaturally as the rest of the people they’d come across in Suest. Loren felt just a bit relieved.

“We were in the area on a different quest, see. We thought we’d get a minute of rest and relaxation—and look where that got us. We shoulda left as soon as we could.”

The stall was equipped with wheels, which enabled its owner to pull it along while peddling their wares. But the owner also offered tables and chairs for customers, and the party now occupied seven of those seats. They ordered a light meal and some drinks as they talked.

Among the passersby, Loren noted a few other likely outsiders here and there, and they all looked utterly perplexed. Weirded out by whatever was going on here, and a little scared too.

Rude as it was, Loren’s party had seen more than enough of the expressionless faces of the town’s residents and it was good to know they weren’t alone.

“We got here two days ago. We celebrated a job well done and partied the night away. Then we took the next day off.”

“And your priest disappeared that night?”

“Exactly. Actually, he said he was feeling sick that evening. He shoulda been resting in his room, but come morning, he didn’t pop out. I got so worried I broke down the door.”

“You broke down the inn’s door?”

If Mills had played his cards poorly, that alone could have put the soldiers on his tail. That should’ve been obvious, given that the crime was property damage. There were always other options, even if you were in a hurry. *He could have borrowed a spare key from the innkeeper,* Loren thought. Once he said as much to Mills, however, the man shook his head.

“No good. The innkeeper just said he ‘didn’t know.’ Didn’t lift a finger for us.”

As it turned out, Mills had indeed attempted that. But as with everyone else in town, the innkeeper wasn’t open to conversation.

“Nothing but, ‘I don’t know,’ and, ‘I have no idea.’ What nonsense. I had no choice but to kick down the door.”

“He must’ve asked you for compensation, then.”

“Thing is, he didn’t react even after I’d busted it open. Creepy, right? More importantly, our priest was gone. We’re adventurers,

sure, and we're capable of searching on our own, but…"

Mills's magician friend took over. "We're new in town, so we decided it was better to ask the guild or the garrison for help."

As for the magician and the thief, Mills had only come to know them after he'd become an adventurer. They'd had absolutely nothing to do with Mills and Loren's old mercenary company.

"Is there any chance your priest returned to whatever town you're using as a base?" Lapis suggested.

Mills and his comrades shook their heads.

"He wouldn't go off on his own, not without telling us. Even if he wanted to, that's a dangerous journey for one man," said Mills.

"And even more so for a lone priest," the magician added. "It's suicide going into the wilds at night, where the monsters and beasts can get to you. He's been an adventurer for a decent stretch now, so I'm sure he understands that."

"Even if he were an idiot who acted without thinking things through, he'd still need a reason to do it," the thief added. "Our party's totally stumped."

Though Loren's party had never met this priest, it seemed highly unlikely he would wander off alone.

"Where did he go, then?" Gula asked just as the stall's owner carried their order to their table.

Suest was large as far as towns were concerned, but it fell short of a true city.

"That's the question, isn't it? Hey, Loren, you got any ideas?"

Loren couldn't stop thinking of what he and Lapis had seen in the sewers the night before. He didn't know if Mills's comrade had been among the dozen or so people who disappeared down there, but it certainly was the case that those people had suddenly vanished.

"Actually, we were about to report something at the garrison."

Loren glanced at Lapis, but she was busy. Her eyes lit up as she stared at the food set down before her. She immediately began to stuff herself.

When he thought about it, he realized they hadn't had a decent meal since arriving in Suest. It made sense that Lapis was excited by the stall's offerings, but Loren really wished she were just a *little* more interested in the conversation. With a light clearing of his throat, he signaled Lapis to pause and look his way, after which she offered a slight nod.

For argument's sake, the info on the sewers had been obtained by their combined efforts, and it wasn't necessarily something to divulge of his own accord. But with her permission, he spoke on all he knew.

"The sewers? Why there…?"

"No clue. But I saw the group head in, then lost sight of them. Mind you, I couldn't tell you if your priest was among them."

"I get that, but we don't have any other leads. Still, it just had to be the sewers… I wouldn't want to go in there."

Loren wholeheartedly agreed. He'd already dipped his toe in once, and that only made him less compelled to go for a second round. However, if it proved absolutely necessary, he did intend to put up with it, and Mills would do the same for the sake of his comrades.

Though Mills let out a low, extended groan, he ultimately resolved himself and took a deep breath. "No way around it… I'll have a look."

"I thought you'd say that. My condolences all the same."

"Ah, goddammit. When I find that bastard, he's treating us to a feast! Good grief. We'll need to buy a whole ton of perfume and deodorizer."

Despite his protests, Mills still had to plan for the aftermath. That seemed to be the sort of guy he was. But before his party could head off, the thief suddenly turned to Mills.

"Perfume and deodorizer?" he muttered. "What for?"

"What do you think? We just learned a group vanished in the sewers, right? Our guy might be with 'em. Even if not, we might find a lead—so we've got to go, right?"

"Is that what we were talking about?" the thief asked with a startled blink.

Mills's face turned grim. He didn't have a naturally stern air, but he had served as a mercenary for long enough that he knew how to look the part.

That said, only Mills's comrades were startled by this shift. Some mercenary's intimidating countenance wasn't going to move any of the members of Loren's party. They had practically ignored the entire exchange and were so focused on the grilled meat before them that they didn't even glance at Mills.

"Seriously, you've gotta listen to people when they're talking."

"R-right. Sorry. Umm…uh…"

"It's fine. Anyways, we're gonna check out the entrance to the sewer on the west side of town. There's no telling what that guy could be getting into. We're going after him."

"Him… Who?"

"What is this, a hangover? Just shut up and follow me."

"Understood."

The thief's reactions had grown oddly dull, and though the magician held his silence, it seemed something weighed on his mind. They still both stood with some prompting from Mills and went on their way.

Loren understood the desire to save their comrade as soon as possible, but he had something he needed to ask first. "Just one thing I want to know. Consider it a trade for the info I gave you. Can we handle that before you go?"

"What? I don't mind, but if so, we're splitting the bill," Mills smugly said.

Loren scoffed. "I was never gonna let you treat us. I just want to ask you what happened to our chief after the company fell apart. If you know anything."

Mills was the first member of Loren's old company he'd met since becoming an adventurer. At the time, Loren had been so focused on running away that he hadn't had the leeway to worry about his surroundings. Perhaps, unlike Loren, Mills had some information.

Naturally, he didn't expect much—he didn't think for a second he would get anything so definitive as the chief's

whereabouts, or those of any of the higher-ups, but perhaps he would be graced with a small shred of info.

But Mills simply stared back at Loren, then said something Loren couldn't believe: "Chief? Who's that?"

"You—what are you… By chief, I mean the captain of our company. Juris Muttschild."

The company had taken its name from the chief. Loren was taken aback. *Why are you playing dumb now?*

But after thinking a second, Mills replied, "Was that his name? I can't remember."

"What?" For a moment, Loren thought he'd been hoodwinked—that this man had only pretended to be his acquaintance. But he quickly tossed this idea. If this was some kind of elaborate con, Mills had nothing to gain by tricking Loren. On top of that, Mills had undoubtedly remembered who Loren was, so he couldn't be a *complete* stranger. "Are you serious? This isn't some bad joke, is it?"

"I seriously don't know. I don't know what I don't know. More importantly, let's hurry up and get to those sewers already. I'll foot the bill here—don't worry about it. You gave me info, and I couldn't answer your question in return."

"I see…"

"You'll stick around for a minute, right? If we find our priest, I'll come around to thank you. See ya."

With that, Mills handed a small bag of coins to the man running the stall and disappeared without waiting for change. Loren took this as a gesture of goodwill—a sign they could eat and drink however much more they wanted. He was grateful, but he couldn't deny that something was off with Mills as he left. He continued to stare in the direction he'd gone even after he was out of sight.

"Is it really possible to forget the chief?"

Every member of the Muttschild Company had been looked after by the chief to some degree. And yet, Mills had forgotten him. Loren had a truly hard time believing it.

Then again, money was everything to a mercenary. Perhaps the name of a mercenary who lost a war was simply destined to be forgotten.

In any case, it didn’t seem like Mills was lying.

I guess there had to be at least one guy like that, Loren mused. He accepted the cup Lapis held out to him and downed the ale within in one swig.

Chapter 5:
Discussion to Pursuit

"NOW THEN, MR. LOREN, what do you plan to do?"

Mills had left them with a decent down payment on food, enough for Loren's party of four to eat and drink to their heart's content.

Or at least, it would have been if the party consisted of ordinary humans. The fact that they were saddled with the abnormality that was Gula meant that even if they had been gifted a palace's entire treasury, it was doubtful she would truly be satisfied. That was a question only Gula could answer.

"There's no two ways about it, right? We complete Ivy's quest and get that info on the ruins she used. What else is there to do?"

"In that case, it's clear that something odd is afoot in this town. Now, we have to pin down what's causing it, correct?"

That sounds about right, Loren thought. But just in case, he turned to Ivy for her take. In passing, he caught a glimpse of Gula emptying another plate beside her.

Ivy, who was relishing her mug of ale, noticed Loren's gaze and said, "Please go ahead."

"You heard her," said Loren.

"Now, about that. At the moment, the only real lead we have would be those sewers, correct?"

Lapis just had to bring this up right as they were eating. A blatant scowl crossed Loren's face as he put his mug to his lips. He'd left her behind to enter the sewers alone, after which Lapis had sprayed him down with quite a lot of perfume to mask the scent.

Had she chosen the wrong fragrance, it would have combined with the stench and made it even worse. But whatever Lapis used, it seemed to be something of a special blend; it didn't go as far as erasing the smell entirely, but the odor that had seeped into his clothes was now mostly dampened.

Without it, he doubted Ivy and Gula would have had anything good to say about his odor. The thought haunted him.

Putting that aside, Lapis was pretty much saying that Loren would have to once again venture down into the place that had spawned that powerfully vile aroma. Inevitably, this cast a shadow over the faces of the whole party.

“I’m just confirming. I don’t want to go down there either,” Lapis pouted as she sensed a few pairs of critical eyes falling upon her. “Thus I thought we ought to discuss how to best go about this terrible job.”

“Well…do we really have any choice?”

The stench of the sewers wasn’t the product of a few bad days. It had piled up over months and years, growing worse and worse as more putridity passed through its channels. The smell didn’t just stick to things, it permeated every fiber of their being.

This wasn’t the sort of vague unpleasantness that one could wash away. If they wanted to deal with the problem on a fundamental level, they would need to start with the very architecture of the sewers.

In short, it was as Loren said. There didn’t seem to be anything they could do about that.

“At most, I guess you could spray us with some potent fragrance before we went in.”

“That won’t work. No smell I can muster will be able to fight off that stench at its source.”

“So what’re ya suggestin’?” Gula asked, never giving her eating hands a moment’s rest.

Lapis downed the cup in her hands and smacked it on the table. The mugs offered by the stall were carved from wood and painted over, so this thankfully did not end in a shattering. “Even if it’s only temporary, we need to take countermeasures to contain the smell.”

“Sure, but do you have any ideas?” said Loren, who at this point, would go for almost anything if it meant sparing himself a repeat of that experience.

“There are some methods. Though they require preparation…”

“There are?!” Loren knew he was in public, so he tried not to be too loud. But he was so startled that he couldn’t help himself.

He didn’t know how many years had passed since Suest’s founding, but those sewers had definitely been collecting their aroma for ages and ages. It was shocking to think that a countermeasure, even a temporary one, existed at all.

“It really is only temporary, and it will require some time to prepare. But there is a method by which we might contain that smell. If you agree, I would like your permission to carry through with it.”

“Permission? Mine? Why’s that? It shouldn’t be an issue, right?”

“I mean to say I don’t intend to act on my own. It’s my duty as a party member to take action only at my leader’s direction.”

“I kinda think it’s a bit late for that.”

“What’s more, if I want my leader to take full responsibility for the potential consequences, I *need* to get his approval in advance.”

“You sure that’s your main goal here…?”

Loren glared fixedly at her, and Lapis frantically shook her head.

“Oh, of course. I would never shove any undue burden on your shoulders, Mr. Loren.”

“You think so? Well, I’ll leave it at that.”

For the time being, Loren didn’t want to say anything that might kick the hornet’s nest. She wasn’t forcing him into this, though, so it was probably better to go along with her plan.

“Are you okay with this, Gula?”

Before they committed, though, Loren sought confirmation from the last member of the party. Gula was still voraciously devouring her meal, and as expected, she didn’t pause to answer. She just gave a slight nod.

Loren took this as her approval and turned away. Even if Gula had meant something else, that would be on her for failing to elaborate. Loren knew he wouldn’t have to take responsibility for that, at least. “How about you, Ivy?”

“I’m not exactly a member of your party, am I?” Ivy’s identity aside, she was still nothing more than an employee at the Kaffa branch of the adventurers’ guild. Thus, she wasn’t obligated to

take orders from Loren, nor did she have to offer her opinion on any of the party's decisions. She looked at Loren curiously.

"Maybe so, but it's no fun if we keep moving forward while ignoring you, right? And we're in the same boat on this one, so we're stuck together anyways."

If Ivy were an ordinary guild receptionist, Loren's words would have sounded more sincere. But though Ivy had changed her name and remade her body, she had once counted among the ranks of dark gods.

For a moment, Loren wondered if he had offended her—implying she shared a lot with a lowly adventurer like him. But Ivy's mood didn't seem any worse for wear. She simply said, "I see."

She went on, "You do have a point there, Loren. Then here's my opinion: you should do whatever you think is best."

"Well then, once the meal is over, please join me for some shopping," said Lapis. "Meanwhile, Ms. Gula, Ms. Ivy, I would be quite thankful if you could secure our base back at the inn."

"So you wanna go shopping with Loren, huh?" Gula mused with a purposeful shrug. "Fine, got it. Guess you can have this one."

"I won't say the thought never crossed my mind, but I ought to be clear—this isn't just for fun." Lapis looked at Gula sternly, and Gula hurriedly dropped the food in her hands, turning to look the other way.

How fearsome she was, to intimidate a dark god of gluttony into forgoing her meal. Yet once Gula was silenced, the face Lapis turned to Loren was devoid of any last trace of intimidating glare. Loren was quietly astonished by how quickly she could change gears.

"Gula, Ivy, stick to the same site as yesterday, but don't go near the well or the inn itself. They're the things Neg decided to cocoon, so there might be something untoward therein. Keep your distance, no matter what."

"Fine, got it."

"Understood."

The two dark gods voiced their understanding, and Loren turned to Lapis.

“So, what are *we* doing? You called it shopping.”

“Well, it *is* shopping. I need to purchase the materials to make a certain something.”

“Not that I know what you’re planning, but are you sure you can find everything in this town?”

Suest was on the western edge of the continent, far away from most everything else. Sure, Lapis hadn’t yet described exactly what she was making, but if it was a medicine or salve, the chances she’d find what she needed here were slim. Most shops that dealt in herbs and reagents were concentrated at the center of the country, where multiple trade routes intersected.

“It should be fine, I think. I don’t need anything too rare.”

As far as Lapis was concerned, it was less a matter of finding the materials and more one of whether or not she’d actually be able to purchase anything in this weird little town.

From the innkeeper to the soldiers, everyone in Suest seemed a little strange. She worried that these strange people might no longer exchange money for goods and services.

“Worse comes to worst, I might have to play thief. But we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.”

Lapis took Loren to a florist.

Loren had been convinced they were headed for some shady alchemist, or maybe a backstreet dealer in contraband that would be arrested if they peddled their wares on the main road. When Lapis instead opted for a flower shop right on the main drag, he felt sort of let down, and he also wondered if this was, perhaps, a mistake.

“Hello! Good day. Is anyone in?” Lapis called out with an unnecessary amount of cheer.

There were no signs of anyone like a proprietor.

Don’t tell me, thought Loren as he held Lapis back and slowly walked in. The building seemed to be an adjoined store and living quarters, and around the back of the shop—at a door that led to the living area—he found a woman standing around absentmindedly.

“Hey, you all right?”

Her air indicated that she clearly was not. Though Loren warily called out to her, the woman didn't even look up. Neither did she open her mouth. She simply stared into space.

This is hopeless, he thought as he looked to Lapis for advice.

Yet Lapis paid no mind to any of this as she began looking through the available flowers. She would inspect one, only to discard it and investigate another. Loren looked at her, then back at the shopkeeper, who didn't seem to care in the slightest. With a sigh, he decided not to dwell on it and focused his attention on what Lapis was up to.

He didn't know any of the names of the flowers she selected, but seeing as they had been found at an ordinary florist, he doubted they were particularly rare or expensive.

"They're flowers...right?"

Perhaps to anyone with adequate expertise, their humble appearance belied hidden value. Loren asked with this in mind, but Lapis looked at him blankly.

"What else could they be?"

As it turned out, they really were just run-of-the-mill flowers. However, in that case, he was even less sure of what Lapis was planning.

"I suspect I know the gist of what you want to say, Mr. Loren. But I have, without a doubt, come here to buy flowers."

"Are you going to use their fragrance to cover up the scent or something?"

That didn't sound like a particularly good idea. Yes, flowers were generally considered to have a fine smell, but that was a mite too weak to combat the colossal stench they were up against.

"I'm not going to cover it up. I'm engaging in a bit of trickery," Lapis answered with a glance at the unmoving woman at the back of the store. She lifted her arms in the air to get the woman's attention. "Pardon me, can I take all the flowers here?"

The shopkeeper did not reply. It wasn't that she was stunned into silence. As far as Loren could tell, it was more like Lapis's words hadn't even reached her ears.

Lapis stared for a moment. After determining that the shopkeeper wasn't about to take action, she walked up to the

woman and slipped a golden coin into her pocket.

“I paid—don’t tell me I didn’t. And you can keep the change,” Lapis declared.

And still, the shopkeeper did not react.

Is she dead? Loren wondered. He asked Scena to examine the woman with her Lifeless King eyes, but it seemed the shopkeeper was breathing normally. There didn’t seem to be anything strange about her.

“And with that, Mr. Loren, please help me collect every single flower in the shop.”

“How are we supposed to carry them?”

The store wasn’t that large, but between everything from the potted plants to the trimmings, there was quite a sizable number of things contained within it. Some of them had even withered. Loren suspected they’d need a cart to move it all.

“Cut them at the base and bundle them up. We don’t need the roots or pots, so you can leave those behind.”

Lapis inspected the area around the shopkeeper and spotted a few sets of pruning shears. She picked two and casually tossed one to Loren.

Loren caught it well enough, and as he saw Lapis promptly get to work cutting, he did the same, starting with the plants closest to him and cutting the flowers at their stalks.

Pruning the contents of an entire store took a considerable amount of time, but the shopkeeper uttered not a word for the entire duration. It was hard to tell what her eyes were focused on, as they seemed to wander aimlessly.

Sometimes people that looked like residents of the town would wander past on the street, whereas the out-of-towners would peer into the store curiously, but none tried to interrupt Loren and Lapis’s work. They lined up the flowers and piled them high. At length, Loren looked around for something to tie them with, only for Neg to spit out thread from his shoulder.

The spider didn’t merely use the threads to wrap them in one bundle—he also made handles to make them easier to carry. As Loren hoisted the bound flowers in one hand, Neg hopped back onto his shoulder.

“Mr. Neg is quite convenient, isn’t he?” said Lapis. “His abilities are self-evidently useful, but he’s quite clever to boot.”

“I get that he’s smart, but what’s convinced him to stick to my shoulder, anyway?”

Loren had heard that spiders of Neg’s species tended to gravitate to strong individuals. However, Loren considered himself by far the weakest member of his current party. Surely it would make more sense for Neg to choose the demon or the dark god over Loren. Yet the arachnid seemed intent on making a home with him.

“There are two possibilities. First, perhaps you really are the strongest member of our party, Mr. Loren.”

“Yeah, no.”

“Second, he recognizes that if he were to stick to Gula or myself, his chances of survival would plummet.”

That Loren found far easier to accept. When he thought about it, Neg had stayed with Loren even as they passed through a dragon’s lair; if this little guy were attracted purely to the strongest individual at hand, it would have made a beeline for the dragon. But if it did that, it would be seen as a nuisance and immediately killed. Neg understood this, and it stood to reason that it also understood that Lapis and Gula were far *too* powerful to be trifled with; only Loren was hanging around an acceptable level.

“If it *is* the latter, Mr. Neg really is impressive. He’s smart enough to know better.”

“I guess he doesn’t just judge someone by their strength. He gauges their threat level too.”

A mercenary would kill for that kind of ability. It was only natural for a mercenary to run from a foe they couldn’t beat, and if Neg could accurately assess his opponent’s threat levels, he could feasibly avoid any and all unwinnable fights.

“It’d be easier if we could tell what he was saying, but I’m not confident I can hold a conversation with a spider.”

“That’s kinda beyond me too.”

Surely Neg hadn’t understood their banter, yet from his usual perch, Neg drummed his forelimbs against Loren’s shoulder. It

was almost like he was frustrated by his inability to communicate. But perhaps this behavior had nothing to do with what they were saying, and he was simply doing it because he felt like it. Only Neg himself could know.

“That aside, what are we doing with these?” Loren asked, lifting his bundle of flowers.

It was, by definition, a bouquet, but there were so many different flowers, and they had been thrown together so carelessly, that it seemed somewhat wrong to call it that.

“We’ll process them once we’re back with the others,” Lapis said as she left the store.

Loren followed behind her, no less enlightened as to how they were about to combat that aggressive stench. “As someone who experienced that hell firsthand, I’m getting a little nervous.”

“The aroma is impossible to dispel on a fundamental level. I said that, right?”

The stench was so deeply saturated into the sewer that it was impossible to completely clear. But if they didn’t do something, the area would be impossible to explore.

As things stood, the smell was so bad that if they pressed forward through it, they’d be incapacitated before they found anything—maybe even made vulnerable to anything hostile they encountered.

“Covering it up will also be quite difficult. I understood that from mere proximity.”

“Yeah, so what’re we gonna do?”

“We’re going to work with what we have,” Lapis said, voice and expression equally confident, though that did little in the way of explaining an exact plan. “In short, we’re not erasing it, we’re mixing something in and changing it into something else. As for what we’ll be changing it *to*, I suppose you’ll know once you try it out.”

“Never heard of something like that.”

“Humankind generally attempts to solve its problems by eliminating them however possible. Honestly, you humans rely on brute-force solutions far more often than we demons. For the time being, just wait and see and leave it to me.”

As for what a shop's worth of flowers was going to be converted into, Loren concluded he wouldn't understand even if it was explained to him. Nevertheless, Lapis seemed positive they were headed in the right direction.

For now, I'll just do what I have to, Loren decided as he shifted his hold on the great mass of flowers.

Upon returning to the inn—or rather, its yard—Lapis promptly untied the bundle. Then she started a fire with equipment she procured from who knew where and got to work. She minced the freshly bought flowers, mashed them, and dumped them into a steaming liquid. From the sidelines, it was hard to tell what she was trying to accomplish.

"Looks like alchemy to me," Loren observed.

Lapis had used tools to measure the amount of each given ingredient she added to the brew. After stirring a bit, she checked the development of the substance within. As Loren said, it certainly looked like some alchemical process.

"It doesn't just look like alchemy, it's actually quite similar," Lapis replied as she stirred the cauldron of mysterious liquid.

Nearby, Gula peered curiously into the pot and took a whiff of the steam wafting off of it.

"This... This is harsh stuff!" Gula cried out as she rolled on the ground holding her nose.

Ivy watched with a smile, not even attempting to help her as she continued to writhe in pain.

Meanwhile, Loren quietly began to distance himself from the pot—whatever was in it could put a *dark god* out of commission. Yet while the pot must have been letting off quite a powerful smell, it didn't *feel* bad from where he stood.

Lapis smiled at Loren's wariness. "As long as you don't inhale it directly, it degrades in the air and becomes scentless."

Come to think of it, Lapis herself was right up next to the pot and wasn't suffering any adverse effects. It was like she couldn't smell it at all.

"The ratios of liquid and the flower are a little special. The recipe is a secret." Lapis put a finger to her lips. But it was still

unclear what she intended to do with it.

Indifferent to what was going through Loren’s head, Lapis continued to stir, sometimes adding a powder or other substance. Every now and again, she fanned some of the steam toward herself with a hand to get a whiff before adding something else.

It was probably best to leave the work he didn’t quite understand to Lapis. Loren opted to keep an eye on their surroundings in the meantime.



Something was obviously off about the town of Suest. Although it seemed not everyone had been affected, a significant majority of the population had undoubtedly lost their minds.

As Loren and his comrades didn't know what was causing the madness, there was no telling when it would come for them too. Yet knowing the problem existed did little to lead to the solution. Loren tried not to think about it.

But even if they left off searching for a solution, there was no telling what these crazed townsfolk might do next. They needed to be as cautious as possible—though it wasn't like anyone ever entered the inn, or even emerged from inside it.

Time simply passed and nothing *happened*. The sun slowly started its downward descent, its light tinting red, until finally, the skies took on the color of night.

Lapis's work continued. The two dark gods were left with nothing to do and wandered around, occasionally checking in on her progress. Gula at one point failed to learn her lesson and once again stuck her head into the steam, only to end up on the ground again.

"Looks like they're a bit early today," Ivy suddenly said.

The sun had set, and the stars were making their presence known in the sky. Loren looked to Ivy, wondering what she meant, then realized her eyes were directed outside the boundary of the inn's yard. He immediately asked Scena for help.

Within a darkening world, he was lent the darkness-piercing eyes of a Lifeless King. Loren saw that people were gathering once more, and not far away. What's more, it had only been ten-odd people last time; this group was more than double that.

"Lapis, how much longer..."

"I just finished."

Lapis overturned the cauldron, using what liquid remained to extinguish the fire.

Crackles and snaps filled the air as white smoke rose from the firewood. Gula—who had by now stuck her head into the steam several times, and had never fared any better—sprinted away from it, but Lapis calmly waved the smoke aside with one hand and snuffed out the last embers with her foot.

“Preparations are complete. We can head out whenever you want.”

“All right. Gula, Ivy, you’re coming too.”

“You got it.”

“Certainly, I believe that would be for the best. Could you give me a moment? I’ll seal the wagon.”

As Ivy did whatever she was doing to the wagon parked in the yard, Loren kept a close watch on the crowd as it amassed, otherwise unmoving.

“So many expressionless people, frozen, staring into space. It’s quite uncanny, don’t you think?” Lapis said as she leaned against Loren. He wholeheartedly agreed with her on that one. Uncanny was, in fact, an understatement.

In a moment they were joined by Ivy, who’d finished up and returned without a sound. “All clear.”

“Okay, then once they start moving—”

The group was on the move before Loren had finished. They took off at the same slow trudge. Based on their trajectory, their destination seemed to once again be the western sewer entrance.

“Let’s go,” Loren said shortly before slipping into pursuit at a slick run. The three women followed him through the dark townscape.

Since they knew where the slow-moving group was headed, there was no need to tail them. Loren’s party circled around ahead and took up positions around the sewer entrance.

Even if the group took a turn along the way, Scena’s powers allowed her to detect signs of life, and she would alert them to any changes. They didn’t have to worry about losing their quarry.

‹It’s quite convenient, isn’t it, Mister? Don’t you think it’d be a pity to relinquish me?›

“If we’re separated, I’ll just ask you to do the search yourself. Same result.”

‹But you can use a Lifeless King’s power without any risk to yourself.›

“Yeah, but it’s not my power.”

Loren conversed with Scena in hushed tones as he and his party lay low around the sewer entrance.

Soon after, the trudging group appeared. Their expressions were as vacant as ever. Given their condition, Loren wondered what would happen if he simply stopped hiding. But just in case, he stifled his breath and kept to the shadows.

The group paid him and his companions no heed as they headed straight for the iron door. Without any hesitation, they pushed it open, apathetic to the foul odor that blew over them, and stepped through without the slightest hesitation.

Loren's party waited until the last members of the group shut the door behind them before they emerged from their hiding places.

"We're giving chase."

"If you insist..."

"Now, now, we have a proper countermeasure this time," Lapis said, her hand holding what looked like a white lozenge. It seemed she had quite a number of these pellets. They were presumably the outcome of her half-day effort to combat the foul odor.

"Do we swallow them?" asked Gula.

"Do you want to?" Lapis asked in turn.

Gula frowned, but Lapis waved her off and began explaining. "They aren't poisonous, but I would not recommend imbibing them."

As she said this, Lapis squeezed the pellet in her hand—then suddenly circled behind Loren. She buried her head in his back and wrapped her arms around his waist. Despite Loren's surprise, Lapis maintained her same posture and spoke in a muffled voice.

"Until it takes full effect, the stench will still be unbearable for me. But I think I can endure in this position. Could you take the lead?"

Loren didn't know what she was trying to do, but they couldn't investigate without pressing forward. And so in this way, Loren walked to the sewer entrance and opened the door.

As the terrible aroma struck them, Lapis let out a slight shriek from Loren's back. Gula was hit at full force, and she

clapped a hand over her nose and mouth, letting out a sound of disgust that was a far cry from elegant.

Perhaps Ivy had expected this, as she had covered her mouth with a prepared cloth before Loren even opened the door. But the smell outstripped her preparations, and she had to place her hands over her cloth mask as well.

“In we go.”

Only Loren was unable to protect himself. If anything happened, he needed to be able to draw his sword, and so he had to keep his hands free. He couldn’t cover his mouth—he had to take it all in.

Consequently, he was assailed by a fierce nausea. But he had experienced this particular concoction of odors once before, and he’d been faced with similar trials on the battlefield. He managed to withstand it and dragged Lapis along down the stairs.

Soon enough, they were at the bottom. Loren stepped out onto one of the paths that lined the waterway and scanned the area with Scena’s eyes.

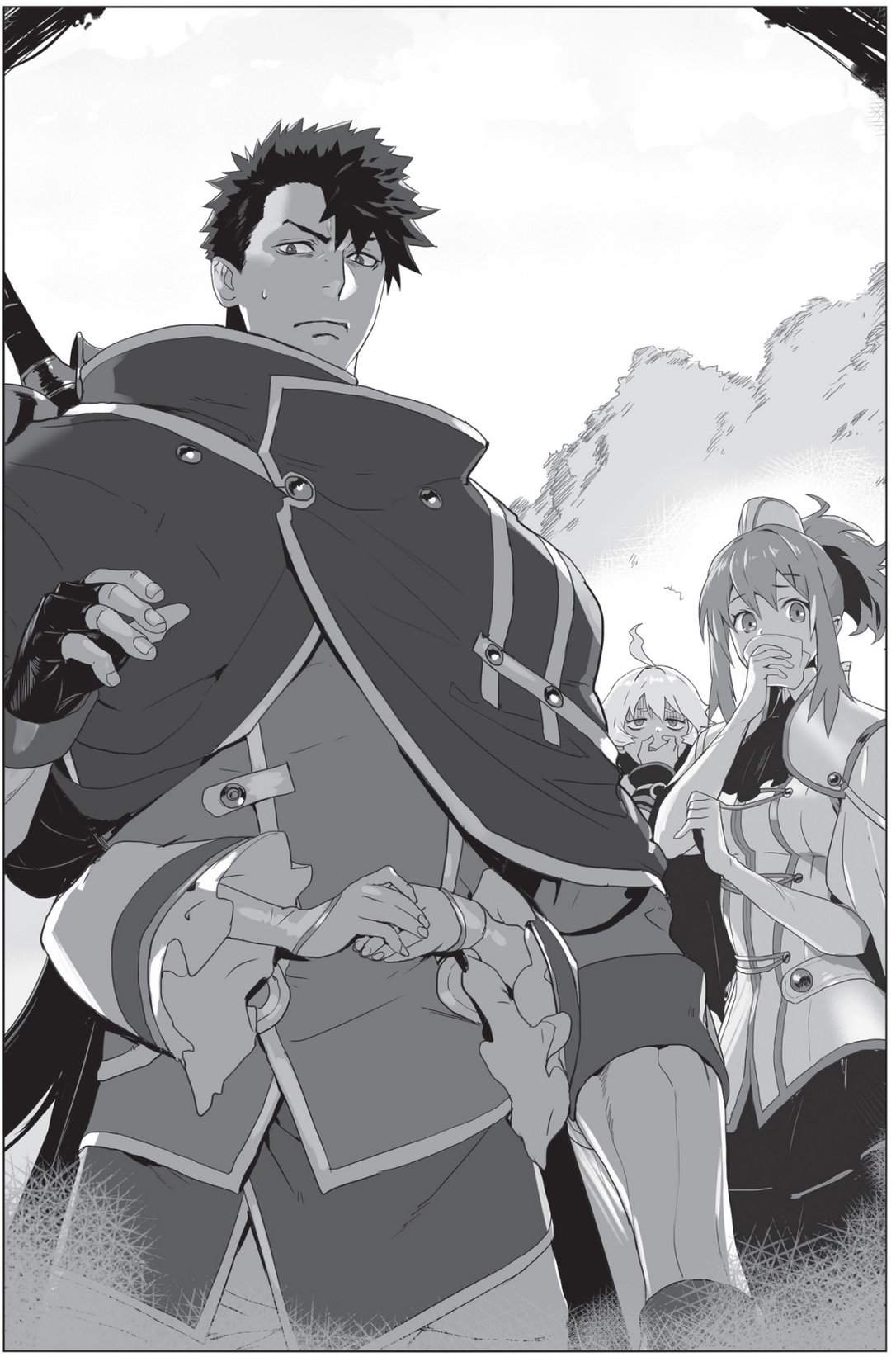
So many people had come down here, yet by the time they arrived, there wasn’t a shadow to be seen. Even Scena’s life-detecting senses could only pick up those same small life forms here and there, and nothing that might have belonged to a human.

Where could they have gone in such a short time? Where were they hiding? Loren pondered these questions as Lapis rummaged around, produced one of the white pellets, and, seemingly aimlessly, tossed it into the sewage.

It bounced once against the walkway but found its mark as it plopped into the water, where it was immediately swallowed.

“What’s that supposed to do?”

After tossing the pellet, Lapis buried her face back into Loren, her face pressed against his spine. Before she could answer his question, the water began to bubble and boil at the place where the pellet had fallen.



Loren readied himself for whatever might emerge—yet Scena's eyes indicated no new signs of life. What exactly was making it bubble, then?

Suddenly, Loren realized that the unbearable stench had died down, if just slightly.

"Oh? The smell changed."

Gula—who'd been holding her mouth and throat with a terrible look on her face—released herself and inhaled. Ivy had kept her cloth shoved against her mouth, but now she loosened it and looked around curiously.

"Seems it worked out."

The stink of sewage weakened. In its place, a faint, floral smell arose.

Just to be sure it had worked, Lapis released Loren and lifted her face. "The pellet reacts with water and releases gas. The gas then reacts to the odor and renders it temporarily inert."

"That's incredible."

"The issue is that it has a limited radius, and it cannot entirely eliminate the offending odor. The effect will fade over time, and the smell will be right back where it was to start."

In short, it reduced the smell to a barely manageable level, and since each pellet had a limited range, they would need to keep scattering them along the way. What's more, it was hardly a permanent solution.

"Still, that's quite something. Now it's only about as bad as a jaunt through a latrine. I can put up with this."

"We typically use these on toilets at the outskirts of my homeland. It also has disinfectant and insect-repelling properties."

Backed up sewage water could lead to infestations, and it was also a breeding ground for disease. It seemed the demons had devised a method to mitigate these risks, and Lapis had used it to make their sewer search possible.

"I think you'd be in the clear to spread this bit of technology."

"I doubt it. At the very least, not while humankind continues to abjure demonkind. Not that I'm blaming anyone in particular."

Humans avoided demons due to a constant level of misbehavior. Lapis claimed that not every demon was up to no

good, but it was hard to say if this general impression could ever be revised.

After all, a number of demons simply shrugged when some of their own that went about doing things that made them all hated, and a number of humans hated an entire race for the actions of a few. If you tried to say one or the other side was in the wrong, you were stepping into delicate territory.

Whether or not Lapis knew what was going through Loren's head, she smiled. "Although I wouldn't mind letting you in on the secret, Mr. Loren. After all, this human doesn't hate me."

Chapter 6:
Progress to Arrival

“WHICH WAY SHOULD we go?”

Since their quarry had once again vanished without a trace, they had no leads to go off of. The sewer extended straight to the left and right of the stairs they had emerged from, yet nothing indicated which direction they should go.

“How about we prop up a stick and see where it falls?”

“We don’t have a stick.”

“Then your sword, Mr. Loren.”

“I don’t want it touching this ground…”

There was, after all, a torrent of wastewater flowing right beside the walkway, and no telling what might have splashed onto it. Loren definitely didn’t want his sword—which he had to hold with his own two hands—to make contact with all that.

What’s more, this greatsword had originally been owned by Lapis’s mother. He doubted she’d love to hear Lapis was suggesting using it like they would some random twig, though Lapis didn’t seem to think anything of it.

“This is just a hunch, but I get the feeling it’s this way.” Ivy pointed down one leg of the corridor.

She said it so naturally and with so little hesitation, Loren suspected that despite her claim, she had seen some sort of clue. “Just asking for reference, but what made you decide that?”

“Don’t you think this sewage system is sort of strange?”

Don’t answer a question with another question, Loren wanted to say. But her question made him take a look around. This yielded no epiphanies, and Loren cocked his head curiously.

“For now, let me explain as we walk. If we stick around too long, Lapis’s pellet will wear off before we’ve made any progress.”

Thus, they started in the direction Ivy had indicated.

Though it wasn’t like they dragged their feet, they still proceeded incredibly slowly. The reason: any given one of Lapis’s pellets had a set range of effect, and if they passed the boundary, they were once again struck by air thick with that unbearable odor.

To ensure that didn't happen, they stopped every so often for Lapis to throw another pellet ahead, and it took a bit of time for the pellet to emit gas and lower the miasma to an acceptable level.

If they ran into an emergency, they would have to run without this protection, but as long as that wasn't the case, they didn't have to force themselves to inhale the stench. So it became an endless cycle of throwing a pellet, waiting, and making a little more progress before doing it all over again.

As she was the one pointing the way, Ivy walked at the lead as she explained her reasoning over her shoulder. "As I'm sure you know, Suest is in the middle of nowhere. The town is decently large, but that's really all there is to it. This modest town has a truly elaborate sewage system of the sort you would only see in a royal capital. Don't you think that's unnatural?"

"Now that you mention it."

The sewers were terribly expansive. The ceilings were so high, Loren could swing his greatsword without any risk of hitting it. Maintaining a system of this scale required quite a sum of money, and you had to have a very good reason for constructing one in a remote town that seemed to have nothing going for it.

"It's quite odd, right? So why do you think it was built?"

"How are we supposed to know that?" asked Lapis as she tossed another pellet into the wastewater.

Perhaps a resident of Suest might have been able to answer, but Loren's party were outsiders who hadn't even had the time to do any research. There was no way they could have had even the slightest idea.

"The reason is simple. This sewage system existed *before* the town—meaning, it was there from the very start."

Ivy said this with pride, like she was stating the answer to a clever riddle she had devised herself. Yet Loren stared back at her triumphant face feeling none the wiser.

"So you're saying there was just *a sewer*? With nothing above it. Just a random sewer in goodness knows where?" asked Lapis, giving voice to the question on Loren's mind.

Sewers only served their purpose when they served towns populated by people. That was the entire point! Without a town,

there was no reason to dig an underground sewage system in the first place.

Who has the money and time to build a facility that's not even going to be used? Loren couldn't imagine.

"That's not exactly what I meant. I mean to say there was originally an underground canal, not necessarily one that was part of a sewage system."

Presumably, when someone had come up with the bright idea of setting up this town, they'd conducted a survey of the land and stumbled upon this place by chance—at least so Ivy theorized.

The sewer boasted magnificent construction and was connected to somewhere far away. Thus, the survey team had decided to use it as a sewage system and built a town over the pre-existing waterway.

"And that's when we see the start of the town known as Suest."

It was unclear how long ago that was—but Ivy spoke as if she'd borne witness herself. Had she been a normal person, this would have been a figure of speech. However, in Ivy's case, it wasn't absurd to imagine she'd actually watched the town grow from its inception.

"So what's wrong with that?" That said, this talk of history did little for their investigation. Loren wasn't sure what Ivy was getting at. *She's not trying to get me to study here of all places, right?*

Just then, he felt Neg patting his legs against his shoulder.

What's up? Loren then recalled the insect-repellent properties of the pellets Lapis had been throwing into the water.

Perhaps for them, the pellets did no more than contain the bad odor, but it might be far more unpleasant for a spider. Loren felt bad for Neg, but it was too late to go back aboveground now. After thinking for a moment, Loren unlatched the chest area of his jacket.

It was a sizable jacket and was fairly roomy inside.

Though a normal spider would undoubtedly be crushed, Neg was covered in a hard exoskeleton, and Loren figured he would be fine. As soon as Neg saw the opening, he slid into the jacket's

interior, coming to rest at the center of Loren's chest as he closed it back up.

The cloth was thick, and though something felt a bit off, Loren knew Neg would be better off tucked away. His eyes met Lapis's, who was eyeing where Neg had burrowed, her expression oddly envious.

"Mr. Neg is a boy, you know."

"Yeah, I know… What about it?"

Lapis's cheeks puffed up slightly, and Loren tilted his head. What had her miffed?

"May I continue?" Ivy reservedly asked over their exchange. Loren nodded. "The origins of Suest, yes, I believe that's where I was. But what we have yet to determine is the nature of this waterway's original use."

"And you're saying you know the answer?"

It was hard to imagine her confessing to knowing nothing at all—not after leading them along this far.

Ivy nodded. "Once upon a time, this was the location of a certain research facility."

Lapis tossed another pellet into the water. The ripple lingered over the filthy water as it sank, and a moment later, a torrent of bubbles breached the surface. Once the bubbles popped, vapor poured out of them and altered the rancid odor.

"As for what they were researching…it just so happened to pertain to the reconstruction of lost body parts, as well as making replacements for bodies that had grown too old."

"You mean…"

Loren had heard of all this somewhere before.

Ivy continued without answering him directly. "Now you may be wondering why I know that. But as it happens, one of the researchers from that facility was chosen as a test subject for a different experiment, in which they were remade into something patently not human. But all that's already said and done, so I'm sure I don't need to retread those grounds."

Ivy came to a stop. She stared at the bubbling water, her tone dropping. "Originally, the laboratory had multiple facilities, both above- and underground. However, so much time has passed

that I believe the ones up top have all disappeared. The only portions that escaped destruction were below the surface, as was the drainage system that served to sweep their experimental waste to the nearby river."

"Why would a research facility need such a large waterway?"

If it was only for wastewater, surely a single narrow channel would suffice. This system, on the other hand, consisted of multiple branching paths. Considering the scale, these paths probably extended to every corner of Suest. Ivy's explanation simply didn't add up.

"That's because of the on-site residence for the workers. All this is a remnant of that."

"Meaning that body-growing facility you were talking about..."

"Yes, it should be at the end of this waterway."

That meant this sewer was in fact a ruin of the ancient kingdom.

At least do a little research before you start using it, Loren thought. Although apart from the main facility, there didn't seem to be anything special about the waterway. Even if the people of Suest had been able to get someone to look into it, they wouldn't have found anything noteworthy.

Sure, it was old. But it wasn't like the ancient kingdom was the only civilization that had left ruins in its wake, and it was likely the locals had seen it as nothing more than the remains of a canal someone had built in times long gone.

"I don't know what's causing these disappearances, but seeing as we're down here anyways, I think that facility's a good place to start."

Loren had begun to notice a pattern since he became an adventurer—whenever something mysterious was happening, it generally tied back to some ruins of the ancient kingdom, or to the tools they'd made.

To think they would cause an endless stream of trouble even after their whole civilization fell to pieces... *They really were a troublesome lot,* Loren thought.

In any case, by this logic, investigating those ruins was probably their fastest route to resolving the problem.

“The underground facility was in working order the last time I came through here. I’m sure it’s still fine.”

“You’re essentially paying us before we’ve finished the job. Are you okay with that?”

Ivy’s promised reward was information about the ruins to which they were now headed. They had yet to resolve the incident, and Ivy was about to lose her leverage.

With a beaming smile, Ivy said, “I don’t believe you’re the sort to leave a job half done.”

“Glad you trust me.” Though Loren wasn’t quite sure what to think about a human who had the trust of a dark god.

As he thought that, he noticed that the other dark god in residence—Gula—was staring at a single point, unmoving. He followed her line of sight. She was looking at the water’s surface, at the bubbles where Lapis had thrown a pellet moments before.

“What’s wrong, Gula?”

“The bubbles look off. Too many.”

Loren took another look.

Lapis’s pellets weren’t particularly large, and though the formula did disperse a bit, the bubbles only ever covered a small area. Yet at the point where Gula was staring, there was an unusually wide spread.

“Lapis, you only threw one?”

“I have a terrible feeling about this,” Lapis said with a nod.

As they spoke, the bubbles roiled with even more force and in even greater numbers, and from below them, a black shadow neared the surface.

I need to be ready for whatever comes out…

If only he could have been. After everything Loren had gone through, he was never actually surprised by his surprise. He could take a fighting stance, but only a true master could hope to keep a level head regardless of the situation.

For that precise reason, no one could blame him for yelping when the shadow breached the water’s frothing surface.

“Whoa!”

The thing that appeared in the filth wasn't alone. It had a pitch-black head the size of a clenched fist and a serpentine body as thick as a human arm. Its long body was dotted with rows upon rows of slender, bright-red legs. Its head sported two protruding fangs, each the length of a human finger, which let off a clatter as they tapped rapidly together.

Had the thing been a tenth of its size, Loren would have been well-acquainted with it.

Also, Loren wouldn't have even made a peep if it had been just the one of them. But the massive body was entangled with another, and another, until they had form a wriggling mass like a net.

"Are these…centipedes?!" Lapis's voice was equal parts loathing and disgust.

The centipedes were so large, it was as though they'd grown from mutated human arms, and their black lustrous bodies wriggled uncannily.

The sight of these enormous centipedes coiled around one another was too horrendous to behold, and their sudden appearance from the murky depths had left the party speechless.

"Centipedes?! Aren't they way too huge for that?!"

"But what else could they be?"

Certainly appearance-wise they were all over a swarm of -centipedes, but Loren just couldn't wrap his head around that reality. The great writhing mass of wriggling bodies was simply too *large*.

As he stood stock still, silently staring, his mind was only brought back when Gula said, "H-hey. Umm… Is it growing?"

Just as she said, the number of centipedes was increasing. More and more of them slithered out of the water.

"That ain't good," Loren said and turned to Ivy. "Which way to the ruins? We're booking it."

Ivy pointed and was about to take off when she came to an abrupt halt. "How am I supposed to go that way?!"

It wasn't like anything was blocking her. However, Loren quickly understood what had stopped her. "The smell?"

Lapis's scent neutralizers had a limited range; if Ivy wanted to run as directed, she would breach that radius. Though Loren figured he could put up with it for a bit, if he ran in that stench for too long, the smell would knock him straight out.

Lapis immediately tossed another one of her pellets, but it would take time for it to take effect, and the small size of her pellets meant she couldn't throw them far.

"Fine, let's just move as fast as we can."

Loren had Lapis take the lead with Ivy and directed Gula behind them. Loren served as the rear guard, and he watched as more and more centipedes emerged.

Though slowly, the swarm neared the banks of the waterway. It wouldn't be long before they reached land. And once they did, there would be no stopping them. Centipedes could be terribly fast when they wanted to be.

Granted, there was no guarantee they would instantly attack, but centipedes were carnivorous, and at their size, it was unlikely they'd just ignore a tasty meal loitering before their eyes.

"Is it possible to intercept them?" asked Gula, who had drawn back next to Loren.

Loren quickly shook his head. It would be simple enough to slice through one of the huge things with the sword on his back, but there were simply too many to account for. In the time it took him to slay ten, the rest would have wrapped around him. His weapon would become deadweight as he used his hands to tear them away, and in that time, even more would dive in to make a meal out of him.

Considering the location, burning was also off the list. It was incredibly dangerous to use fire in an enclosed space, and it was entirely possible some of the gas rising off the sewage was flammable.

Back in his mercenary days, Loren had learned from first-hand experience that the gas released by rot burned very well indeed.

"We just have to run. You don't want to become bug feed, do you?" But then Loren realized something. He looked to Gula. "Can you eat them with that authority of yours?"

“Sure…if that doesn’t put you off of snogging me after this, I don’t mind.” But her smile was tight, and there was clear disgust on her face.

Loren had to ask, “Does your authority’s stomach connect with your real one?”

“That’s a secret. But gimme some tongue and I’ll teach you *all* about how sewage-seasoned centipedes taste, whether you like it or not. You’d better be ready.”

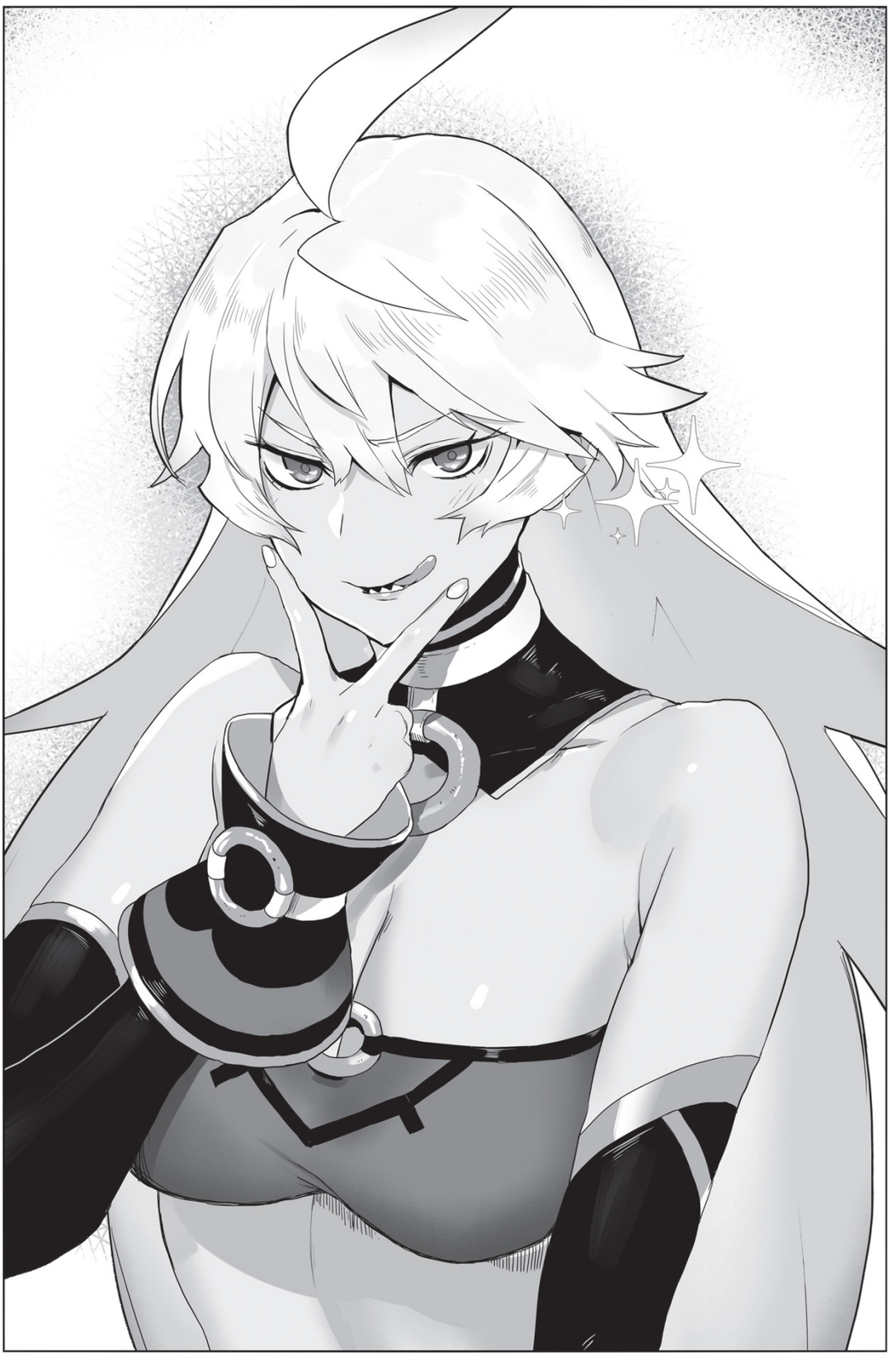
“I’m not forcing you. Don’t make that face.” Loren hadn’t gotten his hopes up. He’d expected nothing and so wasn’t disappointed to get nothing in return. Rather, if even proposing the idea put Gula in a bad mood, he felt he owed her a bit of an apology. Although she still looked just as discontent, she wasn’t taking it as seriously.

“I’ll do it if we get cornered, okay?”

“Let’s pray it doesn’t come to that.”

But as they conversed, the centipedes inched closer to shore, and still more were flooding out of the waterway.

This wasn’t the time to talk. Loren urged Gula on, rushing after Lapis and Ivy, who had already gotten some distance away. It was at that moment that he heard what sounded like Lapis’s scream.



“Mr. Loren! The centipedes are crawling up here too!”

“Are we cursed or something? How badly do the gods hate us?”

When Loren first entered the sewer system, Scena had seen - numerous signals from smaller life forms. He cursed his luck—the situation only seemed to be getting worse.

“Loren! Now it’s zombies!”

Glancing ever so slightly back, he saw Ivy pointing toward something that was making a drenched and splattering sound. What he saw next left him startled.

A filth-covered human hand had burst from the sewage water and latched onto the curb of the passageway. It proceeded to haul its body out of the water. Judging by the clothes, this had presumably once been a resident of Suest—a middle-aged man.

The zombie made no attempt to wipe away the filth, or to comb the water out of its hair. The stench of sewage mixed with the reek of rot as it dragged its body down the walkway. There were no longer eyes in its sockets, which had been reduced to pitch-black cavities.

At times, an incomplete set of teeth slipped in and out of view in its half-open mouth. Yet what truly sent a shiver down Loren’s spine was the centipede that poked its slick head out of the man’s maw.

“He’s been eaten!”

As the body thrust out its arms, searching for someone to share its misery, one of those limbs fell flat onto the floor.

As might be expected, one of those long, black lustrous bodies emerged from the hole the arm left behind. It toppled to the ground, where it continued its feast of fallen arm, tearing off chunks of meat with its enormous fangs.

The hapless man’s swollen stomach looked like the beer gut that one might expect on a man of his age, but the irregular undulations across its surface made clear that fat wasn’t the only thing stuffed in there.

Loren nearly froze as he watched the cruelty unfold, but he quickly reminded himself there was a time and place for compassion and forced his legs to move.

He had a good reason. The mound of centipedes in the water had made landfall. Worse yet, near the devoured undead man's feet, another hand emerged to grope at the walkway's edge.

"This is getting out of hand."

The army of centipedes was already insurmountable. If zombies were added to the mix, Loren would have to demand of the heavens just how badly they wanted him dead.

The zombies he could lay to rest easily enough. But if he cut them open, he would release the countless arthropods within their corpses, which would leave them in even more of a bind.

"Ah, damn it all! Run! Run!"

Was that horrible clatter the sound of fangs, or the rattle of hard exoskeletons rubbing against one another? The black wave let off terrible clicking and clacking as it closed in. Loren glanced back only once and was ready to break into a sprint only for Lapis to stop him.

"If you go too fast, you'll pass the range of the deodorant, Mr. Loren."

"Bad smells or death, you gotta choose one."

Was this really the time to be worried about some ugly aroma?

Lapis plainly replied, "They are equally as distasteful."

She said it so cut-and-dried, Loren was nearly convinced. But of course, he couldn't just agree to hang around.

"Just run already! If you don't like the smell, throw your pellets farther!"

"They're too light!" Lapis wailed.

Not that the swarm cared about any of this. As if to spur the bugs even farther, more and more waterlogged corpses clambered onto the path, teetering back and forth as they staggered toward the party.

"Hurry! If you don't want to be drowning in sewage, or bugs, or rotten meat, put up with it and run!"

"I should have made them larger! I was such a fool!"

Lapis desperately hurled her pellets. Yet even with a demon's strength, the light projectiles couldn't fly far enough. She hadn't made them with intent to hurl them about, so perhaps it was unavoidable. Yet she still cursed her lack of foresight.

Loren slapped her on the back and began to fear that they'd never get away from the encroaching black wave. It showed no signs of stopping.

"There's even more of them now!"

As he jogged, Loren now and again glanced over his shoulder to gauge their foe. The volume of centipedes on their tail continued to increase; they had by now consumed the sewer's walkway like a black carpet.

Small consolation: the insect-repellent properties of Lapis's pellets seemed to have at least a little effect and somewhat slowed their advance. They were only slightly faster than the zombies, and all told, Loren's party maintained a reasonable pace while staying out of reach.

However, their pursuers were also too fast to shake off. They kept up at a steady rate and showed no signs of stopping. If they paused for a second, it wasn't hard to imagine they'd be swallowed by the wave in no time flat.

"How far to the ruins? Or is there any place where we can get the high ground?" Loren asked Ivy. He wanted the quickest way out of these sewers. That said, even if they did manage to reach their original destination or escape, there was no guarantee they'd outrun the centipedes.

But if they reached somewhere it was safe to start a fire, they could feasibly drive the creatures off. Certainly their odds of survival would be higher doing anything other than running through this awful labyrinth.

"It shouldn't be long, but there's one problem!"

You only mention it now? Loren felt like holding his head. He hated the idea of yet another obstacle, but he had to know. It would be even worse to be surprised. "What is it?!"

"We're going to run into a door, and it'll take a moment to open!"

Apparently the door wasn't the sort that could be grabbed and pulled. Ivy would have to operate a nearby device to unlock it, and it would only do so slowly.

Having to wait for a bit usually wouldn't have been any kind of problem, but when you were being chased by a swarm of centipedes, any stretch of seconds could be the difference between life and death.

"Can you run ahead and get it open when we catch up?"

"You want me to charge into that stench? Are you a demon, Loren?"

"Our lives are on the line, you know!" Loren snapped.

A resigned look came over Ivy, but then she looked ahead, pointed, and cried out, "Ah, there it is."

"So we're already there!"

If it was in eyeshot, then the door wasn't far enough away to make a difference. Sending Ivy ahead wouldn't buy any significant time.

If she'd just brought it up sooner... Loren thought. But the moment he looked in the direction Ivy pointed, that frustration vanished from his head.

A portion of the wall was missing—in other words the door, because it was already open.

"In here! Hurry!" a figure cried out while beckoning them inside.

As soon as Loren saw who it was, he yelled in surprise. "Mills?! What are you doing here?"

"Just hurry!"

It was no time for small talk. Loren picked up the pace, hoisting up Gula and Lapis along the way.

"Grab my neck!" Loren called to Ivy as he passed her.

"I'm in your care." Ivy slung her arms around his neck, which left her dangling on his back.

Loren was now burdened by the weight of three people, but he mustered his strength and powered through. At the same time, he had breached the radius of Lapis's deodorizer, and the smell hit

him like a warhorse. The smell just about swept his mind away and he gritted his teeth.

Running at full force, he charged straight through the entranceway that Mills was leaning out of and spun toward the door. “We’re in! Close it!”

Ivy dropped and dashed to the wall, swiftly manipulating the device stationed there. The door shut behind them with agonizing slowness and a long grating sound.

“They’re coming through!”

But as Ivy had warned them, the door was far from quick. What’s more, the centipedes had caught on to the fact that their prey was on the verge of escape—and they picked up the pace.

Lowering Lapis and Gula to the floor, Loren swiftly drew the blade on his back. He smacked aside the few centipedes that skittered in first, then tore through the shoulder of a zombie on their heels before kicking its body into the encroaching horde.

“Ignite! Fiamma Unghia!”

Finally, he poured mana into his greatsword and used the flames that surged from its blade to violently force back the swarm.

The last time Loren used this ability, he had been drained of nearly all the power in his body—but the experience had taught him how to keep a smidge for himself. He moderated the sword’s output and burned only the vanguard, using the heat to make the remaining centipedes falter.

Because he shot the fire from behind a closing door, Loren hoped that even if it ignited flammable gasses, he’d be spared the consequences. At long last, luck seemed to be on his side. He didn’t kick off any unintended collateral damage, and as the centipedes momentarily froze, no more managed to follow the first handful.

Slowly, the wall sealed completely. Reluctant though he was, Loren used his sword and feet to finish off the centipedes that had managed to follow them in.

“Oh,” Mills muttered, “you’re Loren…” He let his back fall against the wall as he slumped down. A dying lantern lay beside him, its feeble light illuminating the space they now found themselves in.

Did he only just recognize me? Loren wondered. But come to think of it, they had been running down pitch-black sewers without a light of their own.

Loren had Scena's eyes to thank for his ability to maneuver, but Mills was stuck with his human senses. He hadn't been able to properly see them until they were within reach of his lantern, and even that was hardly sufficient.

"It must be so inconvenient to be human," Lapis mused.

"Right?" said Gula.

"My thoughts exactly," Ivy agreed.

The non-humans on deck shared a nod, and Loren proceeded to ignore them. He squatted beside Mills, who seemed a good deal weaker than when Loren had last seen him.

The smell of sewage wafted off of the man's body, but now wasn't the time to get hung up on that. Loren had run into this nook in a hurry and hadn't had the chance to assess Mills's condition. Now that he got a better look at his old comrade, he saw that Mills no longer carried a weapon, and that his leather armor had been torn in several places. He was bleeding, and his breath was shallow.

On top of that, Mills's right eye was somewhat glazed, and it was hard to tell where he was looking. Meanwhile, his left eye seemed oddly swollen, and it shifted here and there and here again. Indeed, his two eyes were moving independently of each other. It was purely uncanny to see that one eye move as though it had a life of its own.

Loren kept his question short: "What happened?"

Mills moved his lips to respond, only to break into a coughing fit. By Loren's estimation, the man didn't have much time left.

"I don't know. After I talked to you… We got ready and ventured down here. That much I know… But from there, I don't remember a thing… By the time I knew it, the bugs were all over me, pulling me into the water."

Mills had no idea what had become of his two comrades. But he understood that they were probably dead, and he had done his best to resist. Though he'd lost most of his equipment to the sewers in the process, he'd managed to crawl out of the water. He

was terribly wounded, and had barely fended off the bugs that chased after him as he staggered down the corridor.

It was pure coincidence that he'd opened the door he'd led them through; he had been forced to use the wall for support as he moved, and his body had pressed up against the device, activating it.

"I thought I was done for... But I guess I got one small scrap of luck, meeting you at the end."

"I hear you. Don't talk too much. We have a priest. We can fix you right up." Though Loren said this, he knew Mills was likely beyond saving.

Mills sluggishly shook his head. "Don't waste anything on me. I know I'm finished. And...even without the wounds, it'd be too late for me."

"What do you mean?"

"It's...in my head... There's something *in* there..." Mills slowly lifted his hand, pressing it against his left eye. It was still moving however it pleased, but once he covered it, he looked practically fine. "My friends... I think it got them too. There's something in my *head*... It's telling me to...to let it eat me... To be its prey..."

"Mills..."

"Our memories...our power to *think*, they're eating it all. I'm not gonna be *me* anymore..."

Mills's voice was trembling. Was this his fear of encroaching death, or his fear of losing himself? Loren didn't know. He didn't know what to *do*. He turned toward Lapis for help, but Lapis simply shook her head in silence.

Loren knew what she was trying to get across—there was no rescuing Mills.

"I was a mercenary, for Pete's sake... I knew I wasn't gonna get a good end. I just. I wanna be me when I go..."

Mills looked at Loren with his remaining eye. Loren understood what he was asking for. Still, he hesitated, unable to tell himself this was really the right call.

He waited too long. Mills forced himself to say it aloud, lest his message be lost:

“Please, Loren. Do it for my sake… I don’t care what happens after I die, but I don’t wanna be bug feed while I’m still kicking.”

“Is that…really what you want?”

“It is… Though I’m sorry you have to be the one to do it.”

As Mills nodded, Loren stood.

If he left Mills to his fate, his old comrade would be devoured by the centipedes. Worse, something was overtaking his mind. So, killing Mills while he was still human, while he was still aware of *himself*, was only merciful.

Loren convinced himself of this and raised his sword.

Which was when he heard Scena’s voice in his head: *‹I can make it painless, Mister.›*

Loren lowered his blade.

Mills’s expression thickened with despair. He thought Loren wouldn’t grant his request. His right eye watched as Loren leaned over him and pressed an index finger against his brow. He didn’t understand what Loren was doing.

“We walked the same battlefields,” said Loren. “You must’ve gotten sick of cutting people down and watching them fall, right?”

“Maybe so…”

“This is a bit unfair, but I’ll end it painlessly.” A faint white light emerged from Loren’s fingertip.

Once Mills’s eyes took in the light, his expression became truly serene. “Huh… I see, you know how to put a man at ease…”

The strength left the hand Mills held to his face, and it fell limp. His left eye finally stopped twitching, and finally, Mills closed his eyes.

“Yeah, that’s right… It’s all coming back to me now. The chief, he…I heard someone saw him up north, in the Justinia Empire… Why did I ever forget that…?”

“Thanks for the info. Now sleep.”

Mills offered no response. Loren waved his finger to snuff out its unholy light. By then, the man had drawn his last breath.

Chapter 7:
From Funeral to Conjecture

NO ONE SPOKE to Loren as he offered a moment of silence. They watched over him wordlessly as he prayed for the husk that had once been Mills.

After this was done, Loren squatted beside the body and began to inspect it. He removed the metal guild tag and tossed it to Ivy, who caught and swiftly tucked it into her pocket.

If Loren could have, he would have retrieved the guild tags of Mills's party members as well, but he hadn't the first idea where to find their corpses. If they had been swallowed by the swarm of centipedes, they were not available to be found.

"Can I count on you to take care of that?" Loren asked Ivy.

She nodded. "I accept the duty of documenting what happened to Mr. Mills and his party."

"Thanks for that. I'd like to bury him, but…"

Loren would have dug a grave if they had been standing on earth. But they were in ruins of the ancient kingdom, surrounded by stone walls and flooring, with nowhere to inter a corpse.

Perhaps they had no choice but to abandon him here. But then a wandering spirit might overtake his body and turn him into one of the undead. Even if not, if the centipede tide ever managed to break into the room, Mills would simply be devoured.

I'd rather not leave him to that, Loren thought. Was there anything he could even do? He couldn't think of anything. He'd pretty much given up when Lapis walked up to Mills's body.

"If you want some funeral rites performed, then look no further than this priest of the god of knowledge."

"You sure you're up for it?"

"Why, of course. This is my main occupation."

Lapis hadn't uttered a single lie, yet still Loren felt anxious. With that said, there was no one else he could turn to now, so he took a step back and left the business to her.

Lapis stood directly in front of the body. She closed her eyes, placed her left hand on her chest, and directed her right hand

toward Mills. “Soul of Mills, who fell in these forsaken lands, in the name of Kuhklu, Lord of Knowledge, I beseech thee return to the cycle, and there await your next life. May his light be your guide, so you never drift astray.”

There was no special sound, no flash of light, but after Lapis had finished her prayer, Loren could tell that the air around Mills’s body had calmed, just a touch.

Loren had known far too many men who’d had no one at their side in their last moments. Who were abandoned, without a priest’s blessing, to be eaten by wild beasts or to wander the earth as undead monstrosities. For a mercenary, this right here was one of the better ways to go.

Lapis lowered her hand and opened her eyes. “Now he won’t become an undead, at the very least… But what shall we do with the body?”

Loren thought a bit. “Can we burn it?”

They couldn’t haul it around with them. They were in the ruins now, and though this was a disrespectful way to put it, an unwieldy corpse would just bang into everything.

Bones and ash would be more portable. But even those were a difficult prospect, seeing as there was no guarantee they’d make it back aboveground in one piece. Loren wasn’t even sure if it was possible to cleanly reduce every last bit of Mills to ash. The problem was a lack of firepower.

When he articulated this, Ivy reservedly raised her hand.

“Can you do it?”

“Leave it to me. Despite my appearance, I was once known as a dark god. My combat skills are somewhat reduced in this form, but I can still use a touch of magic.” Ivy swapped out with Lapis, taking her position in front of Mills. “Forge me a spire of crimson—*Flame Pillar*.”

As soon as she finished her spell, the air flooded with such heat that Loren had to look the other way.

An enormous pillar of crimson flames shot from the floor to the ceiling, instantly enveloping Mills’s remains. The intensity was formidable, and Loren did his best to endure the heat and light, but by the time he put a hand over his eyes to try to see it through

to the end, Mills was already gone. There was no smell, no ash; once the flames died down, not a single thing remained.

The only proof the spell had been cast were the scorch marks on the walls, ceiling, and floor.

“That’s quite something.”

“The output is, yes. But it’s difficult to actually hit an enemy with that spell, so it’s not especially useful.”

Gula took that as the end of that. “So where do we go from here?”

Loren’s eyes turned to the depths of the ruins. They’d arrived in yet another passageway, but from here, they had only one direction to choose from. At this angle, Loren couldn’t tell what they’d find farther down.

“We’ve got to press on. Not like we can turn back. And…” Loren jerked a thumb at the door they’d come through.

Gula glanced over—though the door was firmly shut, they at times heard something smack against it, trying to break through and chase them down. The army of zombies and centipedes awaited them.

“Who knows how long that door’s gonna hold?”

The unlocking device was so sensitive that Mills had made it work by pure coincidence. If the bugs and zombies continued smacking themselves against the wall, they could very well activate it in a similar manner.

“And it’s down here, right? That device you used.”

“Yes, most likely.”

That device was Loren’s objective—the ancient kingdom technology by which Ivy had transformed herself. It had to be buried somewhere in these ruins.

Scena hadn’t yet decided if she wanted to use it, but at least for now, Loren wanted to see it in person.

“Then we’ve got no choice. Let’s go.”

“Very well. I’d better take the lead, then. After all, I know this place well. As a note, some of the traps to fend off intruders are still active.”

Ivy held Loren back and took point herself. Gula and Lapis followed after her, with Loren once again taking up the rearguard.

Unlike the ruins Loren had previously explored, this one did not emit any light from the walls. In fact, they had no light source whatsoever. Ordinarily, this would have made it difficult to press on.

However, no one in Loren's party actually needed a light to progress. Neither had anyone prepared a lantern—they simply pressed forward.

Ivy walked without hesitation. It seemed she already knew where everything was—which turns to take, and how to open each door. She warned them of any traps before they were tripped and instructed them on how to avoid any obstacles. They were entirely untroubled as they made steady progress through the empty halls.

"I guess it stands to reason, seeing as we have an old denizen of these ruins guiding us," said Lapis.

"If any other explorers heard about this jaunt, they'd definitely call foul."

"Ms. Gula, are you by chance familiar with any ruins?"

"Why would I know anything?" Gula asked, so confident in her ignorance that it was nearly a brag.

Lapis shrugged tiredly, Loren smiled wryly, and Ivy giggled along.

Then the time came when Ivy's feet came to a stop.

Loren readied herself for whatever awaited them next, but Ivy held up a hand to calm him. She proceeded slightly farther on her own, carefully peeking around the next corner before returning.

"What's wrong?"

"Someone else is here," she replied.

Though her response was short, the implications were shocking.

"Is there another entrance or something?"

If the other intruder had come through the sewer, they would almost definitely have left some trace. But if they'd managed to pass through while leaving nothing in their wake, they were quite the master of their craft.

And if there's another entrance, I'll feel like the idiot for going the route I did.

"There are other ways," Ivy conceded, and so easily that Loren nearly fell over. But she went on, "Unfortunately, they've either collapsed or been rendered otherwise unusable."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, parts of the facility were aboveground, remember? So there were a few ways to get down here from there. But when those facilities were destroyed, those entrances were rendered unusable. I confirmed so myself."

Ivy explained that her survival would have been at risk if anyone had broken in while she was building her new body. Before she got to work, she'd properly examined every entrance and exit. As a result, she'd found that the sewer door was the only real point of ingress.

"When you say they were unusable, what exactly do you mean?" asked Lapis.

Ivy lowered her voice. "Well, these are old ruins. Some facilities can transfer you from place to place as long as you have the necessary tools. However, most of those tools were lost or destroyed when the kingdom fell. I doubt anyone can use them in this day and age."

Loren and Lapis exchanged a look. Although Ivy seemed to believe no one alive could use the technology of the ancient kingdom, they happened to know one exception.

Loren felt the words, *Not again,* building in his chest as he strengthened his grip on the greatsword's hilt. "I've got a bad feeling about this."

Lapis nodded. "What a coincidence. Me too."

Ivy tilted her head, not following, while Gula slowly began to exude a murderous aura.

"Our destination is right up ahead, I'm assuming." Loren pointed at the corner Ivy had peeked around.

Ivy nodded. "Just around the corner, you'll run straight into the room with the device."

"All right, everyone get ready for a fight. It might not be what we're thinking, but we should prepare for the worst."

Lapis’s eyes sharpened, and Gula gritted her teeth while cracking her knuckles.

Ivy didn’t seem to have any idea why everyone was suddenly out for blood. But whatever lay ahead, she knew it had to be something terrible.

Knowing what awaited them made preparation a simple task—even more so as they knew exactly who they were dealing with. At least, that was what Loren hoped for—but he knew that things were never really that simple. They rounded the corner and eyed the door only to be struck once again by how troublesome the ancient kingdom’s ruins could be.

“If this were a normal building, we’d just bombard it with magic and destroy the door along with whoever’s behind it,” Lapis said as she stared ahead.

Lapis was speaking purely hypothetically; if they did that, they would risk damaging the apparatus beyond, and that would destroy the sole reason they’d come here.

Additionally, the door at the end of the corridor—even when viewed from afar—looked incredibly sturdy. No half-baked spells would even dent it.

“The ancient kingdom’s impressive as ever, I guess.”

“You shouldn’t say that when you don’t mean it,” Ivy scolded. “I should mention that the door locks from the inside. It’s also resistant to both physical and magic attacks,” she added, offering her insights into these ruins.

This info was fairly critical.

“I guess that rules out a surprise attack,” Loren said.

Given their resources, Lapis’s tactics would have been most effective and reliable as a surprise attack.

If that was off the table, then if they could get the door open as swiftly as possible, they would still have surprise on their side. But if the door was resistant to all means of attack, it would take a while to even budge. Their target would most certainly notice their efforts.

In short, it would be impossible to attack with that particular advantage.

“If we just had a spell powerful enough to blast straight through the door…” Lapis had yet to give up on her hopes of a long-range ambush, but Loren shook his head.

Maybe he didn’t know how sturdy the equipment in the room was, but he highly doubted it would survive an attack great enough to blow down the door. He’d come to these ruins for Scena’s sake; if he destroyed the machine meant to help her, he might as well up and leave.

“Ivy, can you open it stealthily?” Gula asked. “Didn’t you work here?”

“Of course I can open it. That is, if it’s just locked as it’s supposed to be and not otherwise barricaded,” Ivy said. “Honestly, it’s only thanks to me that you made it this far without falling for any traps. You could stand to appreciate me a bit more.”

“Yeah, yeah. What I mean is, if you open it quiet-like, will the person on the other side notice?”

“Naturally. Gula, are you saying you’re so dense, you don’t notice when the door to your own room is unlocked?”

“You wanna go?”

Gula glared ferociously, and Ivy nonchalantly looked away.

I guess dark gods always have a history, Loren thought as he let out a resigned sigh. “No way around it. We’ll approach as quietly as possible, and once Ivy opens the door, we charge in all at once.”

“Will that take him out?” Lapis asked.

Loren shook his head. “If it’s who we’re expecting, we won’t be able to keep him from escaping. Not unless he’s *really* out of it, or if he’s immobilized for some other reason.”

Loren was 90 percent sure that the room beyond was occupied by the swordsman Magna, a man they had met several times before.

Magna, the black armored swordsman, seemed to have some relation to the ancient kingdom, and his combat prowess surpassed even Loren’s. Loren would have preferred never to run into the guy, but for some reason, he tripped over Magna at practically every turn.

The last time they'd met, Loren's party had managed to chop off his right arm, but the battle had ended with almost all Loren's companions injured in some shape or form, while Loren had been yet again hospitalized. He didn't even want to think about how many times he'd found himself in that hospital by now.

"If we can settle the score, I'd love to… But he's tenacious."

"That's because we tend to run into him whenever he has the advantage in terms of equipment. This time, well… I'm sure it won't be any different."

Considering what Ivy had said, they would be up against Magna as well as his dark elf attendant—who had become a dark god the last time they tangled. And there was a desperately low chance that she and Magna had made it down here by trekking through the sewers.

In other words, they'd used equipment from the ancient kingdom to teleport into the ruins. That made the situation tricky—Magna could simply warp away as soon as he was discovered.

"I don't know why, but he always seems to be one step ahead of us when it comes to the ancient kingdom."

"It's quite bothersome."

"So what now?" Gula asked. "Are we going or not?"

Loren spent a moment reflecting on the situation. Say they did sneak up to the door, and say Ivy opened it as quickly as she could. Say they decided beforehand that they had to defeat whoever was inside, and they instantly put their plan into action.

"He does piss me off, but he's so strong that he could wipe us out if we're not careful."

"Well, there's no guarantee it's the dark swordsman and elf duo behind that door."

"Why don't we start by opening it?" Ivy said. "Any objections?"

After confirming with Loren, Ivy ran down the corridor soundlessly and stopped in front of the door. She sensed the others following on her heels as she brushed a hand against the door. But in the next instant, she noticed something was off. She frowned.

"What's wrong?"

“There’s a *Lock* spell on top of the two underlying locking mechanisms.”

Whoever was inside was evidently the cautious sort. They’d activated the security mechanisms already present in the ruins and layered their own magic on top of it.

At this rate, even if Ivy could open the door through normal means, it wouldn’t open. A *Lock* spell could only be undone with the counterspell *Unlock*.

What’s more, the instant *Lock* was released, the caster would be tipped off. At this point, a sneak attack was basically out the window.

“Can you nix it?”

“I’ll get to the original locks right away. As for the spell… *Unlock*.” Ivy swiftly undid with the mechanisms and invoked the spell she needed. However, her magic proved utterly ineffective.

“Hey, it’s not opening.”

“The other caster is more skilled, I’m afraid. I am unable to surmount the gap in our arcane strength.”

Gula pushed Ivy aside and placed a hand against the door. “Good grief, Envy. Just how much weaker did you get when you quit the life? You’re useless.”

“I have nothing to say in my defense.” Ivy looked disheartened, but this was no time to worry about her.

Gula instantly canceled the spell cast on the door, then switched out with Loren, who kicked the door open and burst into the room.

A moment later, he was blocking an arrow with the flat of his greatsword.

“I was wondering who it was, but *you*? Again?!”

Unlike the passageways, the room they stepped into had a light source on the ceiling that illuminated the entire space. At the center of the room, they saw what looked like a bed in a transparent casket.

The opposite wall was occupied by all sorts of devices that spun and lit up. The slender figure standing in front of these devices wore armor, technically, but much of her dark skin was

exposed. She held a massive, ornately embellished bow nocked with an arrow, and her aim was locked on the entrance.

This was Magna's attendant, the dark elf Noel, who had obtained the powers of a dark god of lust when last they met.

"That should be my line!" Loren snapped. "*You* again?! What do you want this time?!"

Loren's question was met with a second arrow.

The strangely intricate bow made Loren fear that Noel's arrows would have some strange effect, so he chose to evade rather than block. When the arrow collided with the wall beside the door, it left only a small hole. The arrow itself vanished.

Loren expected lag between each shot, but the moment after Noel fired, an arrow appeared from seemingly nowhere, already nocked and at the ready. It looked like she wasn't going to give him any breathing room.

"It seems like her bow has been enchanted to produce those arrows," Lapis said as she inspected the bow, leaving Loren to handle the shots. "That means her ammo is unlimited and there will be no gap between shots. But she's also forgone the usual enchantments of increased accuracy and applying special effects to the arrows. It's a relatively conservative spell."

"An elf with infinite arrows is already a nightmare."

Elves were generally master archers. It was a trial and a half to escape their sniping, and it was no exaggeration to say that an elf could shoot as many men dead as there were arrows in their quiver. Based on terrain and proximity, you could expect them to take out even an army of average soldiers, no sweat.

However, Noel's arrows had no special effects, and they weren't going to start multiplying in the air. She was also within Loren's line of sight, and he wasn't about to let himself be done in that easily.

"Where'd your master skitter off to? Did he bleed out after I lopped off his arm?" Loren's questions were one part provocation and the other part attempt to learn something new.

As she readied her bow, Noel's lips curled ever so slightly.

Loren noticed her smile as the third arrow flew. Since he'd confirmed it had no additional enchantment, he opted to block rather than dodge and deflected it with his sword.

“How could my master possibly fall to the likes of you?” Noel asked.

“Then where’d he go? I don’t see him skulking around.”



“Perhaps I ought to leave you hanging—but why not? Magna came here to heal the wounds you inflicted upon him—and he has long since recovered and left!”

“Sure. So he noticed we were here and ran away crying. Can’t say I blame him.”

“Spin up whatever fantasy pleases you. But he will repay you tenfold for destroying a piece of his armor. When the time is right, he’ll cut you down. Until then, cower and wait.”

“What, you’re not gonna try to settle the score yourself?”

Loren gestured at Noel, telling her to come at him, but she didn’t fall for the cheap taunt. She loosed another arrow to keep them in check, then dodged back without even watching to see if her attack was successful.

“My business here is finished. I must pursue Lord Magna—I have no time for you.”

“Sounds like she’s going to run, Mr. Loren.”

“We don’t really have the means to stop her…”

Loren had seen Noel fight several times now. He knew that even if he closed the distance, she was more than capable of slipping away. What’s more, if her means of escape involved teleportation, Loren couldn’t exactly halt that process.

If she stopped to throw one last barb, he was ready to chuck his greatsword, but Noel was truly done. She deployed some sort of device to create a gate of light, just big enough for a single person to pass through. Then she slid in and was gone.

They kept their guard up for a while even after Noel had vanished.

Teleportation was a rather troublesome thing, and just as Noel had vanished in an instant, so too could she once again manifest without warning. Perhaps she had simply pretended to leave and planned to take them by surprise. Loren readied himself for an ambush, but a word from Ivy and his fear eased.

“It looks like she really is gone.”

“She won’t come back, will she?” Loren asked.

Ivy walked past the device at the center of the room and investigated the floor where Noel had vanished. “There is a

teleportation circle here. Every time you use it, you must consume a particular catalyst, and you can clearly see when a circle is about to activate. There's very little chance of a surprise attack."

"Can we destroy the circle?" Loren wanted to eliminate even the slimmest possibility, just in case. Messing with the tech itself seemed to be the most sensible option.

But Ivy seemed reluctant to do so. "For what it's worth, this is still a valuable relic of ancient history..."

When academic and historic value were brought into the equation, Loren didn't have much more to say. He couldn't really determine the worth of this place, and he felt out of his depth.

"Are you going to send the guild to investigate it or something?"

That said, he didn't really want a technology that could produce copies of peoples' bodies spreading throughout the world. If Ivy intended to initiate a formal study of some kind, he would try to talk her out of it.

"No. Why?" Ivy replied, and with surprising ease.

"Then what's the point of preserving it?"

"If you don't preserve technology, it will be lost."

Loren couldn't quite see the merit in this argument. He didn't know if this tech would leave the world for better or worse, but he also figured there was no need to go out of his way to destroy it. He walked up to the bed at the center of the room and patted his palm against the glass.

"For starters, can you look into this?" he asked Ivy. "I wanna know what they were trying to do here."

"Understood. Please give me a moment." Ivy promptly began to examine a glowing device on the wall.

Gula didn't seem particularly interested—rather, it seemed more like she didn't *want* to see any of this, and she made no attempt to look in Ivy's direction. Lapis, on the other hand, was *profoundly* interested. She studied every motion Ivy made, and at times asked a few questions to sate her curiosity.

"This is...not looking good. It's like someone who didn't know too much about the facility was tampering with it based on pure guesswork." Ivy grimaced.

While Loren didn't know what she was looking at, exactly, he hoped for an explanation he could understand.

"Apparently, they were trying to repair someone's body," said Ivy. "And they wanted to strengthen their physical abilities while they were at it. As for the parameters… Wow, they really just cranked everything as far as they could…"

"Sounds like bad news."

If Noel had been the one operating the devices, the one undergoing the procedure had almost certainly been Magna.

Between his natural strength and the power of his equipment, he was already a formidable adversary. If the device had made him even stronger, Loren absolutely didn't want to meet again. Not that Loren was ever happy to see the guy.

Ivy continued her investigation, fiddling with a device on the wall as her scowl deepened even further. "However, the way they used the equipment here is all over the place. For starters, they discharged the bio booster, and…"

As she indignantly explained, she threw in some words that flew right over Loren's head. He frowned. Whatever all that meant, his intuition for danger was starting to go off. Especially when he heard that some chemical had been released.

Ivy went on, "In fact, they dumped *all* of the liquids… The growth promoter, the stabilizer… It will cost quite a lot to replenish those. They ran through the stock preserved in the ruins like it was water."

"Quick question. I'm fine with that stuff being used to patch someone up. Sure, whatever. But where exactly did it all go?"

Since the ruins were in this specific location, and the ruins connected to the sewers, Loren pretty much knew the answer without anyone having to explain. But Ivy was especially knowledgeable about the ruins, and he simply had to be sure.

"Why, they're expelled with the wastewater."

I'm starting to see the problem, thought Loren. Ivy's answer was indeed exactly what he had been expecting. He felt a faint headache coming on as he asked his next question. "What happens to the water if you dump that stuff in it?"

“That’s… Well, I’m not really sure. Though the ratios and formulas are so messed up that I can guarantee you nothing good would come of it.”

“What’s our worst-case scenario?”

“Say it comes into contact with some animal. I imagine anything that consumes the waste would experience accelerated development, growing to several dozen times its original size. That’s the growth promoter and stabilizer at work, yeah? Then this gigantified individual, empowered by the effects of the bio booster, would produce far more eggs than normal and… Huh? You don’t mean…”

Something seemed to occur to Ivy in the midst of her explanation. Her face turned pale.

It seemed she’d reached the same conclusion as Loren, who was already covering his face with his left hand to contain the headache. Even Gula—typically so indifferent—was evidently irritated, with a vein rising on her forehead.

Lapis took in all their expressions for a beat before hitting her hands together. “Oh, I see. It seems several points within the vast sewage system met those conditions. The centipedes that lived there swiftly multiplied and grew into the swarm we know and love.”

Though Lapis had already reached a dreadful conclusion, Ivy seemed to think it was even worse than that. “No, I’m not sure I’d say that’s what we saw. They’re hardly showing the effects you’d expect. If my memory serves me, then if the proper conditions were truly met, the gigantification would be far, far worse. They’d be several, no, several dozen times larger than the ones we saw.”

“I see. And I’ve just realized something. When we saw Mr. Mills’s eye moving on its own, I knew I’d seen something like it before. It’s a parasite.”

“A parasite?” Loren asked, as a brand-new fed-up look crossed his face. The centipedes were already too much to handle. The last thing he needed was yet another factor to worry about.

Regardless, Lapis unveiled her insight. “I’ve forgotten the exact name, but it is a small parasitic organism that makes its final resting place within centipedes. In its infancy, it lives within small insects, water, fruit, and vegetables. When it embeds within a

living creature, it infiltrates their central nervous system and brain to control their actions, leading them to be eaten by the centipedes—its final preferred host. The eggs it lays within the centipedes will escape with their excretion, thereby continuing the cycle."

In short, a bit of chewing and crushing wasn't enough to kill the infecting larva. As long as a shred of them remained, they could regenerate back to their original larval form.

"Back when we came to town, Neg caught that little thumb-sized mouse and ate it…"

"That's just the sort of thing I mean—though I'm sure Mr. Neg will be fine. Spiders inject digestive fluids into their prey to melt them from within. I doubt the larva could survive that. It's usually smaller than a grain of wheat. I suspect once they grow, the gigantified variety will come in quite the range."

Once the tiny infants entered a sufficiently large body, they became hard to detect, even if they grew to abnormally massive proportions. It was possible that all the food circulating with Suest was contaminated.

"Incidentally, if they latch onto a human brain…"

"Their intelligence will plummet, their thoughts will be muddled, and a portion of their memories—no, *most* of their memories will be lost, I'd imagine."

"What about conversation skills?"

"Impossible, most likely."

"This town's done for then, isn't it?!"

The symptoms that Lapis described perfectly matched the majority of the townsfolk they'd come across.

Lapis seemed to understand this too, and a powerless laugh escaped her lips. Her voice was slightly shaken as she asked, "What do we do, Mr. Loren?"

"There's nothing we *can* do."

If they'd come a little earlier, perhaps they could have contained the infection before it spread. But the town was already full of these parasite hosts, and Loren didn't see any way to help them now.

"*Is* there a way to get rid of those bugs after they've entered the body?"

"Getting rid of a bug literally inside your head? That sounds like a hard one." Lapis's reaction made clear she would've paid good money to know the answer to that.

As Loren pondered the issue, Gula said, "I can't target only the bugs with my authority. Don't even ask."

‹Energy drain isn't accurate enough either,› said Scena.

That ruled out both possibilities before Loren even got around to them. That meant there was absolutely nothing he could do.

"I'll note that we haven't eaten anything from Suest since we arrived. I've been looking after our food supply in the wagon, and I sealed it, so I doubt it can be infected. We should be all right."

"If you want more reassurance, I know how to compound a deworming medicine," Lapis offered. "I think I can make some with these facilities."

"Oh, we have a dispensary in the back, feel free to use it," said Ivy. "I'm sure there are some materials left."

Ivy directed Lapis to a door in the corner of the room, behind which she disappeared.

Once she was gone, Loren was left standing there. Ivy continued examining the device, while Gula frowned at the sheer terribleness of their situation. For his part, Loren silently cursed Magna for his presumed use of these the ruins—and Noel, for her failure to operate them with any kind of care.

Chapter 8:
A Result to Seal Away

NOT LONG AFTER, Lapis returned from the dispensary. When she did, she was carrying four slender ceramic tubes, one for everyone in the party, and each filled with a transparent liquid.

Even if those parasites Lapis described had entered their bodies, this medicine would make it far more difficult for the creatures to wriggle into their brains. On Lapis's recommendation, they all took their doses in one swig.

"I've finished calibrating the device, but the situation isn't looking too good," Ivy said as she returned her vial to Lapis.

How can it get any worse? Loren wondered.

Yet what Ivy said next was certainly terrible. "Since it was handled rather carelessly, the device itself is quite damaged. To be precise, if we wanted to create an entire body, we'd have to omit some natural functions."

"Can you be a bit more specific?"

"It will be impossible to replicate either growth or a reproductive system," Ivy said as though it was nothing.

But this information was of high import. In short, even if they managed to recreate Scena's body, they couldn't make her a fully functional one.

"In addition, most of the ingredients were discharged, so we don't have the resources to produce an adult form. If we squeezed out everything available, we might just barely be able to build a single child."

"Then it's pointless."

If they used the device as it was, Scena would be stuck in the body of a child that could never grow up. Loren simply couldn't abide by trapping her in a body like that.

"Parts of the facility are designed to naturally restore themselves. If given enough time, the system should recover, and the supplies will replenish to some degree."

"Fine... Scena will have to put up with this a while longer."

‹I'm not really 'putting up' with anything, Mister,› Scena said consolingly to Loren.

"That's that, then… For the time being, we'll leave these ruins to themselves. Once the chemicals and ingredients are replenished, we'll be able to make a body for Scena."

"True. And that's not the only thing time could provide. With more time, we might be able to think of a way to affix an undead soul to a living body."

There was no point in beating himself up over something that was simply outside of his capabilities. Loren refocused. The ruins themselves were still functional, and the lost materials would replenish in time. He'd just have to wait.

And it wasn't like Scena was in any hurry to leave Loren's body; giving her more time to think about it wasn't such a bad thing.

"This does all feel like a waste of time, now."

"Well, not exactly," said Ivy. "You'll still be paid by the adventurers' guild, and if you manage to resolve this request, you'll gain a measure of clout. Not to mention my prestige in the guild will still go up."

"Come to think of it, we did come here for that untouched request of yours, didn't we?" Loren said, suddenly feeling something was off.

Ivy nodded.

He went on, "I don't think it's been that long since I sliced off Magna's arm, though."

Sure, they'd spent a stretch on the road, but not long enough for a quest to gain a reputation for being unmanageable.

Ivy tilted her head at this question. "There are signs that the device has been used several times, though I can't tell when exactly the chemicals were discharged. There was quite a stockpile when I first used the ruins. Since the tank is empty now, it must have been leaking for quite some time."

"Is this the first time someone's tried using it to strengthen their body?"

"That I can't say. I only knew it had been used that way because all the parameters were set to the max. I don't know how

long it's been like that."

"Now hear me out. I'm just asking to be sure." Though Loren's eyes weren't hard, he still glared at Ivy. She cocked her head—the opposite way this time—as she wondered what exactly she could have done. "There's no chance the leak started when you remade yourself, is there?"

"That's quite a rude question to ask an expert. I would never make such a mistake," Ivy declared, returning his glare in equal measure.

After withstanding that harsh look for a while, Loren looked away. "My bad. I shouldn't have doubted you."

"It's perfectly understandable. After all, I'm just about the only one who would be able to use these ruins—well, me and that dark elf we just met." Ivy's expression softened. "From your point of view, it just makes sense to check."

"Although it would be more all around more believable if a dark god were the culprit, rather than some random individual," Lapis casually noted, earning her a flick to the head from Loren. There was quite a hard *thock*, and she found herself clutching both hands to her forehead.

Loren returned his attention to Ivy. "Can we consider this the end of the quest, then? You're not going to tell me to take care of everything, are you?"

"Well, this has gone beyond the capabilities of an individual, or even a single party. It would be cruel of me to ask any more."

By this point, the entire town of Suest was essentially done for. Nearly every resident had fallen prey to parasites, and even the most conservative estimate put the infected population in the thousands. It was entirely possible it had even exceeded ten thousand.

Sure, the guild would want Loren to do something about it, but this was the kind of trouble you sent a nation's internal forces to handle.

"Then let's get out of here already. We'll submit a report and leave them to deal with it."

"Sounds like a plan," Lapis said.

At which point Gula suddenly seemed to realize something. "But won't they find out about the ruins if you submit that report?"

“You can leave that to me,” Ivy replied, patting a hand to her chest. “It’s all about *how* you report. Don’t worry. I’ll keep this place under wraps and shift the blame to that dark elf and her master. That’s certainly within my wheelhouse.”

A sinister smile spread across Ivy’s face as she explained. Both Gula and Lapis backed away, trying to stay as far from her as possible—but from Loren’s perspective, getting those two on the guild’s bad books sounded perfectly fine. He couldn’t understand what had creeped out Lapis and Gula.

“No objections,” he said. “For starters, let’s get out of here. Not like there’s anything to gain from hanging around, right?”

Lapis asked the obvious question. “How are we supposed to return aboveground?”

After all, those centipedes and zombies were presumably still waiting for them at the entrance, and it would be incredibly taxing to leave via that route. This would typically be a tense situation, wherein they were trapped with no escape, but no one seemed particularly anxious.

Loren asked, “There were other exits once, weren’t there?”

“There were, but they collapsed…”

“Then can’t we just use Gula’s magic to blast away the debris? If there were normal people up in Suest, I’d be worried about hurting them or about this place being discovered, but it doesn’t look like we need to be concerned about that.”

Ivy clapped her hands together at this epiphany. It would be an indelicate way to go about it, but far better than facing the stench and monstrosities in the sewers. Neither Lapis nor Gula raised any objections.

“All right, then let’s get to it,” said Loren. “We’re running straight out of town—I wanted out of here the second I heard about those parasites.”

On Loren’s order, Ivy swiftly led them to a set of stairs that had once connected to a building on the surface. It was just as she said—halfway up, the stairs were buried in earth.

Gula muttered, “Here you go—*Fireball*.”

A ball of flames about the size of a child’s head emerged from her fingertip. It shot forward at her command, colliding with

the dirt covering the steps.

In the explosion that followed, half of Loren's party was smacked by a shock wave and splattered with dirt and smoke. Lapis had realized what would happen a second sooner than the rest of them and dragged Loren away from the blast zone. But though they'd managed to escape, the two dark gods were covered head to toe in sediment.

What's more, despite the casualties, and despite a large dent that had been made in the packed earth, there was still a long way to go until they reached the surface.

"I think we should focus more on piercing rather than explosive power," suggested Lapis.

If Lapis had her say, a *Fireball* spell had laudable range and output, but it wasn't well suited to destroying a thick layer of earth and bedrock. If piercing was your primary goal, then the *Force* blessing and the elementary spell *Rune Bullet* would be more effective—especially as *Rune Bullet* could be strengthened with a greater investment of mana, and the number of shots could similarly be increased.

But before Lapis could offer her suggestions, Gula and Ivy had pointed their palms at the barely damaged dirt ceiling.

"Now you've done it! *Fireball!*"

"Let me assist! *Fireball!*"

Two fiery orbs, both larger than the previous one, collided with the ceiling, releasing an ear-shattering boom.

Their vision was clouded by black smoke, and the dirt rained from above in a torrent. Loren batted away the fumes that had reached all the way to the nook where he and Lapis had taken cover, and Lapis had started to cough as she stared at where the dark gods stood.

"How about that?! I took it down!"

"There's nothing we can't do together."



Gula and Ivy spoke triumphantly, even more dirt smeared on their faces than before.

It was hard to say if the dirt that had once covered the stairs had fallen into the ruins or if it had been blown outside. Regardless, a hole had been blasted clear through it.

“As long as the result is what you were aiming for... I guess it doesn’t matter how you get there...”

In any case, they had their exit. Loren figured he might as well turn a blind eye to the rest of it. That was the thought on his mind as the party readied to make their climb.

Then, an interruption.

A figure suddenly fell through the hole they’d just made. Whoever it was, they did not try to catch themselves. They fell back-first onto the floor of the ruins, making a terrible sound as they made impact.

“Huh?” Lapis exclaimed, thinking it was a town resident who had been caught in the initial blast.

The figure was bleeding heavily from the head, and they quivered as they lifted themselves up. But what Lapis saw of this individual next was the polar opposite of everything she could have expected.

At a glance, it was clear from his clothes that this had once been a young man of the town. But he did not try to wipe away the blood poured from his skull. After lifting himself up, the eyes he directed at the party roved wildly back and forth however they pleased—just as Mills’s left eye had in the moments before his passing.

The moment Loren saw the fallen man’s face, he retreated two steps back, then three. But he soon spied other shadows looming from above and leaped back even farther.

Right as he jumped away, an old woman fell where he had been standing. She had clearly hit the floor head-first, her head wrenched in a direction that indicated she had perished. Yet once again, in no more than seconds, the lady lifted herself up, blood pouring from her head and broken neck, and her eyes darting and spinning at random.

Loren cried out, “The infected are falling in!”

Lapis glanced up the stairs. The stairway connecting the underground facility to the surface was quite expansive, and the ceiling was accordingly high.

More humanoid figures flocked around the circular hole that had been blasted into the ceiling. They continued to gather—more and more of them. A portion even began to descend the stairs.

“There’s even more of them up there!”

“What do we do? Turn back?!”

“No…”

These bodies were infected, but they were still nothing more than townsfolk.

If left to their own devices, they would probably lose their lives to the ravening jaws of centipedes. But even if Loren and his comrades wanted to save them, they simply didn’t have the means.

What else can we do? We have to abandon them, Loren thought.

In the next instant, the old woman who’d broken her neck reached toward Loren and started to approach him.

Loren raised his guard. “Stay back! Though I guess you don’t understand me.”

The old woman’s actions were already governed by the parasite within her. Even if he warned her off, he didn’t think she’d understand him.

Her head dangled from her crooked neck, and she silently grasped at him, her body covered in blood. Even Loren was unnerved by the sight. Perhaps that was why he had cautioned her—pure instinct.

It wasn’t that he *wasn’t* considering kicking her away. But even if she looked creepy as hell, she was still an old woman. He thought it over for a moment.

What do we do about this? Loren took as many steps back as the woman took toward him.

Then the first man who fell closed in on Ivy. Like the old woman, he held out his hands as he trudged forward.

“Umm, err... I would much appreciate it if you stayed back.” Like Loren, Ivy issued a warning as she inched away.

But those words evidently did not reach the man’s ears. His pace remained constant as he closed in. Then his mouth abruptly wrenched wide, and he let out a cry, the likes of which should never have issued from a human throat.

His voice was so loud that Ivy twitched and froze. And at that moment, the man’s slowness fell away as if they had never been anything but a ploy. He grabbed at Ivy at breakneck speed.

Unable to react to the sudden lunge, Ivy was seized by the shoulders and thrown against the wall. The force pressing down upon her was considerable.

A light groan fell out of her on impact, and she stared at the thing that emerged from the man’s gaping, still-crying mouth. It was slippery, white, and about the size of an adult human thumb.

“Huh...”

Ivy was taken aback as the man’s mouth approached her, teeth bared. Realizing she was about to be bitten, she pushed back—at which point she noticed the force pressing her against the wall had vanished. She blinked, startled.

“Kinda cowardly, aren’tcha? You sure you just messed with yer body and not yer head?” Gula asked, a hand on her hip and sounding right appalled.

But Ivy’s mind hadn’t caught up to what was being said or what had been done. She only saw that every part of the man beyond his wrists had disappeared, leaving only the hands on her shoulders. These she quickly shook off, letting them fall to the floor.

With the authority of Gluttony, Gula had devoured the man assaulting Ivy. Loren had watched it happen. A cold sweat broke out on his brow as the old woman similarly disappeared in the blink of an eye.

Just as the man had raised his strange cry, the old woman had unhinged her jaw, exposing incomplete rows of teeth. She had let out a similar cry as she tried to grab Loren.

But after Gula got to her, not even her hands remained.

“Sorry about that. I owe you one.”

The ghastly sound had also taken Loren by surprise, and he had been somewhat late to react. By the time he had readied his sword, the old woman had lunged too close, past the effective range of his blade.

Though Gula had saved Loren from real danger with her - authority, she didn't look particularly proud of herself. She brushed off the dirt from her head and shoulders. "Try to keep up. That's what I'd like to say, anyway, but I can't blame you for that one. You were up against an old granny. You're just not suited for that."

"Personally, I'd say that's one of Mr. Loren's best features."

Gula's words had a pitying tone, while Lapis's had an air of consolation. Both of them made Loren think, *I've gone kind of soft*.

As a mercenary, he would have had the decisive drive to instantly deal with any force he considered hostile—otherwise, he wouldn't have survived on the battlefield. But he'd been away from that battlefield for a long time now, and it had clearly dulled his instincts.

"Actually, Ms. Gula. Will you be all right after eating that?" Lapis asked, changing the topic—perhaps because she guessed Loren's thoughts.

If she let him ponder too long, there was a chance he would reach the conclusion that he had to return to the battlefield. Lapis wanted to remain an adventurer for at least a while longer, so this was incredibly troublesome to consider.

If he does choose to go, I'll at least have to make sure he takes me with him, thought Lapis. For the time being, she needed to ensure Loren didn't let his mind grow too preoccupied with any strange notions.

That said, the topic she redirected them toward was still terribly important. Gula had consumed a human infected with parasites, after all.

Upon realizing this, Loren was also rather concerned as to Gula's condition. But Gula kept her hand on her hip and acted like it was nothing. She even let out a light scoff.

"Maybe if I ate it with my mouth up here. But the things I eat with my authority don't really affect me. I mean, that other

stomach can even digest inorganic matter, you know. A measly parasite's not gonna last me out."

"Sounds reliable enough, but...you think you can eat all of them?"

Gula glanced at where Loren was pointing. The crowd gathering around the hole had grown so large that it could grow no larger. Bodies pushed against bodies until finally one missed a step, then another. And down they came.

The group proceeding down the stairway had swelled too, their members tightly packed together.

Gula stared at them fixedly, then turned to Loren. "That's a bit much," she said, as casual as ever.

"I figured."

As expected, those that fell hit the ground with nothing to stop them. They suffered injuries that begged the question of how they were even still alive, and blood splattered as they lifted themselves up or crawled toward the party.

Their numbers were gradually increasing.

Lapis pressed up against Loren, and asked nervously, "Do we turn back?!"

"We can turn back to brave the stink and the beasts, or press forward to cut through this crowd... Which one do you want?"

These were the only two options.

Honestly speaking, everyone in the party wanted to complain that it was just so *unfair*—that both options were equally unappealing. But if they didn't make a choice, they'd just end up joining the ranks of these pitiful victims.

"My vote is for the people."

"I'd prefer goin' for the people too."

"No matter what happens, I'll testify for you," Ivy said in conclusion.

She was, presumably, referring to the two people Gula had devoured, as well as the many more they would need to slay to escape the town.

Granted, these people were infected and had been robbed of free will, but they weren't criminals or monsters. They were bread-and-butter civilians. Sure, Loren and his crew could argue

self-defense, but it was hardly a pleasant thing to have to kill the innocent, and the aftermath would be complicated.

Perhaps it wouldn't be so bad if they had the guarantee of the adventurers' guild. Ivy's promise did slightly lighten Loren's mood.

"Then let's go!" He raised his voice to psyche himself up as he took the first step up the long flight of stairs.

Countless figures above descended down the precarious steps—but all of a sudden, before anyone had done anything to them, a few at the front abruptly collapsed, exhausted, and their bodies tumbled down the stairs.

Standing at the lead, Loren kicked their bodies away. But unlike the ones who'd fallen, the ones he kicked did not rise again. They lay still, limbs splayed out.

‹I'm helping too, Mister.›

Scena's thoughts gave him the answer: she had used a powerful energy drain to devour the lives of the leading few.

Scena couldn't kill the bugs on their own, but she was more than capable of killing them alongside their hosts. When it came to killing things without making contact, she was just as potent as Gula with her authority.

"If we want to beat them, we should avoid contact whenever possible," said Lapis. "There's no telling how those parasites might wriggle in. I'd say the hosts' blood and bodily fluids are most dangerous. No matter what, don't let that get in your mouth."

"Sure, you can say that…"

Scena's energy drain somewhat thinned the herd on the stairs, but whatever loss the horde sustained was immediately replenished by the crowd at the top. In moments, it didn't feel like there were any fewer infected than there had been before.

So Lapis certainly had a point, but as far as Loren could tell, they weren't getting away clean from facing off with the wall of bodies ahead of them.

"While the medicine I gave you is effective, you should have some additional resistance to infection. But there's no guarantee if a grown worm gets its hooks into you."

“Not even gonna think about that,” Loren replied as he swung his sword.

With a proper slash, he bisected his foes and scattered their blood and flesh in every direction. Thus, Loren was forced to sweep them away with the body of the blade. With his might, he managed to launch one person with each swing, sending them flying off the stairs to the hard floor below.

On top of this, Gula’s authority and Scena’s energy drain let them make steady progress up the stairs, slow as it might be.

‹I’ll lend you some power! Please burn them!›

Loren received those words along with the life force and mana Scena had stolen away.

It’ll be hard to manage this, Loren thought. But he pictured this overflowing power pouring into his greatsword as he chanted the necessary words. “Ignite! Fiamma Unghia!”

A crimson flame poured from the blade of the sword he held forward. It consumed the path ahead, swallowing the parasite victims that tried to grab hold of them. These men and women were blasted back to the surface from whence they came before they could so much as rattle a groan.

“You’re getting better at controlling it, Mr. Loren,” Lapis praised him. Once the flames died down, only scorched corpses remained.

Loren had managed to clear the stairway in one fell swoop. Before the path could again be blocked by more infected from the surface, Loren’s party burst up the stairs.

At length, they reached the top, scattering the nearest infected with Gula’s authority and Scena’s energy drain as they planted their feet on the soil.

“All right, we’re out!”

Loren brandished his sword, ready to buy time for their backline to get all the way clear. As he swept away the infected encroaching upon him, he took in the sights—and what he saw left him at a loss for words. He nearly let his greatsword fall from his grasp.

“Mr. Loren? What’s wrong…”

Lapis noticed Loren was acting strangely as she cleared the last few steps. She similarly scanned the area, and when she saw what he did, she was just as dumbfounded.

What they laid eyes upon was not the town that had left when they entered the sewers.

“Well, damn… It changed a lot when we weren’t looking,” Gula said idly. She raised a hand over her eyes as she surveyed the buildings, which were consumed in smoke and flames.

From between the smoldering buildings burst a screaming young woman—thus far spared from the infection. But just as she made it to the street, she was forcibly dragged back into the darkness of the alley.

A young man desperately raced down the road and, in the midst of fleeing his infected pursuers, looked back in relief as he managed to outpace them. Not a moment later, the door of the neighboring building burst open, disgorging a flood of the infected. The young man was swallowed in the wave and never seen again.

Just one street down, the road was covered in centipedes that raced in every frantic direction. They ran down residents who had already lost their minds, drowning and devouring them.

“How chaotic can you get?” Loren tiredly muttered as he knocked down one of the approaching infected with the flat of his sword and kicked away another. By the look of things, the town had been almost completely overtaken by the infestation. It had gone beyond the point of hopelessness. “What do we do about this?”

“Well, there doesn’t seem to be anything we *can* do.”

In the distance, Loren saw a building collapse with a great thud. What emerged from the wreckage was so large that Loren had to crane his neck to take it all in: a massive centipede with clattering fangs.

Several dozen times bigger, huh? You’ve gotta be kidding me. That doesn’t even begin to describe it, Loren thought as his mouth hung open.

While he was too dazed to move, Scena used her energy drain to eliminate one infected after another.

“The town is done for,” Lapis said. “We have no way to save the victims, and by the look of things, there aren’t many survivors either.”

Those who could run had probably already fled. Those who couldn’t—like the woman who had been dragged into the darkness—had already been infected.

“Long story short, we’re the only ones who’re still safe?” asked Loren.

“That is highly likely,” Lapis answered as she offhandedly kicked away any threat who approached her.

The design of her priestly vestments suggested that kicks were not the priestliest activity. Compared to the vestments of the other orders, the devoted servants of the god of knowledge wore some pretty showy gear—but in exchange, it could be rather lacking in defenses. The skirt was a prime example of this.

Loren understood why Lapis opted to go for kicks, though, so he wasn’t going to stop her. After all, her legs were still artificial, while her real arms had since been recovered. It was a demonstration of her ability to think ahead; she was avoiding infected contact with her real body as best as she could.

“There’s no bringing this under control,” Loren yelled. They weren’t making even a little dent in the infected population, but he did his best to fend them off. Lapis and Ivy seemed to be discussing something quietly, and Loren and Gula took charge of fighting off any comers who tried to approach them.

“I’m getting sick of the taste of iron…” Not wanting to touch them directly, Gula was mainly using her authority to intercept them with unseen mouths. When she saw a good opportunity, she cast magic to burn a large swathe. But perhaps because Loren’s party was the only group still putting up a resistance in Suest, the number of assailants never seemed to diminish.

Yet if they stopped resisting, they’d join the ranks of infected, and none of them wanted that.

“Hey, Loren,” said Gula. “What do we do if that huge one comes for us?”

“We’ll have to run. No way we can fight off that monster.”

In terms of pure size, the titanic centipede—which they occasionally glimpsed—was as thick around as the neck of the

ancient dragon they had met in demon territory. Loren didn't feel the slightest inclination to try his hand at fending it off.

In fact, if at all possible, he wanted to run. And if that wasn't going to happen, he would call forth the flames with his sword.

Luckily, the massive centipede had made a nest at the center of town and didn't seem interested in moving far from it. That was presumably where the most food was concentrated. It had little reason to venture out to the other districts.

Yet once it finished devouring the treats close at hand, it would set its sights on the infected further afield, and then they would find themselves facing off with the enormous beast.

We need to do something before that happens, Loren thought.

Lapis's discussion with Ivy seemed to have concluded, and Lapis jogged over to him. "Mr. Loren, after much discussion, we've decided to burn down the town."

This outrageous proposition was offered with perfect equanimity, but Ivy nodded deeply. Looked like she was serious.

"To be blunt, not even an army could deal with this. The simplest means of escape would be to break through the encirclement and flee—but if we abandon this town, in all likelihood, the infection will spread at a tremendous rate."

"I get that, but how are we gonna burn a whole town? And even if we do, how are we supposed to explain it to the guild?"

Worst-case scenario, they would be treated as the criminals who had razed the town of Suest to the ground.

And even if you did want to raze it, Suest was pretty big. Loren doubted that anyone in his party had the requisite firepower.

But Lapis had an answer to this. "Please channel your strength into Fiamma Unghia and produce as great an inferno as you can muster. If you wield the full might of the sword, it could incinerate Suest in a flash."

"Do you…want me dead?"

The power invoked was determined by the power invested—this was the rule of the enchanted sword Fiamma Unghia. In the hands of a demon lord, Loren could see it having the oomph to level a town, but Loren ran out of strength even after summoning

a relatively moderate flame. If he forced himself to eke out any more of its might, it would devour his very life. He saw nothing but certain doom in his future.

But Ivy and Lapis presented a solution to these worries.

“We will form a defensive barrier,” said Ivy. “While we’re preparing it, Loren, please use energy drain on anyone who comes near.”

“We’ll call you when we’re ready,” said Lapis. “Mr. Loren, you stick that greatsword into the ground, then run into the barrier before you activate its powers. The sword has registered you as its proper owner, so you can pass your strength into it even when it’s not in your hand. Meanwhile, you’ll be safe in the barrier.”

Apparently, Lapis and Ivy had been discussing the logistics of this plan, and this was the conclusion they’d reached. It was presumably possible—at least Loren hoped so. But he had trouble believing the weapon he wielded truly had the power to destroy a whole town. It simply didn’t feel real.

But I have to do it anyways, he told himself.

Taking his silence as consent, Ivy added, “Leave the guild to me. I’ll make sure they don’t cause you any trouble.”

“Even if we burn everything aboveground, the horde underground will survive, won’t they?”

The number of centipedes and so forth aboveground was considerable, but there had been plenty in the sewers as well. Each one housed its own lineup of parasites. Should the ones up top be burned away, the ones in the sewers weren’t going anywhere. So ultimately, even if the town was burned to ash, doing so seemed pointless.

“Gula and I will seal the sewers along with the ruins,” Ivy replied.

True enough, they had no hope of wiping the map clean if they had to include the waterway crowd. Ivy had thus concluded that their best bet would be turning a bit of a blind eye to that section of the population. The ruins and the sewers would instead be blocked off.

That said, the seal would only prevent people from entering. Ivy and Gula would be able to dispel and reapply it at will. After

some deliberation, Lapis and Ivy had decided to let the ruins lie until they had replenished the required chemicals and materials.

“And we plan to pin it all on that dark elf and her master. They’ll be treated as the true culprits behind all this. How does that sound?”

“How to put this…? That makes us sound like the scheming villains here.”

Though they were only doing this to prevent the casualties from spreading, they were about to burn down a whole town, along with all its inhabitants, bug and human alike. And the blame would be pinned on someone else.

Mind you, that *someone else* was most likely responsible for the incident, so Loren felt hardly any guilt over the matter. But a part of him still wondered if this was acceptable behavior—not that he could do anything about it.

“It’s a tad late for that,” said Lapis. “I mean, you have one demon and two dark gods in your party.”

“I’m just a temporary member. Once this is done, I plan to return to my guild duties.”

“That aside, what’re you gonna do, Loren?” Gula asked.

Loren was hard-pressed to respond. But he knew he didn’t have the time to hesitate. He scrubbed his hair with his left hand and answered in a subdued voice, “If that’s the only option, that’s what we’ll go with.”

“Then let’s get to work. Mr. Loren, you start collecting power.”

Lapis and Ivy promptly split up, using chalk to draw a magic circle of sorts on the ground. Gula took up a position to guard them, and Loren was left to his own devices. He gazed at the infected closing in and breathed out a long sigh.

“Sorry about this, Scena. I’ll be borrowing your strength.”

‹Oh, perish the thought, Mister. I’ll drain them of everything I can get, don’t you worry!›

Scena seemed delighted that Loren was purposefully asking for her assistance. There was a bounciness to the thoughts she sent him. The joyful tone did square kind of poorly with the brutal deed they were about to commit.

“Then…I’m counting on you.”

‹I won’t hold back! Engaging energy drain!›

With that proclamation, Loren watched as the closest infected body instantly withered, falling to the ground with a brittle crunch. But before the body had even touched down, the next target was already being sucked dry, adding another parched body to the pile.

In that span of time, Loren swung his sword. While the others were focused on their jobs, he wouldn’t let any of the infected get near.

Epilogue:
An End to Sleep

“AND THUS, the swordsman Loren wrapped his arms around the beautiful priest maiden. With two sinister gods of old at his beck and call, he scattered the armies that came upon him in wave upon wave, and conquered the town of Suest in the midst of its calamitous fall!”

“Hey now…”

“What manner of vile deity cursed him to endure such trials and tribulations? Oh, may he go forth with the blessing of knowledge!”

“That’s the blessing I need least… You’re really not gonna listen to me, are you? Well, fine. Hey, Gula, could you pass the water jug?”

“Give me a sec… There’s not much left. Still want it?”

“Fine with me. I’m just gonna use it to give her a smack.”

Gulla shook the earthen jug, checking its contents before handing it over to Loren, who expressionlessly sat up on the bed.

After taking it, Loren gave it a light shake himself. Gula was right—it was mostly empty. He slowly lifted it up.

Realizing that Loren was serious, Lapis—who had been standing by and staring out the window as she spun the sort of epic the troubadours would tell—hurriedly spun around, holding her hands in front of her face. She motioned for Loren to stop before the jug had left his hands.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry. There, I apologized! Just anywhere but the face.”

“Then keep staring. That way I can only hit the back of your head.”

“I’m *truly* sorry, please forgive me.”

Lapis bowed her head, and Loren finally lowered the jug. Gula held a hand toward him, so he returned it to her.

Once Gula had returned the jug to its original placement, Lapis puffed out her cheeks, a touch irritated. “But Mr. Loren.

Don’t you think it’s high time they spun a heroic epic or two with you in the leading role?”

“Sounds idiotic. That just ain’t me. In the first place, who’s this beautiful priest maiden you keep bringing up?”

“Why me, of course. Is something wrong with that?” Lapis stared straight back at him, declaring it so without a hint of shame. She had neither hesitation nor reservation. It was almost refreshing to hear it so matter-of-factly, and it felt like she had not provided no shred of wiggle room for Loren to object.

“In any case, you say that’s ‘just not you,’ but I do think you’ve done enough to deserve a little tale this time,” said Lapis.

“Now that’s a joke if I ever heard one,” Loren snorted. “I haven’t done anything praiseworthy.” He returned his raised upper body to the bed as he reflected on what had brought him there.

He had certainly been outnumbered, and to a terrifying degree. Yet his foes had not by any means been versed in combat. They were simply a crowd that had tried to push forward and grab him en masse.

Sure, it would have been insanely difficult to deal with the situation without killing them. But even when Loren hadn’t landed the killing blow, sooner or later his foes would have fallen prey to Scena’s serious energy drain. He’d known they would die all the same, and this had compelled Loren to finally face them with the sharp end of his blade.

Loren’s physical prowess and technique—on top of the powers of the greatsword itself—had combined into what was essentially a hurricane of slashes. Those overtaken and robbed of their will by the parasites had become little more than a somewhat hefty wall of flesh, and had offered no resistance beyond that.

Until Lapis and Ivy had finished their preparations, Loren had immersed himself in the tedious work of mowing down the horde. Scena had made good use of this time and wielded her energy drain in full swing.

She drank and drank, and Loren had felt the power growing within him. He was just waiting for it all to end.

The moment Lapis told him the time had come, Loren stabbed his bloodied sword into the ground, then dove into the protective barrier while pouring every ounce of his and Scena's stored power into the sword.

The strength left his body at a staggering rate. He had felt his mind fading along with it, despite his best efforts to keep observing the destruction he had wrought. He remembered his field of vision filling with crimson, and he remembered an immense *sound*. That was all.

Loren had not experienced anything after that, and everything else he knew was secondhand. According to Lapis, Fiamma Unghia's flames had nearly surpassed the defenses of the barrier as they swallowed the town of Suest in the blink of an eye. It had been a close call, but they survived—in fact, they were the only ones that did. Everything aboveground was reduced to so much nothing.

If the flames spread that wide, you'd expect the surrounding plains and forests to catch fire too, Loren thought. But it had been so instantaneous, and at such unimaginable temperature, that the flames hadn't spread at all.

Everything brushed by the heat was instantly vaporized and blew away with the breeze. At other times, the flames skipped over the whole melting part of the process and directly converted solid matter to gasses, which similarly blew away.

Thus, the town called Suest disappeared from the map. Not a trace of its original residents remained, and only the pools of melted glass served as a reminder of what had once been.

After witnessing this wanton destruction, Lapis and the dark gods had returned to the wagon, which had escaped destruction thanks to a similar barrier—Ivy's handiwork.

They made sure the horses showed no signs of infection, and after that, their next destination was Lapis's base beneath the blue sands. There, they used the equipment to test and ensure none of them was infected, and ultimately found that they had all escaped cleanly. Nothing was stopping them from returning to Kaffa.

Loren was still out cold when they returned, and as expected, he was carted off to the usual place. He was trying his

best not to think about it.

After all, there had been a lapse of several days between the time he lost consciousness and the time they returned to Kaffa. Lapis, Gula, and Ivy had been looking after his unconscious body that whole time. And if he started thinking of everything that entailed…he would be unable to stop himself from tearing his hair out. He'd march straight to the gallows.

"Yeah, we saw a few things and whatnot. But it's nothin' to worry about, right? Me and Ivy, we're, well, you know. We're old enough. And Lapis…looked pretty happy about the whole situation, weirdly enough."

That was what Gula had told him when Loren regained consciousness—when he was first writhing on the bed at the realization. Her words were the finishing blow; Loren spent an entire day in a daze. But that was already gone and done with.

"Ivy's been stuck at the guild ever since. With all the reportin' and the paperwork, she's especially busy."

After Loren came to terms with a few things—and pushed a few things he didn't want to think about beyond the bounds of memory—the next thing he was concerned about was the aftermath.



An entire town had disappeared. It would have been stranger if it weren't treated as a major incident. But when he asked, Gula could only reply that Ivy was taking care of it.

Ivy was nothing more than one of the guild's employees. Loren wasn't sure how much weight her reports and testimony held, but he couldn't learn any more about it either.

Anyway, according to Gula, guild receptionists apparently carried a high degree of credibility. There was apparently some method or another by which they proved the authenticity of their statements, but Gula didn't know the specifics.

"If people knew the method, it'd be easier to fake it. But anyway, I doubt Ivy's gonna leak any info that'll put us in a bad spot."

Ivy had managed to falsify her identity to get herself her guild job, and as far as Gula was concerned, she wasn't about to divulge anything that would worsen her position with them.

"I don't recall any information that would *put us in a bad spot*, though," said Lapis.

"Well, there's your identity, for starters," said Loren. "And Gula's, and Ivy's. Also, that I'm the one who actually burned it down."

Apparently, Lapis did not consider any of this to be dangerous information. Loren let out a sigh.

With that said... Loren thought as he lay on the bed. *If Ivy succeeds, we'll be giving Magna and Noel a good hard time*.

It was the least they could do to get back at those creeps. Their appearance and names would be spread and they would be named as wanted fugitives. And, if this drew the attention of any higher-ranking adventurers, perhaps that would even get rid of them.

But... Loren made a sour face. That duo always seemed to be a step ahead, and Loren's party never had a good time when they were involved. Could they really just let other adventurers take care of them?

Even if he let someone else kill them, could they possibly get one over on them—possibly *outwit* them even once—before that happened? Perhaps Loren would only ever be satisfied after he managed this, just the once.

Lapis must have picked up on something from his face, as she opened her mouth and sounded slightly concerned. “Mr. Loren, are you feeling ill?”

“Not exactly…”

He told her exactly what he was thinking. She listened silently, and once she was done, she folded her arms and let out a slight groan.

“Getting the drop on those two… That sounds a mite difficult. But that’s the only way we can make them regret ever crossing us.”

“And we can’t end it all on a losing streak.”

Thanks to Mills, Loren’s mercenary comrade who had perished in Suest, Loren had information on the location of his company chief. Apparently, Juris had been spotted in the northern Justinia Empire, and to Loren, following this lead was far more important than anything to do with Magna.

“Though even if I do find the chief, I don’t plan on returning to the mercenary life. I just wanna see him one more time.”

“I see, I see. Interesting.” Lapis’s arms were still folded before her chest, but she grinned to herself.

For some reason, Loren felt a little anxious, and Lapis once again picked up on it. She unfolded her arms to put him at ease, and with a bright smile, said, “You don’t have to look so worried. This isn’t a matter we can tackle right off the bat. And I’ll have you know, I couldn’t possibly do anything untoward to your benefactor.”

“I’m trusting you here.”

“Please continue to do so. It would make me a bit sad if you didn’t,” Lapis said as she walked over to the bed. She bent over and placed a hand on Loren’s forehead. The cold chill of her hand was rather comforting, though it reminded him that he had yet to fully recover.

Expending enough power to level an entire town had placed a substantial burden on Loren’s body, even if he’d had the energy drain to assist him. This was clear in how Scena seemed to have completely exhausted herself. She hadn’t risen from the depths of his consciousness since.

Loren could instinctively tell she hadn’t disappeared, but she was also so tired that she couldn’t reply when he called for her. It just served to underline that the sword he wielded was indeed a demon lord’s weapon.

“What’s important right now is for you to rest, Mr. Loren. We’ll think about all sorts of things once you’re healthy. Until then, I’ll ponder all the troublesome stuff for you. Don’t worry about it.”

Relaxing into the calming sensation of Lapis stroking his brow, Loren closed his eyes.

He was worried about Scena’s condition, but he understood he had also suffered significant injury. It was inevitably a little concerning to leave things in Lapis’s hands, but he trusted her to know she wouldn’t leave him behind to throw herself into some life-threatening situation.

For now, he had to rest up, to recover from all the damage he’d suffered. And once this thought occurred to him, he was suddenly assailed by drowsiness. Loren offered no resistance as he fell into a deep slumber.

Bonus Story:
From the Notes of a Certain Priest

OCCASIONALLY, YOU'LL meet individuals who refer to the domain of demonkind as "hell."

The land is governed by the great demon king, so in all honesty, it should be called "the Great King's Domain," or maybe just "demon territory." I'm honestly not sure.

People seem to imagine incomprehensible animals wandering our lands, or flowers that grow in unsightly, crooked forms, and that spew poison to boot. All that, merely because demons took up residence in the area. In all actuality, there isn't any significant difference between demon territory and any other region.

Now, that isn't to say the aggregate mana of the demon lords and the great demon king *never* gives birth to some mysterious life form and *never* induces some absurd evolution in the local vegetation. It happens! But surely this occurs in human territory too...right?

In any case, the divide in the general viewpoints of our races is a terribly sad thing. As for people calling my homeland "hell," well—I happen to know a place far more deserving of such an appellation.

I am of course referring to Kaffa, my current base of operations. If that isn't hell, then I don't know what is. Even if you dismissed the fact that all manner of dark gods strut around the place, Kaffa would still be hell.

How else to capture those bright smiles plastered across those faces? Those bodies that gleam as though just slathered head to toe in oil?

It's not just that it's suffocating to be surrounded by them. It's more that their manager is that Dark God of Lust! But for whatever reason, those muscle-bound individuals give off the most peculiar air. It's not simply the impact of their appearance. Merely recalling the sight inflicts considerable damage upon my soul.

Ah, now that I've recalled it again, I need to get my sick bag.

Oh, no, there's no way a beautiful lady such as myself would ever *spontaneously* do anything that required a sick bag. It's just that whatever I ate this morning refuses to be digested; it's making quite a fuss, demanding to be let out. I am a very kind soul, so I have no choice but to bow to its wishes. Now, pardon me.

I'd love to have Mr. Loren reflect on his actions, seeing as he instigated this travesty. You needn't think it over for more than a moment to realize nothing good can ever come of asking for a favor from that Dark God of Lust.

As for why it came to this? During our last job, we obtained intel that a lady named Envy Bridgeguard numbered among the dark gods.

We didn't know anyone named Envy, but Mr. Loren did remember a certain someone with the surname Bridgeguard; so, he sent someone to keep tabs on the individual in question. Since she was potentially a dark god, this meant that whoever he sent had to be quite powerful as well. And the chosen watchman was Mr. Luxuria, the Dark God of Lust.

This is a nightmare.

I don't really want to dwell on the matter, so I'll skip a few things. The point is that *Ivy* Bridgeguard, the guild receptionist, openly admitted to being the dark god herself. It felt like she had no intention of hiding it in the first place.

Since "dark gods" aren't particularly welcomed in society, she had changed her name—and even her body—to pass herself off as an average human.

Changing one's true name through magic is incredibly dangerous. I understand that she didn't want to be a dark god anymore, but you'd usually hesitate to do such a thing. I suppose the fact she pulled it off earns her the title of dark god in itself.

However, Mr. Loren was less interested in the information that one of the guild's receptionists was a dark god, than he was in the process she'd used to change her body.

Given Ms. Scena's circumstances, I do understand where he's coming from, but he had a *dark god* right in front of his nose. Was that really what he should have been paying attention to?

He really is a wonderful person.

That said, we ended up taking a quest from Ms. Ivy in exchange for information on those ruins. This meant we had to head straight to a town named Suest.

On a side note, Ms. Ivy really must consider who she's talking to when she makes those jokes of hers. I nearly attacked her in earnest.

The quest involved investigating the mysterious disappearances of townsfolk and adventurers in Suest. Since all the adventurers sent to look into it had yet to return, it had become quite a troublesome situation—rather, the hunters had become the hunted. It was no laughing matter.

I would have preferred to avoid trouble, but once Mr. Loren heard that the ruins containing the equipment he needed happened to be near the town, he could no longer refuse.

Ms. Ivy came along as a guild overseer of our investigation. Thus we set off and reached a sight quite familiar for myself—though Loren seemed a bit startled when he laid eyes upon it again. Yes, it was the blue desert, where blue sand stretches as far as the eye can see. We changed trajectory at that point and plotted a course straight to Suest.

As you might expect for the entrance to a town, there were guards at the gate. However, these guards forwent all the usual checks and allowed us in as soon as they saw Loren's guild identification.

I got the feeling this went beyond simply having lax security measures.

Usually, a guard will at least read the information on your tag, or try to confirm it's the real deal. Because of this, entry into some of the larger towns can become quite a time-consuming process.

Of course, I doubt anyone can glean truly useful information from a brief glance at a guild tag... But I thought that perhaps they were in actuality incredibly proficient soldiers.

Not that they looked that way to me. In the first place, though adventurers' guild tags are used as a form of identification, the guild itself isn't the most credible organization.

Thus, the guild IDs are inspected far more assiduously than forms of identification authorized by lords and nations. But, well, let's just say the soldiers were lazy and leave it at that.

Yet the strange behavior did not stop with them. The innkeeper and the guild receptionist both behaved in a way that forced me to cock my head.

We learned the reason for this a bit later, but at the time, we had absolutely no idea what to make of it. And on top of that, Mr. Neg, the spider that is constantly stuck to Mr. Loren's shoulder, used his threads to envelop the well and the inn, and all with us none the wiser.

Mr. Neg was intervening to protect us—though just then, we couldn't comprehend his intentions, and I could only watch on curiously alongside Mr. Loren.

Had Mr. Neg not done that… Perhaps I would have been fine, being a demon. And the two dark gods would have made it somehow or another. But there's no telling what might have become of Mr. Loren.

I'm assuming Ms. Scena could have done something about it… But the best offense is a good defense, and I have nothing but gratitude for Mr. Neg.

Is he really just an ordinary spider?

We greeted the night no less unsettled than we had been during the day. But we did catch sight of a group of townsfolk, gathering for reasons beyond our ability to discern.

Mr. Loren made sure to tail them. They seemed to be heading west.

However, there were no important facilities on Suest's west side. At least, I was sure the entrance to the sewers was the only thing of note. And the suspicious group did indeed enter the sewers.

Loren tried to go after them, but I'm sorry to say I was forced to wait outside. As his partner, the fact that I couldn't follow him speaks to a lack of resolve on my part; I can't deny that. But surely I'm allowed to hesitate to skip into the sewage system, which is to say: Anything but that.

An adventurer must be prepared to take on unseemly jobs, don't get me wrong. But I wanted to avoid anything that stained

my vestments or let a foul odor saturate them.

…I really have nothing to say in my defense.

I can only reflect upon my shortcomings.

I must also repent for treating Mr. Loren as though he was filthy after he came out…

I'm repenting. I'm sorry.

But even a goblin is capable of repentance!

If I truly wanted to make up for my failure, then it was up to me to use my demonkind knowledge to formulate a counter-measure for the smell.

Before that, though, it was our civic duty to report both the innkeeper's strange behavior and the apparent disappearance of quite a few people in the dead of the night. When we headed down to the garrison, we came across one of Mr. Loren's surviving mercenary comrades, Mr. Mills.

One glance at Mr. Loren and you can clearly tell he must have been a wonderfully skilled mercenary. But Mr. Mills wasn't half bad himself. He explained to us that his priest friend had gone missing.

From what we'd seen, the sewers were the likeliest location to yield answers, and the way Mr. Mills immediately went to investigate put him pretty high in my books.

He and his comrades had a bit of a strange air about them, though. How was it possible for him to forget the name of the chief of his mercenary company?

It raised a few questions, but at the time, resolving the present issue took priority.

And so, with the permission of our party leader, it was time to do some shopping and get to work.

The item I intended to make is known among demons as an "odor neutralizer." It's a truly indispensable invention when searching places like sewers.

When humans try to deal with foul smells, they either try to overwrite the aroma with an even more powerful one or they attempt to somehow absorb it. We instead opt to add an additional scent to counterbalance the distasteful one.

In the first place, whenever you try overwriting an already potent aroma, any smell you replace it with will likely be just as unpleasant. Meanwhile, you'll never perfectly absorb the offending odor either. If you instead mix it with other smells, thereby changing it on a fundamental level, you neither require a strong alternative perfume nor do you need to worry about failing to absorb the excess.

I did my best and successfully concocted the pellet—and the time to use it came soon enough. That night, another suspicious group gathered in the street, and this time Ms. Ivy and Ms. Gula came with us.

The group's destination was, of course, the sewers. Just as we'd expected.

This time, I put up with the smell and headed in. After I deployed the odor neutralizer, Ms. Ivy explained the origin of the sewage system and offered additional information on the ruins Loren hoped to reach.

How should I put it? You don't often get to hear stories from people who were actually alive during the time of the ancient kingdom. According to Ms. Ivy, the sewage system had originally been constructed for the facility that had become the ruins in question.

I had a terrible feeling about this.

I suppose the bottom line is that we were dealing with waste from ruins that had been focused on researching living things… and that never leads to anything good.

It seems no one ever considers ensuring their waste won't harm the local environs before dumping it outside. Or perhaps there was such a system long ago, and it's simply degraded to the point of uselessness.

Whatever the cause, these ruins tend to be nothing but trouble for people of the modern era—people like us. And my bad feeling was right on the money.

We were subsequently attacked by massive centipedes. Even small centipedes evoke intense psychological disgust from a large segment of the general population. Once they're enlarged to such proportions, the impact is even greater.

It's just *the worst*!

There were too many to deal with even if we'd wanted to fight; fleeing was really our only option. However, if we tried to run too fast, I wouldn't be able to throw my neutralizers into the sewage fast enough for them to work.

In short, we needed to endure the smell and make a break for it. But if we ran too hard, we'd breathe too hard, and the amount of air we inhaled would increase.

This was a huge failure.

At the time, I was nervous about the side effects of using too much of the neutralizer, so I'd made it into small pellets that only covered small areas. But this was in the end a mistake.

If I'd known this would happen, I would have made a liquid or granular version and just dumped a massive pot of the neutralizer into the water from the start. But what's done is done!

We bolted in the direction of the ruins Ivy had described, but according to her, it would take some time to open the door. Unless we sent Ivy ahead—whereupon she would have to endure the smell all on her own—the centipedes would catch up to us before the door could, and we'd be inundated with their zombified victims as well.

Secretly, I readied myself to do away with my modesty and blow the bugs to kingdom come, no holds barred—but for some reason, the door to the ruins was open, and Mr. Mills peeked out.

This must be what they call "a narrow brush with death."

Thankfully, Mr. Loren picked me up alongside Ms. Gula and Ms. Ivy and dashed as fast as his legs would take him. Honestly, if someone asked me to run full force through that stench, I'd have said "No, thank you." Even under those circumstances.

It was hard enough just bearing through the smell, and if I happened to trip? That would be the end of Lapis.

I did notice one thing once we charged into the ruins. As our party consisted entirely of people who could see in the dark, we didn't really need any light source to guide us through the underground passages.

That was also a mistake.

Luckily, no one caught on, but if any ordinary adventurers had seen us, they'd have realized right off the bat that something was off about us.

There's no telling who could be watching. I must be more careful from now on.

This realization of mine was cut short, however, as the situation did not permit us to stand around mulling things over.

Mr. Mills was injured. He'd headed to the sewers in search of his missing comrades, only to be assaulted by that swarm of centipedes.

Now it's time for me to reveal the secret. As it turns out, Suest had been entirely taken over. Far before we arrived, it had been overrun by the bugs living in the sewers.

The reason the residents were acting so strange—and the reason the townsfolk gathered and made for the sewers in the night—was because of larval parasites that had taken control of their bodies.

I know of several varieties of small parasites that are able to manipulate larger lifeforms, but I was not previously aware of any that were able to hijack humans. I imagine they mutated due to the influence of the ruins.

Mr. Mills's body had already been infected, and he knew he didn't have much time left. Mr. Loren borrowed the strength of a Lifeless King and enabled the man to fall into an eternal slumber.

As I am, I can't even begin to fathom how Mr. Loren must have felt, having to put down a long-lost old comrade with whom he'd only just reunited.

It's a bit sad to think about.

In his last moments, Mr. Mills gave Mr. Loren a smidge of information on that chief of theirs.

We couldn't bury his body, so I offered a prayer to put his soul to rest, and Ms. Ivy performed the cremation. You might forget, but I am a properly ordained priest. I'm certain Mr. Mills's soul returned to the cycle of reincarnation.

Thus, we saw him off, but we couldn't mourn for long. We were in the ancient ruins now, and a horde of bugs and zombies

was but a wall away. Turning back was not an option, and we were forced to press on.

Of course, searching the ruins was a nonissue. After all, we had Ms. Ivy, who seemed to know everything about them and thereby saved us the trouble. We arrived at our destination without taking a single wrong turn.

But there, Ivy informed us that we weren't the only explorers present. The second Mr. Loren heard that, he was instantly out for blood.

I did get where he was coming from. As far as both of us were aware, there was one particular individual who seemed to possess a great deal of knowledge about ruins of the ancient kingdom, and who made use of equipment and facilities no ordinary person would know about: the black coackro...*ahem*, swordsman, Mr. Magna, and his attendant.

Rather, no one should have been capable of using the facilities in those ruins. Yet that man operated them like he'd always known their purpose. I'm somewhat interested to learn where exactly he hails from, but if I posed the question, I doubt he'd answer.

The door separating us from our guests was also a formidable one. We knew our enemy awaited just beyond it, but the sturdy door prevented us from getting a preemptive strike. Although I considered blasting through with powerful magic, Mr. Loren was after the equipment in the ruins, and I couldn't just destroy his goal.

With little choice left, we tried rushing in as swiftly as possible for a full-frontal attack—but that was where we suffered a wee mishap.

Ms. Ivy was supposed to be able to open the door, but there was a magical lock on top of the ordinary ones. What's more, she failed to bypass it.

Now we could no longer land a quick and decisive strike. We'd given whoever was on the other side ample time to prepare.

Ultimately Ms. Gula pulled herself together and unlocked the door in Ms. Ivy's stead, but once we entered, we were faced with not the individual we had expected, but his right-hand woman:

Ms. Noel, a dark elf with the authority of the Dark God of Lust, and quite a troublesome individual.

As she explained it, Mr. Magna had already finished his business and left. Apparently, he'd come to regenerate the arm Mr. Loren had lopped off.

If we'd had the element of surprise, we might have been able to capture her, but she was ready with a bow enchanted with a limitless stock of arrows, which she used to keep us in check. We were unable to lay a hand on her—in fact, she slipped away as easy as anything.

Once she was gone, Ms. Ivy investigated the condition of the ruins, and as it turned out, that woman had been rather messy. All sorts of chemicals had been discharged into the water. This was clearly the source of whatever had changed those bugs. Yes, while Mr. Magna and his little buddy were able to use the facilities in the ruins, they didn't do so with what you might call mastery. Otherwise, they wouldn't have discharged such a valuable stock of catalysts and solutions.

They really are a bothersome duo.

This is only conjecture on my part, but that does establish the cause of this incident. Can't someone go out and arrest those two already? Given the sheer magnitude of the forces they were meddling with, the damages caused by a basic mistake were on another level entirely.

To make matters worse, their indiscrete use of the facilities had left them damaged, and the ruins were in no state to be used again.

Neither did that address a certain riddle we were facing—namely, that there is simply no telling what would happen if we transplanted Scena's undead soul into a living body. So we can only spend time thinking of a way to get around that issue while we wait for the ruins to naturally replenish their stocks and for Ms. Ivy to restore their functionality.

Suest itself was done for, and there was nothing we could do about it. Ms. Ivy would have to do her best to report to the guild, and the rest was up in the air.

So of course we ran into another issue.

There was no exit by which we could leave the ruins. In an attempt to break through the ceiling and make a new one, Gula and Ivy worked together to blast the dirt away. But the hole was quickly surrounded by the bugs' infected victims, and they began to fall in.

The infected seemed keen on increasing their numbers. We fended them off as we made it out, only to find things even worse than we expected. We ran straight into a centipede even larger than the ones we'd already met, and the town was overrun by the infected. All in all, it was dreadful.

This was beyond anything anyone could bring under control. Thus, I made a proposal to Ms. Ivy—at this rate, it would be best to just burn it all to the ground.

If the kingdom were to dispatch its army to Suest, they would only be able to do the same once they'd sacrificed countless soldiers. Some soldiers would inevitably be infected, and they would only spread the damage.

However, if the land was burned, the underground ruins would remain safe. As for the troublesome things in the sewer system, Ms. Ivy would have to devise a way to take care of them herself.

Reporting this to the guild would be quite an ordeal, but again, Ms. Ivy would just have to do her best. There was no other way.

Now the burning itself was not an issue. The sword Mr. Loren held in his hands possessed more than enough power for that. But if Mr. Loren used it on his own, it would put his life in jeopardy—more or less. That said, we had plenty of extra batteries all around us, so as long as Ms. Scena sucked the life from the infected and lent it to him, that problem was essentially solved.

And thus, that day, the word "Suest" disappeared from the world map. The blame and bad press for the incident would all be pinned on a mysterious dark swordsman and his dark elf companion.

Do your best, Ms. Ivy.

Of course, Mr. Loren was hospitalized... As we've all come to expect.

He had all the life energy he required, but wielding enough flames to burn down a city still placed quite the burden on his body. Can’t anyone introduce us to a safe and easy job for Mr. Loren? He’s been sent to the hospital after nearly every job!

It feels like nothing I do ever works out. I don’t think it has anything to do with his abilities or his nature, but the moment Mr. Loren gets involved with something, even a perfectly ordinary job becomes suddenly outrageous. It’s like a universal constant.

But this isn’t Mr. Loren’s fault. I can only say he was born under a terrible star.

If he develops a grudge against the god who presides over fate, I would highly recommend he switch to my faith. Knowledge is a gateway to many great things.

And with that, I lay down my brush for today.



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Table of Contents

Table of Contents
Color Gallery
Title Page
Copyrights and Credits
Table of Contents Page
Prologue: A Wrong Choice to a Reunion
Chapter 1: Hell to the Request
Chapter 2: Acceptance to Consideration
Chapter 3: Laying Web to Spraying Down
Chapter 4: The Problem to Old Sentiment
Chapter 5: Discussion to Pursuit
Chapter 6: Progress to Arrival
Chapter 7: From Funeral to Conjecture
Chapter 8: A Result to Seal Away
Epilogue: An End to Sleep
Bonus Story: From the Notes of a Certain Priest
Newsletter