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Author

Yu Okano

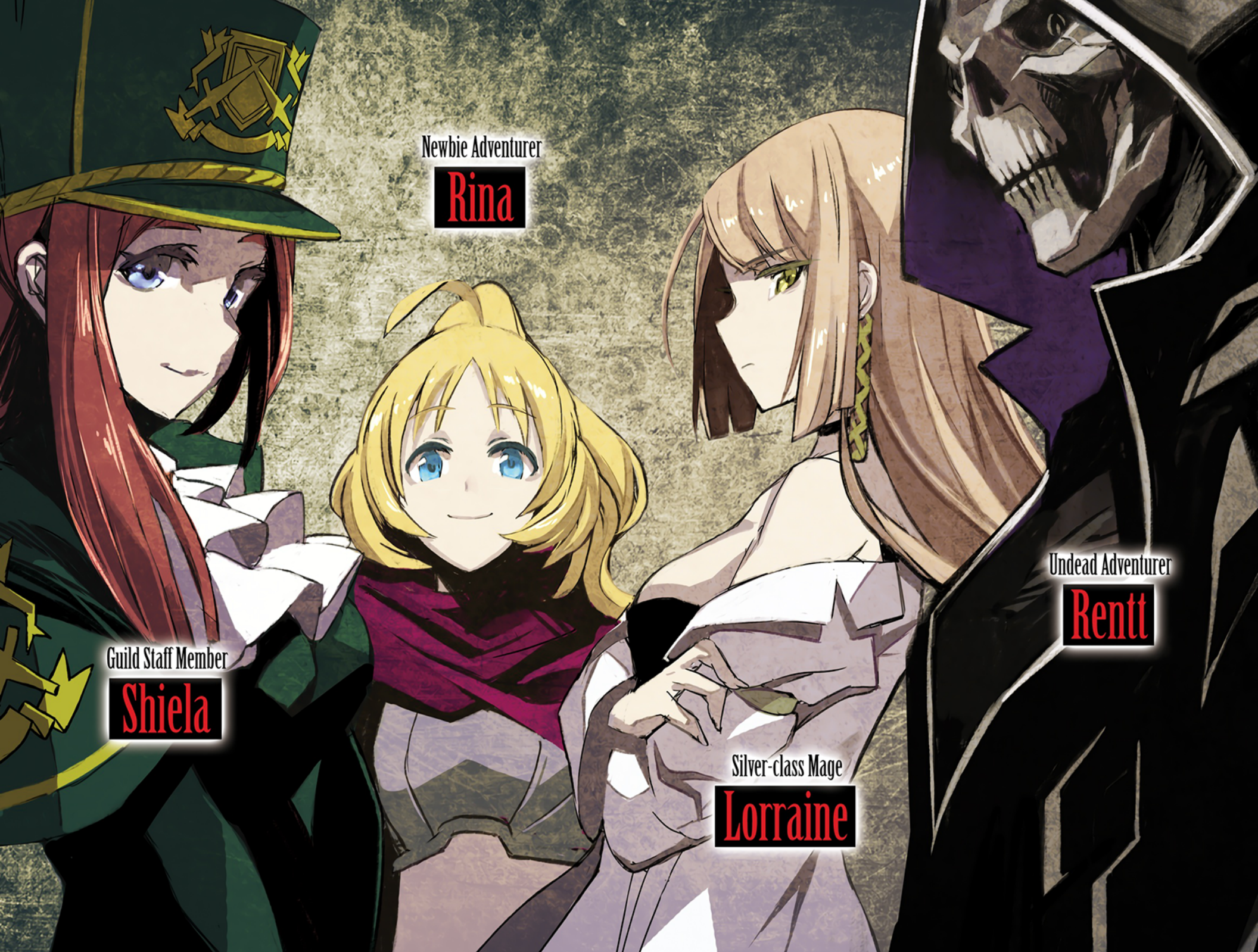
Illustration

Jaian



The Unwanted Undead Adventurer


The Unwanted Undead Adventurer
first
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Yu Okano / Illustration: Jaian


Newbie Adventurer
Rina
Guild Staff Member
Shiela
Silver-class Mage
Lorraine
Undead Adventurer
Rentt


“An abomination made of bone, living in an eternal pocket of still time, with an equally eternal life that flaunted the divine laws of the land—such was the Giant Skeleton that stood before me.”

first

1 The Unwanted Undead Adventurer

Yu Okano
Illustration: Jaian



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PROLOGUE

This... This is bad.

That was the first thought that flashed across my mind as the monster before me opened its crimson-red lips, rushing at me with its mouth wide open.

In a particularly rural corner of the lands was the Kingdom of Yaaran, and on the fringes of the kingdom was a small town by the name of Maalt. I, Rentt Faina, an adventurer of the lower-Bronze-class, found myself hunting weak monsters in the Labyrinth of the Moon's Reflection—which, if I may add, was close to the township of Maalt. On this day, much like any other, I continued my relentless hunt for Skeletons and Goblins, assembling what little materials and magical ores I could.

That was my daily routine, after all; I basically did the same thing every day, returning to town in the evenings and off-loading my gathered materials at the adventurer's guild for a humble sum of coin. At least, that was what I had intended to do today, as I always have before.

However, the disruption to my well-established routine was sudden and abrupt—a quick wrench in the cogs, if you will.

Perhaps I should elaborate a little on the subject of labyrinths. As I have walked the chambers and paths of Moon's Reflection every day, there was little to no possibility of me getting lost. Ironically, it was this familiarity that was my undoing, for I had discovered what appeared to be a new, different path along my old and familiar routes. I suppose one could call it bad luck.

Yes, let's go with that.

Under normal circumstances, I would have probably overlooked such a thing. Adventurers, after all, were supposed to be individuals who *adventure*. With that being said, the definition of "adventure" was not exactly rushing into situations without any prior surveillance or planning.

In reality, however, there were far more adventurers who simply charged headfirst into any situation—and as ashamed as I am to be counted amongst their number, I, too, have made such mistakes.

It would probably do me well to raise a single point in my defense here:

To begin with, the Labyrinth of the Moon's Reflection was discovered ages ago. To find new chambers and paths in such a well-explored labyrinth was virtually unheard of—in other words, it was a big discovery. One would summarily deduce that some sort of magical grimoire or weapon with a wildly ridiculous price tag sat at the end of this mysterious path. In addition, one could attain a certain degree of fame and fortune by charting a previously unexplored area of a labyrinth.

And so it came to be that I entered this strange path, with thoughts of potential riches clouding both my mind and judgment. My short-lived exploration trip, however, did not end well. I soon found myself toe-to-toe with a monster of gigantic proportions in a large chamber. And when it rains, it pours—or so they say. The monster, of all things, had to be a Dragon.

You know. Dragons. Monsters that stood at the top of the monster hierarchy. Normally, one would have to be a Platinum- or Mithril-class adventurer to even stand a chance against them, as they were the monster of monsters.

At a glance, it looked a little different than one's usual vision of

a Dragon. While most Dragons looked a certain way, this one was markedly different—it was like a large snake, or perhaps a frog. However, there was no mistaking that the monster in question was a Dragon of some sort—at the very least, that was what I thought.

Unfortunate adventurers who do cross paths with Dragons usually do not make it out alive to tell the tale. As Dragons do not usually appear before people very often, eyewitness accounts are rare, perhaps historically so. In fact, you could even count existing, recorded instances on one's hand. Legend has it that there were no more than four of such Dragons in the world, and their strength was said to even rival that of the demon king. Some would say that they were not monsters, but instead divine beings, while others would say that they were beyond even that.

In other words, someone like me, who had been stuck in Bronze-class for eons despite their best efforts, would be utterly crushed and defeated if the Dragon so much as lifted its little finger.

—For a while, I wondered if Dragons actually had fingers.

With a Dragon appearing before me, I had no choice but to be surprised—in the first place, I did not have any illusions or thoughts of fighting it at all. This, specifically, was why I decided to run. If I didn't run, I would surely die—and so my feet began to move, as they should.

But then—

I guess the Dragon really was the monster of monsters, as it quickly noticed my attempt and intention to escape. Perhaps it could not help but notice, just like how my feet could not help but freeze on the spot. Just like that, I found myself unable to move.

It was perhaps more accurate to say that my body itself refused to move. It did not even twitch. A normal individual would

question why this was the case—if they were, say, a normal person who had never come face-to-face with a monster before.

Owing to my long tenure as an adventurer, however, it was not difficult for me to understand this current phenomenon. Adventurers eventually learn to read their opponents regardless of their nature, be they human or monster. Summarily, the pressure and aura released by a being of high strength was often enough to oppress and intimidate the weak; they say it is like being crushed by a heavy, invisible weight.

At least, that was how the rumors went. But what I experienced was exactly that.

Incapable of withstanding the pressure emanating from the Dragon, I was unable to move, completely rooted to the ground. Upon realizing my situation, I wished from the bottom of my heart for the Dragon to spare me. It probably would not, however. This, I knew as much.

At that point in time, all I could do was stand and watch as the Dragon advanced closer unto me—all the while praying that it would change its mind about eating me. Reality, however, was not quite so forgiving.

After it caught sight of me, the Dragon swiftly opened its mouth, charging in my general direction. Of course it was going to eat me—as expected. That was the conclusion I arrived at as I pondered, somewhat leisurely, in the face of death.

At the same time, a little voice in my head reminded me of how dire the situation was, and the fact that I would soon be dead. There was not much I could do about it, however—my body simply wouldn't move.

It had been about ten years since I first became an adventurer at the age of 15. Back then, I had believed that I would one day exceed Platinum-class rank and become one of the few legendary

Mithril-class adventurers—that was my dream when I first started out.

So, I took on simple quests, earning my daily keep as I continued dreaming of such a future. When I was done with my daily quests, I would continue my daily training regimen. And although I did all that, it seemed like it would all end here.

It was pathetic; unfortunate, yes, but mostly pathetic.

With feelings of utmost regret, and a strange sense of release knowing that my relatively pointless life would end here and now, my body was engulfed in the mouth of the Dragon—and that was that.

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What I was not expecting, however, was the strange sensation of waking up after an indeterminate period of time. It would *seem* that I had woken up, regardless of how I was sure I had been eaten by a Dragon, and how I had confirmed my death with these very eyes. Yet here I was, awake.

And then I noticed—

Wait. No, no no no. That's impossible.

That was what I thought as I woke up, confirming the situation around me.

This all seemed impossible, particularly the matter of what had happened to my body. I could not process what was happening; even so, first, a look at my hands was warranted.

It was then that the realization struck me. There was no flesh on my hands—though there should have been—and there was no skin, either. In fact, all that remained of what was once my hand were a series of white, thin bones.

—And that was all there was.

This strange ailment did not stop at my hands, however; it had apparently afflicted every inch of my body. My feet, too, were plain bone—no flesh or skin anywhere. Same went for my thighs, as well as both my arms.

As for my face… Well. It was not common practice for adventurers to carry compact mirrors. Needless to say, I did not have one. I would assume with an educated guess that I probably had a skull for a face. In other words:

I, Rentt Faina, adventurer of the lower-Bronze-class, had apparently conducted a class change from “adventurer” to “Skeleton” at some point in time.

Impossible…



CHAPTER 1
A Grasp Of The Situation And Existential Evolution

I found myself at a complete loss. My first thought—*What should I be doing?*

For starters, it would be fair to say that I had definitely been eaten by the Dragon. Even if I were alive in a somewhat non-human form, I supposed I should be grateful.

Well, no. I could not be sure—was I even alive in the first place? Skeletons were a type of undead monster, creatures that have already died once. As such, it would be easy for bishops and priests of the church to exorcise them with simple cleansing magic. If anything, they were exceptionally weak monsters.

The explanation behind Skeletons being cleansed was simple: being a sack of walking bones, they were creatures brought forth against the divine logic of the gods. Other explanations included the more simple "they are dead, and as such cannot exist on this world." Succinct, but true. This continued defiance of the divine rules of life and death was apparently the prime reason for their weakness to said magic.

Personally, I had no idea if any of this held water, owing to the fact that I wasn't a bishop or priest in the first place. However, the general argument for it seemed sound, and for myself at this point in time, it was a critically important piece of information.

Plainly put, if I were to expand upon that logic, I was definitely

very, very dead. More accurately, I was existing in the world as a dead pile of bones. This was a very, very bad thing indeed.

As I had mentioned a while ago, the fact that a dead being continued to exist apparently flaunted some severe laws of the divine nature. If I were to simply saunter back into town and enter a tavern as if nothing had happened, it would not end well. No matter how much I would claim that I was Rentt Faina, some no-good priest who spent all his time in the tavern from morning to night would chance upon me, then promptly get rid of me with his stave. If this were to come to pass, my existence would simply be erased. This was something I definitely wanted to avoid.

Such were the bones of the situation. On the bright side, I was still alive. Even if I were to exist as a Skeleton and defy the laws of life and death, as far as I was concerned, my consciousness was intact; I was still very much alive. This was precisely why I could not simply skip back to town and carelessly get myself killed.

Well, then, what should I do? That was the burning question.

This was the Labyrinth of the Moon's Reflection; adventurers would certainly make their way to the labyrinth as they always had, merrily killing what monsters they found along the way. Even for a relatively beginner-oriented labyrinth populated by weaker monsters, adventurers stronger than myself often made their way here. If I appeared before such individuals, I would certainly be killed—for good, this time.

Whatever, then, should I do...?

As I continued to think, a few strings of thought connected in my mind:

It was perhaps safe to assume that I was now a monster of some sort. There was a certain mysterious aspect to monsters: older and more experienced monsters tended to evolve into more powerful versions of themselves. This phenomenon was com-

monly referred to as “Existential Evolution.”

Although I was not absolutely sure if I was a monster to begin with, I seemed to be some sort of walking Skeleton at a glance. If that really were the case, then wouldn’t this concept apply to me, as well?

—The whole “Existential Evolution” thing, I mean. After all, having knowledge of monsters was sort of an occupational requirement for adventurers. If memory served, Skeletons could apparently evolve into flesh-eating Ghouls—at least, that was what I remembered reading in a book about monsters some time ago.

Although Ghouls were also a type of undead monster, and hence also went against the divine laws governing life and death, they at the very least had a more humanoid appearance than a Skeleton did. Rotted and dried out though it may be, a Ghoul even had flesh. With a robe and mask, I could perhaps pass for a human—those were my thoughts on the matter.

If I did this, I would be able to sneak into town rather uneventfully, and I would finally get the chance to explain the nature of this situation to my friends and compatriots. I was, of course, very much aware of the absurd nature of my plan. If anything, it was not very well thought-out; although this was all I had to work with at this point in time.

I made a decision—

I would aim to somehow trigger this Existential Evolution. I, Rentt Faina, would evolve into a Ghoul in the Labyrinth of the Moon’s Reflection.

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The Existential Evolution from Skeleton to Ghoul was the first thing I had to address. Although I had already decided on that

course of action, I was unsure of the extent of my combat abilities. I was only a low-ranked Bronze-class adventurer that was near the bottom rungs of the guild. I did, however, fare better than Iron-class adventurers, who were the newest of the new. If I were to objectively state my combat prowess, I would say that taking down one or two Goblins and Skeletons was doable, and well within safe limits. I could do at least that much—

Although I probably would not come out of it unscathed.

If there were three or more enemies, it would perhaps be a little more difficult, but I would still be able to win, somehow. If there were four or more enemies, I would definitely run; if there were five, I would be done for. That was how it looked at this point in time.

It would not be fair, however, to call me weak. I did not have much say in the matter to begin with, having begun my journey as an adventurer only a decade ago. But I had been training hard for almost 20 years. In fact, I would actually like some empathy here—I had trained for that long, but I could only do this much.

If one were to ask why I had spent that much time and effort training, only to have nothing much to show for it, the answer was very simple: I did not have enough reserves of mana, spirit, or divinity. In addition, I did not have many of the abilities required to adequately control my already meager reserves of power. It could be said that this was a more-than-fatal issue for any budding adventurer.

Frankly speaking, I would actually appreciate some praise for having made it thus far.

I suppose I have not explained what magic, spirit, or divinity are. Let us talk about the nature of mana, to start. Mana is a required prerequisite for the casting of magical spells—the font of mysterious magical energy that some individuals are rarely born with. If one were to put it simply, those blessed with mana at

birth are able to conjure flames and wind without the use of any tools, to cause water to flow freely from nowhere, and to persuade the earth itself to move beneath their feet. In more ways than one, magic is a very convenient skill.

Although the ratios differed between the various races of sentient beings that populated these lands, one in approximately every 50 humans was born with mana in their being. This was no small number.

However, those with enough mana and aptitude to actually become successful mages numbered at one for every thousand—such was the rarity of this blessing. As long as the user possessed a certain amount of mana, however, simple spells like the venerable Foteia Borivaas fireball, or the Gie Vieros earthen arrow, could be cast without too much trouble. Though, to proceed beyond rudimentary attack spells, one would require the aforementioned combination of mana and aptitude, which was available only to one in a thousand humans on average.

It was perhaps worth mentioning that, while I did have some mana reserves at birth, they were pathetically low—hardly a fraction of what one would need to become a powerful mage. After all, I had been unable to cast any low-level attack spells despite my long periods of training. My lack of talent in this field was painfully apparent.

I could, however, conjure water for drinking and embers to light campfires with. For that, I was grateful, even if said blessings were small ones. Yet it was extremely regrettable that I could not use magic in combat.

An explanation of spirit would perhaps be in order. Often referred to by a plethora of other names, such as “Chakra” or “Prana,” spirit is the life force of all living things.

Unlike magic, spirit is the root of all life, and as such was available to any and all living persons. If one were to use it well,

one could strengthen their own body, augment their attacks, and even obtain stamina way above that of an average human. However, as most individuals subconsciously used spirit as a means of staying alive, few come to realize its true potential.

On the other hand, even if one were to become aware of one's own spirit, a significant amount of training was required to use it adequately, in addition to requiring a natural aptitude for channeling one's life force.

In my case, I did not have enough command over my spirit reserves to actually utilize it effectively, even though I had become aware of its existence. But even so, I did come up with the ability to amplify the force of a single attack by 1.5 times once in a single day—personally, I considered that ability my trump card. Although the augmented attack did carry a significant amount of force, it would certainly be seen as child's play to an actual practitioner of the spirit arts.

Last but not least would be an explanation of divinity. I suppose you could say it is even rarer than the blessing of mana, as most people have no affinity for it whatsoever. It is said that divinity is bestowed unto humans by divine beings, such as gods or faeries. Having any pool of divinity in oneself is considered a rare thing indeed, and most people blessed with it find themselves working for the church.

Depending on how one uses it, divinity is known for enabling the use of healing and cleansing spells which, on a rudimentary level, could be used to heal illnesses or purify the undead. Wielders of greater fonts of divinity are even able to purify vast tracts of corrupted land.

In addition, due to its nature as an ability bestowed by divine beings, the lucky few with divinity in them find themselves able to communicate with faeries and gods. In some cases, they even rise to prominent social positions.

In this case, if we were just talking about a run-of-the-mill individual, they probably would not have a single trace of divinity in them at all. But I, for one reason or another, *did* have a sliver of divinity in me. With that being said, a sliver is a sliver, so greater tasks were beyond me.

If memory serves, this snippet of divinity originated from an event in my younger days, where I decided, for some reason, to fix a local run-down shrine of sorts. The spirits that inhabited that shrine probably saw fit to bless me, and that was that.

Although I had been able to use the divine arts a little since then, all I had managed to do was purify dirty water so it was safe for drinking, or to clear a wound of its infections. Things like closing wounds instantly or purifying corrupted land was, and still is, unfortunately beyond me.

It is, however, still a very handy life skill to have. More often than not I find myself thanking that faerie or spirit from the bottom of my heart.

And that concludes my explanation as to why it was difficult for me to continue in my capacity as an adventurer with only this much aptitude and ability. After all, the fonts of mana and divinity within me were small, and even I knew that I was not exactly cut out for adventuring.

It was perhaps worth noting that individuals with the ability to command and utilize all three abilities were very rare. In fact, I do not recall encountering another quite like myself. Unfortunately, with the important factor not being quantity, but the degree of aptitude and power one has, one could also say that I was extremely unlucky.

Most individuals who aspire to be adventurers usually have a strong innate disposition to one of the three abilities—about, say, half of them were that way. Someone like me, who was neither here nor there, was very much a rare oddity. In fact, people like

me would have probably just chosen a normal, non-combative job, and would live their entire lives out that way in relative peace. I, too, should have done that; at least, that is what I would say in hindsight.

One thing prevented me from doing as I should have, however: the fact that I had a great dream.

From a young age, I had chased it, and have continued to do so—to become a Mithril-class adventurer. There was no way I could give up after all this time.

But as a result of my great dream, I appeared to have ended up as a Skeleton of sorts. While nothing much could be said about that right now, I still did not feel like I should give up.

Regardless of my current appearance, I was apparently not completely dead. While I had no idea why I was still alive to begin with, I felt like I was on the luckier end of things, given that my body still moved.

It is said that humans will find a way as long as they have life. They are able to achieve great feats precisely because they live. It was with that thought in my mind that I continued to live on.

Come to think of it, being a Skeleton wasn't entirely a bad thing. Although it was a huge problem in and of itself, in addition to how I didn't know if I was truly alive, I could move, and thus was not entirely helpless. There was nothing inherently wrong with thinking that I could continue to work hard from now on, even in my current form.

Just to be sure, I gave the abilities I had when I was "alive" some short test runs. Mana, spirit, and divinity all seemed functional, having apparently followed me into the afterlife. I felt like I had more than enough to go on with these advantages.

At the very least, I could say that I had quite the leg up from a

typical Skeleton monster of this level, who definitely would not have any of said abilities. I could probably fight with this—it was more than enough.

It was also worth noting that while my aspirations to evolve into a Ghoul sounded alarming, I had no intentions of eating human flesh. I was doing so just to obtain a more human form.

Either way, I did not recall Ghouls requiring human flesh for sustenance. If I were compelled to do so by instinct or some other reasons, I would cross that bridge when I came to it.

Perhaps I would do it in secret, or at least find some way to sate my hunger; for now, that was not worth thinking about. More importantly, it was vital to verify the extent of my strength in combat, and to continue my task of evolving into a Ghoul.

To achieve that, I had to defeat the denizens—more accurately, monsters—of the labyrinth I was currently in. Justifying my actions in doing so was simple: Existential Evolution was only triggered by monsters gaining more experience and strength with time—at least, that was how the typical explanation on the matter went.

The best textbook example of this would, ironically, be a Dragon. Dragons, born as juveniles and eventually maturing over the years into an Ancient Dragon, were a good illustration. However, Dragons were monsters with a high amount of latent ability and power in the first place. Compared to Dragons, Skeletons simply remained Skeletons, regardless of how much time had passed.

Undead monsters were very much dead, after all. Even if they were to spend thousands of years standing in place, they would simply just exist. Accounts of undead monsters becoming stronger simply by standing in place were virtually unheard of.

The logic behind this was simple: bones were bones. A pile of

dead bones did not grow.

I once again found myself at a loss, but not for long. I had to gain experience; I had to fight.

It was said that monsters absorb the life force of other monsters should they fall in combat. This definitely held true, both for humans and monsters, with the core difference of humans remaining human regardless of how much strength they absorbed from fallen monsters. While there were many strong, seasoned fighters and adventurers, they were still human on the inside.

Monsters, however, differed from humans in this aspect—after obtaining a certain amount of experience and absorbed strength, the typical monster evolves into a stronger form via the phenomenon of Existential Evolution. Based on that, it would seem like my path had already been laid out for me.

Of course, the problem of whether or not I was really a monster to begin with still remained; even so, I would be able to find out easily via trial by combat. I viewed it as a prerequisite that had to be carried out before evolution.

As such, my first task was to locate and defeat a nearby monster.

As for monsters that even a simple Skeleton could defeat… Slimes, Goblins, and other Skeletons came to mind. Thankfully, they could all be found within this very labyrinth. Although I was currently in an unexplored section of the Labyrinth of the Moon's Reflection, I did recall seeing a number of monsters on the way here.

There were multiple theories as to why monsters existed in labyrinths in the first place. All those theories, however, seemed to agree on the fact that monsters reappeared after a set amount of time once slain. The phenomenon, colloquially referred to as "re-popping," would see monsters resurrect themselves at any

time, within 30 minutes, to days, or sometimes years. Weak monsters in labyrinths, in particular, were observed to reappear within approximately one hour.

While I could not precisely determine how much time had passed since I had been eaten by the Dragon, I was sure the time required for said monsters to reappear had long passed. My death, after all, did not feel like a mere five- to ten-minute affair. Though it seemed silly thinking that my biological clock would make any sense, given that I was currently a dry pile of bones, all I had to do was wait around should my estimate of time be off.

With that in mind, I set off back toward the way I came in, having deemed this the fastest way to encounter another monster. Lifting my bony feet, I began to walk, returning to the worn path with a series of heavy steps.

Upon actually trying to move, however, I discovered that my body was painfully heavy—I supposed as such that I could not fight like I was able to in life. However, the fact that I could move somehow filled my heart with relief.

Although I was currently the weakest in the overall monster hierarchy, I was still considerably faster and stronger than an average human. I could only hope that it would somehow work out, but that could have simply been baseless optimism on my part.

As for my weapons, I found myself still equipped with my well-worn one-handed sword and armor from my previous life, so there appeared to be no problems in the equipment department. All other aspects of my combat potential, however, would have to be tested in the field.

It did not take long for me to cross paths with another monster, taking about, say, five minutes after I had set off on my quest. My opponent, for better or worse, was just like me, albeit without any kind of weapons or armor—another Skeleton.

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And so it came to be that I stood facing my adversary in the dark passageways of Moon's Reflection. My opponent was a Skeleton, just like me. A pale pile of bones, held together by the bare minimum of life force required for it to move about. It was unable to use magic, did not possess a shred of spirit, and was hardly able to channel divinity of any sort. It was, in all senses of the word, a normal Skeleton.

As I readied my sword, the opposing Skeleton stared in my direction, as if affirming my presence.

Clack clack clack!

Its bones clashed together, releasing a dreadful sound. If I didn't know any better, I would think it was laughing at me.

Skeletons—

I had fought them many, many times in my career as an adventurer. But now, I found myself freshly revolted by their existence, perhaps due to my newfound perspective.

Once a living thing had become a pile of bones, it would definitely never stand again. However, the Skeleton before me could move in spite of that, as a continued defiance of the divine laws of life and death. The more I looked at it, the more I felt that its existence in and of itself was a mockery of nature.

It occurred to me that I was probably viewed the same way by other human beings. No matter how I spun it, it seemed impossible for me to return to Maalt as I currently was.

Once again reminded of that fact, I could not help but sigh. Although, I did not have any organs for breathing, let alone lungs. Having become nothing but bones, I suppose this much was obvious.

I felt a fresh wave of shock wash over me at this revelation—the fact that I was now something completely inhuman was driven deep into my mind. There was not much I could do about it, though. That was just how things were now.

Although I felt like I had already digested the facts of my newfound state as a Skeleton, it would seem like many other things about this development still bothered me. If anything, I felt more hesitant than ever.

Despite that, I had no choice but to press on. I had to defeat this other Skeleton before me and evolve into a Ghoul at all costs! With that in mind, I put my backbone into the task, making a running start toward the opposing Skeleton—

At least, that was what I had wanted to do. The speed at which I was advancing toward the other Skeleton was, for lack of a better word, painfully slow. I suppose one could define it as a sort of run; a jog, maybe. However, the speed at which I was moving left much to be desired—it did not seem like a pace suited for combat.

At the very least, I was faster than an average member of Maalt's townsfolk. But I was still decidedly slower than the common adventurer, even the lowest-ranked Iron adventurers.

It would seem that my physical abilities had also been adversely affected by my untimely death. It was obvious, perhaps, if one thought about it:

A Skeleton was nothing more than a walking pile of bones. As all living things needed muscles of some sort to move, it was a miracle that Skeletons could move at all—and a given that they did not move particularly well.

As if to prove my point, the opposing Skeleton's speed was also achingly slow. Thinking back on it, all the Skeletons I had met up to this point moved in a similar fashion. If anything, it could be said that their sluggishness made them the perfect prey for

Bronze-class adventurers such as myself. It was possibly thanks to them that I had continued existing as an adventurer for this long.

But even if Skeletons were easy prey for Bronze-class adventurers, I was currently a Skeleton, as well. It was surely not going to be an easy fight; this much I realized the moment I raised my sword.

Although it was obvious that my swordplay would be a lot slower than it was in life, it was not as if I had suddenly forgotten how to swing my weapon. At the very least, I firmly recalled the basics. It was with that knowledge that I came to a simple conclusion: the only quick attack I had in my repertoire at this point in time was a simple downward swing. Just to be sure, I decided to test my theory. The results, however, were extremely disheartening.

For one thing, it was difficult to lift my sword. This was most likely due to the changes in my musculature, or lack thereof. Even so, I was greeted with more difficulties as I tried my best to lift my weapon. The combined weight of the sword, along with the force required to reverse the direction it had been traveling in, was considerably straining.

If my observations rang true, this was all due to a lack of muscles. In other words, all the techniques and movements that I had learned up until now could not be employed in this situation.

Once again, it occurred to me that this was an obvious fact. After all, the techniques I had learned were used and taught by humans. There wouldn't have been a single technique or attack that was designed for the physique of a Skeleton in mind.

Even so, I strived to work out a solution. If I simply stopped here and now, I would surely be defeated by the other Skeleton and die, again. Perhaps, then, it was quite the stroke of luck that my first opponent was a sluggish and simple Skeleton.

As I was busy testing out potential sword attacks, the opponent had picked up speed, and was rushing in my direction—until it promptly slipped. As a result of its unfortunate fall, my opponent's right leg bone had apparently dislodged itself. The Skeleton was now sitting on the ground in a somewhat awkward position, desperately attempting to retrieve and reattach its detached leg.

I could not help but laugh at the dark comedy of this scenario. At least, I wanted to laugh, but Skeletons in general were incapable of producing such a sound. The only sounds a Skeleton could make were rattling sounds, and that was about it. Without much of a choice, I decided to emulate the sound that the opposing Skeleton had made when it first set eyes on me. A miserable series of clacks was the result of my attempt at laughter.

As if enraged by my bony laughter, the enemy Skeleton jammed its detached bone back into its socket, then stood up and rushing toward me once more. It seemed like it was serious about attacking me this time.

I could not see this as a good thing—it most definitely wasn't. Although Skeletons were weak monsters, it had enough speed and power to kill a grown man—minus the typical adventurer, of course. With that being said, even the weakest Iron-class adventurer would take severe damage from such a blow.

While I was lost in thought, the Skeleton's charge hit me straight on, and we had now both fallen onto the ground. I nervously looked for a way to counterattack, convinced that if I simply sat and did nothing, the other Skeleton would surely kill me. But apparently, that was not necessary.

The reason for that was simple: the other Skeleton simply did not attempt to attack. This was perhaps due to a combination of factors, including the fact that the momentum it was moving at, and the specific angle I was holding my sword, had caused my weapon to become firmly embedded in its skull. A truly serendip-

itous occurrence.

However, that much wasn't quite enough—the enemy was an undead monster, after all. If anything, the enemy Skeleton seemed more irritated at the fact that its field of vision was now blocked by a sword sticking out of one of its eye sockets. This fact, as opposed to being bothered by the fact that the sword in question was a sharp, metallic instrument in its skull. It was also far from being dead.

Judging by everything I had seen thus far, it was fair to assume that Skeletons did not possess much in the way of intellect or logic, even though they had a somewhat humanoid form. The Skeleton that had attacked me was a good example, as it was thoroughly confused by the current developments, and apparently could not decide what to do.

Capitalizing on this chance, I quickly grabbed the handle of my blade, placing what force I could onto the weapon. I had thought to simply push the blade through, given that it had been so conveniently impaled into the enemy's skull.

I was, however, reminded of the unfortunate fact that I was an almost-powerless Skeleton. After all, bone was a material used to make armor, and it was considerably hard. The enemy's skull probably wouldn't shatter with what little strength I had. Even if I tried to put my body into the attack, it would not work, as I did not have much of a body to begin with.

I found myself at a complete loss.

I had to somehow channel more power into the blade's hilt, no matter the cost. If this went on, I would probably be stuck mud-wrestling this Skeleton forever. It was greatly undesirable for my first battle to drag on for hundreds of years.

Drawing my mind back from its hopeless daydream, it occurred to me that I should at least attempt to use one of the abili-

ties I had acquired in life. For all intents and purposes, I was not a normal Skeleton, and I should be exploiting that fact to the fullest.

I had become too caught up in the matter that I was currently a Skeleton, and had forgotten that I had defeated many Skeletons in my previous life. In fact, I used to be able to defeat Skeletons with nothing but brute force. I even had mana, spirit, and divinity at my disposal.

Although normal Skeletons were not aware of it, their movements were powered by magic, as well. As a result, Skeletons possessed a higher measure of speed and power than the average person, hence its classification as a monster. Since I was no longer human myself, it occurred to me that I should be using my newfound capabilities as a monster as much as possible too.

Amongst the three abilities available to me, spirit was the one that was the most suitable for an application of brute force—and as such, the most suitable for my current situation.

Having finally arranged my thoughts, I began to focus, surrounding my body with spirit energy. Amidst considerations that I had last used this ability when I was more than just a pile of bones, I had no idea if it would actually work. But I had to test it out somehow. If it didn't work, then I would have to rely on simple force. If it did, on the other hand...

I was known in life for pushing forward even if things seemed grim. It didn't make sense to simply give up now.

As I continued to focus, it would seem like my gamble was paying off—with all of my strength, I thrust the sword's hilt, slowly pushing the weapon through the Skeleton's eye socket and eventually breaking through its skull. But the force of the attack did not seem to stop there—a series of unpleasant crackling sounds spread through the enemy Skeleton's body, and all at once, all the bones in its body broke into a thousand small pieces.

Like a puppet with its strings cut, what used to be the enemy Skeleton collapsed into a shower of bony fragments, scattering across the ground of the labyrinth. Up until a few moments ago, those bones had been connected, and had formed the body of a Skeleton. But with its head crushed and form compromised, the Skeleton seemed to have lost its undead traits, returning once more into a lifeless pile of bones.

I won. Somehow.

Although it was a clumsy and thoroughly shameful display of a first battle, all that mattered was my victory.

While I was not as agile or strong as I was in life, I had managed to use the abilities available to me for a strained victory. Perhaps I didn't do as badly as I thought.

With that notion in my head, I leaned back, my mind somehow filled with an ambivalent sense of relief.

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Well, then. While it was all fine and good that I'd defeated a fellow Skeleton, would this be a definitive step toward my evolution?

Searching amidst the shattered bones of my opponent, I picked up what appeared to be a magic crystal. I held it up to myself, as if expecting some sort of change to occur. Unfortunately, however, nothing of the sort happened—at least, I assumed as much. Suddenly, as if to prove me wrong, a stream of light slowly rose from the Skeleton's shattered remains, gradually heading toward my body.

Is it still alive?!

Alarmed, I quickly took a combative stance, but the stream of light did not seem hostile in any way. It did, however, ignore my

most valiant attempts to dodge it, eventually making its way into my body. Preparing myself for some sort of impact, I half expected the light to hurt me in some way, it did not. Instead, I felt full of strength.

As I slowly began to absorb the light, I could feel the energy I had expended in the previous fight return to me. Oddly enough, even my reserves of mana, spirit, and divinity all seemed to increase, if only by a sliver. Was this the much-vaunted Existential Evolution that monsters went through?

Deciding to find out, I conducted a thorough inspection of my body—not that it took very long to do at all. Although I definitely felt stronger, I was still visually a walking pile of bones, not quite yet the Ghoul I was hoping to become. If anything, my appearance did not actually change in the slightest.

While the lack of a mirror prevented me from confirming, the visible parts of my body, such as my arms and legs, were still pale white bone. My face probably did not fare any better. In that case...

Then was this all for naught?!

That was the first thought that had crossed my mind in this moment.

Thinking about it calmly, I realized that Existential Evolution was probably not something that happened overnight, especially not with the defeat of only one other Skeleton. This was also knowledge that was gleaned from my readings of various tomes on monsters—numerous books seemed to reach the same conclusion.

For instance, if said evolution truly did occur with the simple defeat of a monster by another of the same type, they would then instantly become stronger, more powerful monsters. In turn, they would effectively spread like wildfire and make the world a living

hell for the rest of humanity. Although the lands were populated with distinct types of monsters, including those that posed credible threats to humanity, most of them were monsters that could be safely hunted and disposed of. This was how humanity managed to live on in relative peace inside established towns and villages.

As such, those very same books I had been reading deduced that not many monsters must go through Existential Evolution on a regular basis. Simply put, the process was not something that happened easily or quickly. One would possibly need to defeat a great many enemies first, with some having a higher degree of strength, or to live for a certain amount of time before it would even happen.

In my case, I had just become a monster, and had struggled to defeat another Skeleton. Evolution would not be knocking on my door anytime soon—such was a reasonable assumption. If anything, I should be grateful for becoming a little stronger, especially if the surge of strength and slight increase in my abilities were anything to go by.

While I had trained for days, weeks, and months without much results in life, the instant gratification of my previous battle was much more preferable. With the defeat of a single enemy, I grew a little stronger.

Relatively speaking, I would find battles easier the more of them I fought—a reasonable deduction, I thought. Of course, there was no guarantee that my battles would result in victory each and every time. I did also get rather lucky for my first fight.

Well, I suppose it would ultimately come down to me trying my hand at defeating various other monsters in the area. I had to at least try.

With that thought in mind, I set off on the passageways of the Labyrinth of the Moon's Reflection once more.

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As expected, my hypothesis was correct—I grew a little stronger with each defeated foe. After that initial battle, I encountered and swiftly defeated a number of other Skeletons. Each time, that strange light would rise from their body, making its way inside me.

With each absorbed light, I felt stronger and faster. It was not just a mental illusion of sorts; my movements had become markedly faster and stronger. Even my spirit art attacks had their offensive power increased. While I had struggled to push my blade through the enemy's skull during my first encounter, I could now send my opponent's bones flying if I put my backbone into it, crushing them in the process.

Perhaps the time had come for me to move on to bigger prey, like Slimes. I had certainly become strong enough to at least entertain such thoughts.

Although Slimes were somewhat weak, just like basic Skeleton monsters were, qualities to not be underestimated were their indeterminate shapes and jelly-like bodies. Due to these traits, physical attacks did not work too well on them, so the easiest way to defeat Slimes was to attack them with spells of some sort.

With that being said, however, it was inaccurate to say that Slimes were invulnerable to everything but magic; it was still very much possible to defeat them with physical attacks.

There were two ways to go about doing this: one could crush the Slime's core, which was a crystalline organ in the interior of the Slime. If that object were destroyed, the Slime would simply dissolve and die, leaving only magic crystals in its wake. But that was much easier said than done. A Slime's core was not stationary, as it often moved around inside its fluid-like body. Certain degrees of technique and finesse were required to damage it with a sword or spear. Such skills were commonly found in adventur-

ers past the middle-Bronze-class level. On that note, I was a lower-Bronze-class adventurer, so I obviously could do nothing of the sort.

The other method was somewhat messy, as one could simply scatter the gelatinous parts of the jelly around with blunt force impacts, eventually reaching the core before the Slime could regenerate, thus destroying it. As this was an extremely simple method, even I was capable of executing it. It did, however, require a certain amount of execution time.

The gelatinous nature of a Slime meant that it could reform even if scattered, starting with the largest piece. In order to prevent that from happening, either a relatively forceful blow, or a series of rapid blows, had to be applied. In my case, I chose for a single, powerful spirit art reinforced attack. It was all I had.

Basically, I was only able to hunt one Slime a day in my previous life. I was incredibly weak—

Well, I *was* a lower-Bronze-class adventurer, after all. To make matters worse, I often traveled alone, as opposed to joining a party with others.

Slimes were simple monsters that could be easily dispatched even if the sole member of the party had some small degree of magical aptitude. One did not need to be a great mage to take out Slimes, as a single fireball or earthen arrow would do the trick. If anything, few adventurers chose to utilize the time-consuming, inefficient method I was now forced to use.

In exchange, I was able to hunt lower-tier monsters, such as Skeletons or Goblins, in relatively large numbers. This resulted in respectable earnings for a lower-Bronze-class adventurer such as myself. Though in my current form, I might even give my archnemesis, the Slime, a run for its proverbial money.

Having at last gotten used to my skeletal body, I was able to

deliver blows of considerable force, even without utilizing spirit arts. Surely that would be enough to scatter the gelatinous body of a Slime.

It was time to give my new skills a spin. I set off for an area in Moon's Reflection that was well-known to be inhabited by my archenemy. Although I had already defeated one on my way into the uncharted territories of the labyrinth, significant time had passed for a re-pop to occur, according to my assumptions. Of course, it was quite possible that another adventurer could have gotten to the Slime before I did.

After exploring labyrinths for such extensive amounts of time, one eventually develops a biological sense of time within its walls, which is handy for keeping track of time when surveying. In highly-populated labyrinths, the smell of blood and metal would often fill the air, in addition to vibrations caused by combat that could be felt in the floor and walls. In my case, I had spent most of my time exploring this particular labyrinth, and as such, I had a relatively good grasp of its scope of time. Thanks to that, I could even determine which areas of the labyrinth would experience high adventurer traffic during specific times of the day.

As such, I determined that there were no adventurers known to frequent this labyrinth around this period of time. This wasn't the only labyrinth around the town of Maalt, after all. There was another, bigger one close by, apparently called the Labyrinth of the New Moon.

Many parts of that labyrinth remained unexplored, with multiple areas and floors only partially mapped out. As a result, most adventurers in Maalt headed toward New Moon. Those who had instead opted to frequent Moon's Reflection were either stubborn or solo adventurers who could not find a party to explore the depths of New Moon.

For the record, I was of the latter group. Although I had originally wanted to explore the Labyrinth of the New Moon instead, it

was populated by a vast number of monsters, including those that attacked adventurers in packs. A lower-Bronze-class adventurer wandering into that labyrinth alone would be no better than a death sentence. Barring the times when I had been invited at the last minute to fill a slot in someone else's party, I greatly preferred hunting in the Labyrinth of the Moon's Reflection instead.

Thinking back on it, it was a relatively lonely life.

There were many reasons as to why I adventured alone, but the main reason was simple: no other adventurers wanted to be in a party with me. After all, I had been stuck as a lower-Bronze-class for roughly ten years. Even the most untalented adventurers would rise to middle- or upper-Bronze-class level in that lengthy span of time.

—That was evidently not the case for me.

Even so, I was not completely isolated; I was occasionally invited to join other parties. However, as I wanted to become a Mithril-class adventurer of my own ability, the nature of my dream prevented me from joining the parties of other adventurers quite often. In addition, my long stagnation in the adventurer ranks had apparently earned me the name of "The Thousand-year Bronze-class," and as a result, even the occasional party invitations had eventually dried up.

It was a sad tale, so let us leave that be for now. More importantly, I still had to hunt myself a Slime.

Shelving those thoughts, I continued moving forward, and was soon greeted by the sight of a slowly-moving, almost transparent monster of jelly.

—It was unmistakably a Slime.

Drawing my sword, I slowly crept up upon my archnemesis, the very same kind of Slime that I had hunted these past ten

years.

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It did not take long for me to notice that this Slime was slightly different from its peers. Its body was clear and transparent—it was obvious that it had reappeared not too long ago.

A clean Slime like this was considerably rare. It's perhaps worth mentioning that Slimes' hues often became clouded after living for a while, mainly due to eating other monsters, or the occasional unfortunate small animal. Trapped in the Slime's gelatinous body, its prey would slowly start to dissolve, resulting in quite the unpleasant sight. Slimes also sucked up corpses and other dead bodies quite frequently, and it was not uncommon to see bones and half-digested remains of monsters suspended in a Slime's body. New adventurers not yet used to the sight of viscera often found themselves throwing up.

While the sight of dead mice and the like were somewhat tolerable, Slimes sometimes absorbed the remains of humanoid monsters such as Goblins, or in some cases, even the half-digested corpses of adventurers who had died exploring the labyrinth. Most adventurers would lose their appetite for exploration after such a sight, if not their stomach altogether. Of course, those who continued being so easily disgusted did not remain adventurers for long. Though even those that did press on down the adventurer's path still continued to find half-digested dead bodies disgusting.

In my case, I felt very little, having continued on as an adventurer for some ten odd years. Common wisdom stated that adventurers needed to steel their guts during their first year.

Drawing my mind back from yet another train of thought, I once again became aware of the relative clarity of the Slime before me. Although I was currently a Skeleton, and could be more frightening to the common man in certain situations (more so

than a Slime in the middle of digesting its meal, at least), my emotions were still very much human.

I did not want anyone to think I derived any sort of pleasure from destroying a corpse-filled Slime. But this particular Slime was clean, and very much so. The fluid of a freshly spawned Slime like this was worth a tidy sum. If one were to somehow collect its fluids with a vessel of sorts, it could be sold to the adventurer's guild or to an alchemist as an important, rare ingredient. Even the fluids of an impure Slime could be boiled and mixed with various medicinal ingredients to create basic healing potions, so it was not a bad ingredient by any means. The fluids of a pure and clean Slime, however, had many more uses, and as such could be sold for much larger sums.

Although I was a Skeleton now, the tool belt I had in life was still attached to my waist. In said tool belt was a container I had specifically prepared for this situation, and I quickly decided that this was the course of action I would take after defeating the Slime.

Slowly, and with considerably suspicious movements, I began to approach the Slime. As I did so, the Slime, as if noticing me, shivered intensely, shooting out what appeared to be a glob of water in my general direction.

Anticipating its attack, I dodged cleanly to the side. The glob of water I dodged promptly hit the ground, instantly beginning to dissolve the earth. It did not take long for a small trail of smoke to rise from the unfortunate patch of dirt.

This was one of the Slime's signature attacks—Acid Blitz. As its name may suggest, the Slime produces an acidic substance within its body, and shoots it out as a form of ranged projectile attack. Whatever was unfortunate enough to be hit by said attack would then dissolve.

It was a simple, acid-based attack, and depending on where

the victim was hit, it would not deal too much damage. However, if it caught one in, say, the eyes, the unfortunate victim would not escape unscathed. At the very least, one should endeavor to protect one's face in such an encounter.

Although I would not lose my vision from a simple acid attack to the face in my current form, the bone structure of my skull would most likely dissolve, in which case I would simply die. So losing one's eyesight was hardly the problem here. It occurred to me that I had to avoid every single one of the Slime's attacks, just to be safe.

It's worth noting that while the Slime's attack was considerably dangerous, the Slime itself was markedly slow. A normal Slime like this one was not known for moving fast. In addition, its movements were easily predictable; all I had to do was be sufficiently careful. As long as one was alert for the ever-present threat of the fast-moving Acid Blitz projectile, Slimes were not fearsome monsters by any means.

If anything, the main problem adventurers faced when attempting to defeat a Slime was that of their own skill sets and abilities.

Due to my current state as a Skeleton and the absorbed energies of the other Skeletons I had defeated, I was stronger than I had ever been. At the very least, I was now capable of movements close to my original speed in life. I would probably not lose to a Slime, of all things.

As I gradually continued to advance, the Slime motioned to shoot yet another round of acid in my general direction. This time, however, I was prepared, holding up my sword and boosting my speed with my spirit arts. Sprinting toward the Slime, I swung down my sword in a flash, hitting its body and retreating rapidly before it could finish shooting its acid.

Although I felt something give as I landed my blow, there was

no way I had instantly defeated the Slime. With that thought in mind, I quickly recovered, once again readying myself for another blow.

But this time, the Slime did something unexpected. Instead of following up with an attack, it simply stopped, quivering in place. All of a sudden, it completely stopped moving, before promptly dissolving into a lifeless puddle.

This was a commonly observed phenomenon when Slimes embraced death—with the life force supporting their gelatinous body gone, they returned to a liquid-like state, spreading out limply upon the labyrinth's floor. Simply put, the Slime I had hit with my weapon was very much dead.

I could not help but be shocked at this sudden turn of events. It was beyond comprehension; after all, I had never been able to defeat a Slime in just one blow when I still drew breath as a lower-Bronze-class adventurer. Even so, the truth before my eyes was undeniable.

Due to the nature of my desperate attack, I had not been able to confirm it, but perhaps my weapon had hit the Slime's core by a stroke of luck. I would then be able to fully justify what had just happened.

If anything, I should be fully prepared to not be so lucky when encountering my second Slime. Caution, in this case, was a great virtue.

More importantly, there was the matter of the Slime's jelly—the alchemical ingredient I wanted to harvest. If a Slime's fluids were to touch the ground, it would no longer be usable as a clean ingredient, so one would have to be prepared with a container on hand at the opportune time.

Of course, if one were to attempt to do this to a living Slime, the container would simply bounce off its membrane. Fortu-

nately, this membrane was dissolved upon the Slime's death, and it felt very much like stabbing one's arms into a bucket of jelly.

Retrieving a container flask from my tool belt, I stuck its nozzle into the body of the dying Slime, fully filling it. Although Slimes shot out strong acidic fluids in life, such as with Acid Blitz, it was strangely not very acidic at all in death. In fact, adventurers who had a habit of sticking their hands in dead Slimes found that their hands often ended up clean and rejuvenated. On that note, I would mention that the bodily fluids of a Slime were often used in women's cosmetics. In fact, clean Slime fluid was often used for this very purpose, as it apparently had some medicinal properties due to its unique composition.

While such a rare ingredient could be easily used to create higher tiers of healing potions, most of it ended up being used for cosmetics. It occurred to me that the feminine pursuit of beauty was a seemingly infinite venture.

Was it so truly necessary to create cosmetics from monster parts...?

Well, I suppose there was some justification for that—it is said that monster-based ingredients have significant effects on humans. The impacts supposedly range from immortality, to reviving the dead, or even turning an old man young again... Perhaps this was a natural progression in the grand scheme of things.

Ending my internal monologue, I turned to look at the container, which had now been filled up by the rapidly deflating corpse of the Slime. Filling it up to the brim, I slid it out slowly from the Slime's dying goop, taking care not to spill any of the precious fluid.

Good. This will surely sell for a fair amount of gold.

A fair sum, indeed—perhaps even worth quite a few days of work.

As I had mentioned, clear Slimes were worth their weight in gold—almost literally. To even meet such a Slime, one would have to wait about an hour for it to appear once more, in addition to not contaminating the Slime in combat with fire or earthen spells. In fact, there was no easy way to gather uncontaminated fluid with magic, so that was why the Slime had to be defeated with brute force.

For these reasons, it has been said to be an ingredient that was only gathered by adventurers who had suitable expanses of both stamina and strength. In fact, adventurers who could defeat Slimes in a single blow could hope for even greater rewards. For someone like me, however, it would probably take up to half a day to accomplish.

That being said, I had no means to sell this ingredient, let alone use the funds to pay for any sort of inn or accommodation. From that angle, my endeavors seemed somewhat useless.

Leaving those thoughts aside, I once again set my mind to evolution—I had to become a Ghoul at any cost.

If I could evolve, I would be able to walk into town, and even sell the rare ingredient I had just collected.

As for accommodations... Well, while I wasn't sure about the opinions of prospective landlords, rental properties shouldn't be all that difficult to find.

I also needed to speak with someone about the situation at hand; someone who would not simply run away upon learning that I had become a monster of sorts. With regards to that, however, I had just the person in mind.

As my thoughts carried on about that person and how I met them, I decided to move on from my current spot and search for my next target.

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It was after defeating the fifth Slime on that day that I began to become aware of the changes in my body. Although I had sought out and fought many other monsters since then, it would seem like my initial encounter with, and subsequent defeat of, the Slime was not a fluke after all. All the Slimes I had encountered after the first perished in much the same way.

My strength was quickly exceeding the point it had been at when I still lived.

When I was a lower-Bronze-class adventurer, I did not feel any sense of progress no matter how much training I did. In fact, I did not seem to progress in any way at all. But now here I was, becoming stronger in death. I was not quite sure if I should feel happy or sad in regards to this development, although it was greatly preferable to just endlessly stagnating.

Although I did not know where I would plateau at once more should I continue growing at this pace, I set such thoughts out of my mind. Instead, I decided to do what I could at this point in time—I continued to fight.

After fighting and defeating ten more monsters, I felt a strange feeling well up from deep inside me—an almost foreign feeling that I had not felt up until this point. It was by no means an unpleasant feeling. If anything, it felt more like something was springing up from deep within me.

However, being as cautious as I ever was, I tried my best to endure and resist it. Ultimately, my efforts were proven futile.

A slow, crackling sound filled my entire body, with the sound progressively getting louder as my body was engulfed in a warm stream of light.

What's happening…?

That was the only thought my mind processed before another inexplicable thing happened before my eyes—dried-up, shriveled flesh began appearing around the white bones of my body. As if to hide the harsh white of my bones, the flesh continued to creep, before surrounding my bones altogether.

This was very much it—I could feel it. My wishes had been granted—

This was Existential Evolution.

This was what was happening at this point in time.

I continued my internal monologue as the phenomenon continued, slowly spreading to the rest of my body. Brown flesh, dry to the point where I began to doubt if moisture even existed in its veins, started growing and wrapping itself around my arms, legs, and everything else it could find.

Although I had been a pile of bones up until now, I had finally been blessed with flesh...!

After a short while, the phenomenon stopped. Just to be sure, I decided to inspect my newfound lack of bony surfaces.

As expected, flesh was firmly attached to my limbs—limbs that had been stark white sticks of bone up until now.

However, the flesh in question was a far cry from what I used to look like when I was human. To begin with, it looked like extremely dry, thin sheets of brown stretched over what used to be white bone. In addition, my newfound flesh did not do a very thorough job of hiding my bones at all—bits and pieces of white showed through the canopy of brown.

I felt like a pile of bones that had meat haphazardly stuck onto them. If I were to surface from the labyrinth in this form, wolves, dogs, and the like would surely find me to be a delicious snack.

Maybe I *would* be eaten.

While my body was this way, my lack of a mirror, once again, caused me to assume that my face was identical. I was familiar with a monster that looked like this, however. Bits of dried meat clinging to bone—none other than a Ghoul.

I was now unmistakably a Ghoul, the initial target of my evolutionary goals.

If memory served, Ghouls looked like humans with their skin removed: with some torn flesh still attached to the bone, with bits of the latter showing through their muscles. They also looked very...dry.

In other words, I was absolutely disgusting—but of course, there was no way a dried corpse would look appealing. I was an undead monster. It was also obvious that no one would fancy such a form, much less aspire to somehow become similar to it. However, to me this was a huge step forward, if only because there was now flesh on my bones.

Having experienced Existential Evolution, I was now aware of the fact that I could continue climbing up the proverbial monster hierarchy if I continued working hard. That was a fact worth celebrating.

Undead monsters, in particular, looked more and more human the higher they climbed up the ladder. For example, if I were to become a Vampire, which was an even higher existence than Ghouls, I would basically become indistinguishable from a human—in which case I would be able to move around the streets of Maalt without any problems.

In my current form, the best I could probably manage was sneak into town—I would still be unable to walk about freely. However, I was familiar with the gate guards of Maalt. If I played my cards well, I may be able to enter and exit as I pleased.

But of course. Although it was mostly dry meat, I did currently have a body, and as such there was one important thing I wanted to try.

“...VAAAH... VAAAAH...”

I valiantly tried to channel air through my throat to see if I could speak. It would seem that generating some kind of sound, at least, was possible.

“HE... HEEH... VVO... HEH... VO. OOD... MOV... NINV... GGGUH... HEH... VVO...”



...

No. This really wouldn't do.

Although I found myself able to speak, I was by no means fluent—or very coherent, for that matter. I suppose some practice was in order.

On the other hand, I did greatly prefer this state compared to that of a Skeleton who could not speak and could only make clattering sounds. With this, I would be able to reach a mutual understanding with any human being who entered the labyrinth... Or so I hoped.

Of course, the prerequisite being that the person I was speaking to did not remain actively terrified of me.

As I continued to ponder various possibilities, a sharp sound of clashing metal interrupted my thoughts. It sounded like someone was engaged in combat with monsters a considerable amount of distance away, as it was clearly the sound made by a sword impacting a hard surface.

Like most of the monsters I had defeated thus far, this floor did not feature anything but weak monsters, much less any that would generate a metallic sound. From this fact alone, one could infer that the irregular sound came from an adventurer—there was no other possibility.

This sound... A living human being was here! My heart skipped a beat at this thought.

Thus far, I had only lived for a little more than a day in this labyrinth. Most of that, however, was spent fighting monsters alone throughout the night. It made sense if one thought about it.

Up until now, I had always entered labyrinths during the day, returning to Maalt in the evenings for food. Before I knew it,

however, I had become a Skeleton, and was unable to see any specks of hope in my future. As such, I had continued slaying monsters inside the labyrinth—perhaps it was only natural that I would miss the presence of other humans.

I wanted to speak with someone, anyone. If an adventurer was present, then so be it.

I did, however, quickly recover from my excitement. Due to my appearance, attempting to speak with a human would be a somewhat harsh undertaking.

Although I was no longer a walking pile of bones, a Ghoul was still...a Ghoul. If I were to approach an adventurer with this dried-out corpse body of mine, they would clearly be alarmed, promptly readying their swords for combat; a conversation would be the last thing on their mind.

Although the result of the encounter might be a little different if I were some sort of sentient, intelligent monster species, I was currently a Ghoul. My prospects were dim in that regard. As such, I chose to distance myself from the source of the sound and hide, so as not to come into contact with the adventurer in question.

However, curiosity got the best of me—would I really be able to ignore and move away from a human being when they were so close to me?

—No. I found myself unable to resist.

Such was the degree of my isolation and loneliness—I wanted to see a person, no matter what.

And so I made my choice, creeping up to the source of the sound silently. If I were discovered, I would simply escape.

I thought peeking from the shadows would likely be acceptable. I would then hide my presence as best as possible, moving

forward as quietly as I could.

As the sounds grew louder, my heartbeat followed in tandem. A little bit more...

I wasn't too far now from another human being. Slowly but surely, I arrived at my destination, with the sounds of combat continuing from behind a corner.

Remaining cautious as I crept up the path, I carefully peeked over the corner, staring beyond into the corridors of the labyrinth. There, as I had expected, was another adventurer, sword drawn and engaged in combat with monsters.

CHAPTER 2
Rina The Adventurer

"...Yah!!"

Swinging her weapon at a Skeleton was a young girl, whose voice seemed to ring out with more force than her swing.

The quality of her gear, or lack thereof, was the first thing that jumped out at me. The girl was clad in cheap armor, complimented by an equally cheap one-handed sword. She was definitely a new Iron-class adventurer.

It was perhaps worth noting that I was very familiar with my fellow adventurers, at least those who resided in Maalt. This girl, however, was not a familiar face—hence my assumption.

Although Iron-class adventurers would one day surpass me and were viewed as nothing more than potential rivals, I made sure to remember their faces and get to know them better—if only because that was a way by which I could prevent the endless stream of adventurers eager to make fun of my lack of talent. I made it a point to befriend them then and there, in addition to memorizing their social positions and connections, before going our separate ways.

It was interesting to note that while I had absolutely no talent for adventuring, I was instead blessed with a good memory and street smarts, allowing me to easily outsmart any Iron-class adventurers who were up to one no-good plot or another. As a result, my cunning was known even to higher-ranked adventurers in Maalt, and I was mostly left alone. This was also perhaps due

to the fact that Maalt mostly hosted adventurers of good character.

In addition, I also made a point to knock a good sense of morals into ill-natured adventurers from the start of their career. This had long-term effects, eventually snowballing into an overall improvement of character amidst the adventurers of Maalt. This was one of the reasons why I had not been asked by the guild to put down my sword all this time, despite being stuck in one of the lower adventurer ranks for almost a decade.

Put simply, I was adequately scheming—in a good way, of course.

I shifted my attention back to the young adventurer. Not only was she dressed in a complete beginner's outfit, her prowess also left much to be desired. In fact, she actually seemed a little weaker than I had been in life.

This was perhaps an unfair comparison, however—any Bronze-class adventurer was easily leagues above that of their Iron counterparts. I was, after all, able to defeat a Skeleton without too much trouble. Although I wouldn't call it easy, I was definitely capable, given the fact that normal townsfolk would be saying their prayers after encountering a Skeleton. Even Iron-class adventurers had to group up in twos or threes to easily defeat one.

As such, my continued solo expeditions should at least paint me as being somewhat capable—although not to an extent that I could be proud of.

It was with those thoughts in mind that I deemed the girl who stood before my eyes to be irredeemably weak. Although she seemed to be putting up a valiant fight against her skeletal foe, all it took was one mistake for her foe to shift the tide, after which she would most definitely lose. That was the extent of her powers.

However, no matter how green, an adventurer was an adventurer. In the event of her slipping up, she could easily escape—and then that would have been that. I was not too worried about her well-being; at least, that was what I thought—

Hey, now.

Upon closer inspection, the situation seemed a lot more dire than I had originally made it out to be. As if not completely thinking about the possibility of defeat, the young girl pressed on, attempting to overpower her foe.

Her efforts, however, were in vain. Obviously lacking the appropriate stamina, the adventurer began to fall back, unable to keep up with her foe's attacks. This was a potentially fatal situation, given the fact that she was currently in a narrow labyrinth path with no obvious routes of escape.

As the Skeleton continued pushing the girl backward, she suddenly stopped.

"...Huh?!"

The girl's back was now literally against the wall, and it would appear that she had only just noticed this.

I shook my head. This was the trap that befell adventurers who failed to inspect their surroundings carefully. A swordswoman of her caliber, in turn, would require some space to move and swing her blade. In other words, the adventurer's fate was sealed the moment she had trapped herself carelessly.

As if noticing this, the Skeleton she had been fighting advanced upon her, eagerly raising its arms and motioning to strike her with its bare hands.

While the Skeleton was not armed, it was, at the end of the day, very much a monster. If that blow connected with an adven-

turer that did not sport much in the way of defense, they would surely pass out. What's more, if the blow landed in a critical spot, they might even end up being instantly killed. It went without saying that a normal person could not hope to endure such a blow.

Basically, if the Skeleton's attack connected, the girl would die. All I could do was accept that fact as I came to this conclusion.

Though, I did not mean to say that I could simply accept the girl's death as it was—I simply meant that I had intended to continue my observations, as appearing before her would entail all sorts of risks.

Although I'd been caught up in the heat of the moment prior to arriving at this spot, I had finally calmed my mind upon seeing a living, breathing human. Even if I were to appear before her now, she would think of me as nothing more than a monster; a conversation was beyond my wildest dreams.

It was beyond me to simply leave the girl to die, however.

Although I was now physically a monster, my heart remained that of a human. Unless the person in question was some sort of terrible scoundrel, I would definitely, at the very least, attempt to help them. To me, this was the right course of action: a senior adventurer protecting the life of their junior in the unforgiving harshness of the labyrinth.

This was why I did what I did.

"...GAAAAAAH!!!"

To distract the Skeleton from its prey, I jumped out from my corner, roaring as ferociously as I could. I was not so sure if my plan would work, as it was a half-gamble to begin with, mainly owing to the fact that I was currently a Ghoul.

Not being an expert in monster behavior, I had no idea just how much attention a monster would give to a loud noise generated by another. The monsters that I had fought up until now did seem to register me as an enemy, though, as they immediately readied themselves for combat upon laying eyes on me. Maybe something about me made me different from other monsters, with the monsters in question noticing as much about me, as well. This was why I did as such—if anything, my plan should have a high rate of success.

It did not take long for me to see that my gamble had paid off. Stopping midway through its attack, the Skeleton instead turned and faced me, before rushing in my general direction.

The girl's eyes opened wide at this development. It would seem like she had intended to slay the Skeleton where it stood, with it having shown its back to her. However, the girl seemed too overcome with shock, and merely stood frozen in place.

There simply was no choice: I drew my sword, running toward the enemy. Although I had originally intended to save it, I began channeling spirit into my sword. I had to end this quickly with a decisive blow.

After evolving into a Ghoul, I became aware of the fact that spirit attacks could now be used quite a few times without me running out of energy—so I supposed one attack now would not hurt my reserves too much.

Raising my sword in a well-trained motion, I put my body into the blow, swinging my sword down with considerable force. It was a clean stroke, deeply engraving into my opponent's bony body. In a split second, the Skeleton severed into two neat halves, breaking into numerous fragments as what remained of its body hit the ground.

"...Amazing... "

The female adventurer, stunned, could only continue staring at the remains of what had been the Skeleton mere seconds ago.

I couldn't blame her. Although Skeletons were weak monsters in general, few adventurers in my class could easily split them in two. Anyone would be surprised; yes, even me.

That was indeed amazing.

Huh.

Was I always this strong?

That was how I felt after slaying the Skeleton. I stood silently for a while, pondering about what had just occurred.

It seemed like I was now even stronger than before. If I kept growing at this rate, my goal of eventually evolving into a Vampire seemed within reach. I felt a ray of hope in my heart—although I was perhaps getting ahead of myself a little too much.

With that thought, I was jolted awake—

The girl was still where she stood. Surely she was more important than my internal monologues.

Was she hurt?

Although I had motioned to speak, it felt like something was caught in my throat, and I was immediately reminded that I was nothing more than a Ghoul. If I had carelessly approached her, she would certainly run; that would not do.

Then…what should I do?

Turning to look at the girl, I found her with her sword raised, staring at me in fear.

It did not seem like we could come to terms so easily.



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"S-stay away!!"

That was the girl's response as I approached her with an outstretched hand, a stray "Vaaaahh..." escaping my lips as I attempted to speak.

Again, I could not blame her. There was perhaps not a single person alive who would not be alarmed if a Ghoul approached them in a labyrinth with its arms raised.

Come to think of it, it was also strange for something like a Ghoul to be present in the Labyrinth of the Moon's Reflection in the first place. This was due to the simple fact that Ghouls were of an even higher class than Skeletons, and they did not simply appear randomly in a place so commonly frequented by lowly ranked adventurers.

If one did appear, it would surely be due to some sort of irregularity at the lower levels, or be a unique monster governed by one of the labyrinth's mysterious rules. In those cases, those monsters would be seen as special, and they were more often than not a lot stronger than their normal counterparts.

If a beginner were to encounter a monster like this, their death was almost guaranteed—hence the girl's cautiousness. In fact, it would be strange if she were not on her guard.

Although it would seem strange for me to do all that despite being aware of how I would look to a normal being, that was not what I intended to do. If anything, I wanted to greet and speak with her casually. However, I was still not used to this body—though I could somehow fight in it, speaking appeared to be excessively difficult.

Due to the fact that I had trained my body for the past decade,

and knew of my movements and weaknesses well, I could easily compensate for and fix any issues that arose from my newfound body.

However, talking was another issue altogether. I never really practiced speaking to begin with, and what I had assumed to be a simple task was turning out to be more difficult than I thought. As a result, my words were instead mangled into a series of half-roars, and there was absolutely nothing I could do about it.

To make things worse, there was the issue of my body being that of a corpse. Further exacerbating the issue was the fact that this adventurer in particular was a young girl. Although I was shocked at her defensive posture and words, there was, again, not much I could do about the current state of affairs.

More than my potentially disgusting appearance, however, was the fact that I was a Ghoul—that was probably enough for her to raise her blade against me.

Probably.

Be that as it may, I had to establish a form of communication one way or another. This was the reason I stopped at her words and instead stood in place, desperately trying to form my incoherent roars into words.

"Vaa... VAAAaa... Ge... Gellow... Aagghh... Ahh... Ah am... Ven... Ventt... VENTT!!"

"Eek!!"

The sudden increase in volume further perturbed my already incoherent words, causing the poor girl to jump up in fright.

I was not discouraged, however. If anything, I felt that giving up now would be an incredibly bad idea.

For example, if I had simply given up and left, the girl would

surely escape. She would then report my existence to the guild, which would then classify me as a special monster of sorts, which would then lead to the guild dispatching strong adventurers to dispose of me. That was a turn of events I definitely wanted to avoid.

Although I had become somewhat stronger from fighting and defeating numerous other monsters, there were many other adventurers out there who were stronger than I was. If someone like that were sent to hunt me, my life would end for a second time.

That was why establishing some sort of communication with this girl was of utmost importance. At the very least, I had to convince her that I was not a threat.

Although the option of killing the girl to silence her remained open, I could not bring myself to do it—I was, and still am, human, after all. I truly could not do something like that.

If the girl were a bandit or some sort of criminal, perhaps I could entertain the notion. However, she seemed to be a scared adventurer fighting for her life, and I could not see her as anything else. Even if it were for my own benefit, I could not bring myself to take away her future—not from one as young as herself.

This was why I tried my damnedest to speak.

"V... Veeassee... ! Vis... Visten... Vu me... Ahh... Not... Enevii..."

I continued repeating my incoherent words. The girl, in turn, surprised at my actions and lack of hostility, seemed to start listening.

"Ah...? It's...talking...?"

"Ves... Vess... Aie amm... Rentt! I... Adv... Venturer..."

Maybe it was to be expected that things would be a little different with someone to actually speak to. Slowly but surely, my

speech became more coherent.

Clarity gradually crept back into my voice—its once dry and raspy roars now sporting some degree of clarity. At the very least, it was clear enough for her to vaguely understand me.

"Adven... Adventurer? You? An adventurer?! Um... Were you once an adventurer... Maybe...?"

"Ves! Ay... Adv...venturer! Nam... Name... Rentt!"

"Mister Rend?"

"Rentt... Ren...tt! Ren...tt... "

"Ah, Mister Rentt..."

It would seem that she had gotten more used to me.

It occurred to me that this girl held a somewhat gutsy disposition. Although she continued to firmly grasp her weapon, she did not seem to mind that she was currently engaged in an otherwise normal conversation with me, a Ghoul. A normal adventurer would have simply struck out at me, or looked for an opening to escape.

"So, Mister Rentt... Your appearance... Is that some sort of disguise?"

"No... No. I...died... "

Although her eyes widened at my statement, her expression slowly transitioned to that of pity as I continued my story.

"Ah... S-something like that happened, huh... No matter how you put it, you DO look like a Ghoul... Hmm. But I have heard stories of people becoming undead monsters after death. Although I've never heard of someone keeping their personality and memories..."

The girl's observations rang true. While cases of undead monsters preserving some part of their memory after death did exist, it would mainly be such memories influencing the monster's behavior and mannerisms. They were, as such, not considered to have the same mental clarity and sentience of a normal, living person.

The reverse also held true—legends speaking of individuals who, through highly advanced magic, managed to reincarnate themselves as undead monsters with their consciousness intact and functional. Sightings of them, however, were few and far between. Needless to say, I hadn't encountered such a being myself.

In other words, a Ghoul like myself, who was fully capable of coherent speech, logic, and reason, was no longer a rare occurrence, but instead an impossible one.

I found myself at a loss—I had no way to explain why I had ended up this way. I did have a hunch, however. If I had to guess, the Dragon that ate me definitely had something to do with it.

Other than that, however, I inferred that I was, for all intents and purposes, a regular Ghoul.

But that was not something I could simply tell this girl.

More importantly, I needed her to understand that I was very much sentient, and capable of reason. After all, securing a source of cooperation and eventual aid was first on my agenda.

I had to make it back to Maalt at any cost. And for that to happen, I had to enlist this girl to assist me—which was why I said as such:

"...That... I... I also... D-don't...know. But... I... I live!"

"I-is that right? You... You live? That's a little strange coming from you... But you're definitely not a normal monster... And you

did save my life. Oh, yes, you did! So, thank you very much!"

As if realizing this fact midway through her speech, the girl thanked me, still holding her sword as she did so.

I responded in kind.

"D... Don't... Worry. About... It. Advent... Turers. Help... Each other..."

"Um... Is what you're saying really true? So, I can leave? You're...not going to kill me or anything like that?"

I found myself more flustered than I should have been at the girl's question.

"I... I... Will not kill... Kill you. But... I would... Would like some... Help."

"P-phew! That's a relief! I thought I was a goner there... But... Help? A request...? Well... You are the person... Um. I mean, monster, who saved my life... So I'll hear you out! Well... I hope you don't ask for my blood or flesh or anything..."

"Of... Course. About my... Request. I need... C... Clothes... To wear."

"...Clothes? To wear? Hmm. Ahh... Ahh. Right. I see."

Saying so, the girl stared at me, as if she were closely inspecting a biological specimen of sorts. Eventually, she nodded as she understood my predicament.

"If you continued as you were...other adventurers might simply mistake you for a monster and attack you... Hmm. Well, then, would a robe or something to hide your body suffice?"

"Y... Yes. That... Sounds g-good... Thank... You. Here... Some m-gold... Gold."

The girl was probably an Iron-class adventurer who did not have much in the way of income. Such was evident from her equipment alone.

Although I was a somewhat lower class of adventurer myself, I did not have many difficulties earning my keep, and still had the gold and equipment I had on me prior to my unfortunate demise.

Some of my equipment remained on my person, though some other items had been scattered around the clearing. I did, of course, retrieve my belongings, and had performed the adequate checks for damage.

Detaching my coin-filled purse from my belt, I placed it on the ground, retreating a few steps backward as I instructed the girl to pick it up. The girl, for her part, advanced slowly and cautiously before finally bending over and picking up the bag, checking its contents.

“T-this is… Wow! You’ve made quite the fortune! I suppose you were quite a famous adventurer in life?” asked the girl, surprised.

In truth, my wealth had been amassed by steadily saving across the years, as opposed to me suddenly earning a large sum. The girl now held my entire fortune in her hands.

On that point, however, I remained silent. I did not want to start explaining my affairs—if I did, it would surely lead back to the Dragon, one way or another. Instead, I decided to redirect the conversation by once again bringing up the subject at hand.

“C-clothes… Once you… Have them. You can… Use. The rest for… Yourself. P-please.”

To those words, the girl had this to say:

“I… I understand. I guess you have been through a lot… But

you don't seem like a bad monster to me. You know, if it weren't for you, I would already be dead... I, Rina Rupaage, daughter of knights, will most certainly repay this favor in full. Please wait for me, Mister Rentt..."

With that, the girl continued to back away, still holding her sword. Soon after, she was gone.

It would seem like she was still somewhat afraid of me. But of course that would be the case. If anything, that was the correct course of action that should be taken as an adventurer. Adventurers who were careless or too trusting were bound to end up dead somewhere, and sooner rather than later.

I felt that she would one day become a skilled adventurer.

The problem now was straightforward: would she actually keep her promise, or would she simply abscond with my money? Equipped with my decade of experience with regards to assessing the character of new adventurers, however, I felt that Rina would not betray me. She seemed a bit too serious and morally upright to do something like that.

Well, even if she did betray me, I suppose I would deal with the fallout then.

If, as a result, a strong adventurer were to be sent after me, I had to at least try and defend myself—I had to become stronger. Or would it be more appropriate to simply hone my hiding skills?

I felt silly at even raising the possibility of such a notion. I suppose it would just come down to becoming physically stronger in the end.

And so I continued hunting other monsters in the Labyrinth of the Moon's Reflection, all the while keeping those thoughts in mind as I patrolled its halls.

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Rina Rupaage was a new adventurer, and a young girl at 17 years of age. Her armor and weapons were visibly cheap—as were most of the other items on her being. One could almost say that she looked impoverished.

Upon closer inspection, however, certain points caused her to stand out. Her beautiful blonde hair, which was well-cared for, seemed to pair well with her bright blue eyes that held a hope-filled gaze. If anything, a dress and a more delicate manner of clothing suited her much more than an adventurer's outfit.

Her reason for coming to Maalt, a town on the fringes of Yaaran's borders, was clear: she had received information that two beginner-level labyrinths existed near that town—at least, that was what she had heard in the capital.

After all, there were many skilled adventurers in the capital of Yaaran, most of them proving to be quite strong. Due to this, it was not the most conducive of places for a new adventurer who had yet to make a name for herself. This was why Rina had set out for Maalt, in search of a place where she could feel more comfortable.

She had also been advised by a staff member of the capital's adventurer's guild that new adventurers were in demand at border towns. This introduced her to the various towns available—towns where she could train while saving up some money. Rina, completely taken in by the staff member's description of said towns, eventually made her way to Maalt.

Normally, adventurers based in the capital of Yaaran would not relocate to a fringe town regardless of the amount of competition. To the greater half of adventurers, the capital was the place to be, primarily due to the higher-paying quests available. As such, most would not want to leave the capital at all, and called those who had been assigned to fringe towns "capital dropouts"—

such were the general sentiments of Yaaran's adventurers.

Rina, however, did not feel this way. Due to her personal circumstances, she very much preferred to leave the capital as soon as she could; that was how Rina Rupaage found herself immediately applying for an assignment in Maalt upon the staff member's recommendation.

It had been a day since Rina had reached the town of Maalt. Although she had first set foot in Maalt filled with hopes and dreams, she very quickly found her dreams shattered.

The reason for this was, once again, quite obvious. To a freshly-minted adventurer like Rina, both of Maalt's supposedly entry-level labyrinths posed too much of a challenge. Exploring them herself was far too taxing, and while assembling a party was the best course of action, no one had wanted to group up with Rina. This was due to Rina's gender, appearance, and possibly, her history.

That is to say, Rina was a woman, which automatically placed her a rung under her male counterparts. To make things worse, she looked far too delicate, and was equipped with the cheapest items money could buy. In addition, it had hardly been a month since she became an adventurer. It was easy for any seasoned veteran to simply assume that Rina was "adventuring" as a hobby, and therefore could not be taken seriously. An unfortunate, and perhaps discriminatory story.

In reality, Rina was perhaps a tier above the typical adventurer who came to Maalt. In addition to being familiar with her weapon, she also possessed a sincere and honest personality. To one with an eye for talent, such a combination of strength and will for her experience level was rare—and if anything, Rina could definitely pull her own weight in a party.

However, it would seem that Rina Rupaage did not have very good luck. All of the individuals she had approached to form a

party with had jumped to erroneous conclusions regarding her abilities.

Under normal circumstances, the local adventurer's guild would employ several spotters, usually staking out at one watering hole or another in search of new talent. Of important note here, the spotter for Maalt's guild was none other than Rentt Faina. In his absence, a higher-leveled adventurer would spot in his stead. Unfortunately for Rina, neither were present upon her arrival.

As a result, Rina, who was unable to find anyone else to adventure with, ended up deciding to explore the Labyrinth of the Moon's Reflection alone. Although the staff members of Maalt's adventurer's guild had their misgivings, they had received reports of Rina's capabilities from the capital, and thus determined that the chances of Rina losing her life in the labyrinth were low. This was why the guild had allowed Rina to undertake a quest on her own, albeit with prior words of warning.

To Rina, it would only be a matter of time before Rentt or one of the guild's advertised adventurers came searching for her, so it would probably not matter much if she had gone exploring on her own in the meantime. While most of Rina's assumptions were true, she would have possibly made a different decision had she known more of the outside world.

Rina was considerably sheltered. While she was capable of a large variety of sword skills, most of these techniques were ceremonial in nature, so they did not serve any purpose in actual combat. To make matters worse, Rina did not have much in the way of combat experience at all. This was why Rina had ended up adventuring on her own in the Labyrinth of the Moon's Reflection, under the recommendations of Maalt's adventurer's guild. Even though she eventually ended up in a situation that very nearly claimed her life.

She had gotten off to a good start and had managed to defeat a

few monsters on her own, so she could have simply stopped then and there, collecting what ingredients and magic crystals she could for a tidy sum at the exchange. However, Rina overestimated her abilities and decided to go further.

If anything, this was a mistake often committed by new adventurers. While Rina was bound by many other rules and often treated as excess baggage in parties, she used to have some fellow adventurers to party with—and veterans, in turn, to offer her words of caution. However, this was not the case in Maalt—and Rina had made a potentially fatal decision because of that.

As a result of her actions, she had a close call with death at the hands of a Skeleton—had the fight continued, she would have surely lost her life.

But Rina was lucky; after all, she ended up crossing paths with someone who had decided to help her.

Just as the Skeleton before her raised its arm for the final blow, a savage cry pierced the air.

"...GAAAAAAH!!!"

Lifting her head at the sound, Rina could make out a silhouette at the end of the passageway.

Just as she wondered who her savior could be, Rina found herself at a loss for words, as what was standing in the passageway was a monster much deadlier than a typical Skeleton—a Ghoul. It also did not appear to be a normal Ghoul—a complex-looking series of tattoos were etched on its face, softly emitting a dim, blue glow.

Although Rina had not encountered many monsters in her short career as an adventurer, even she picked up on the fact that the monster before her was unique. If anything, it was probably a special monster native to this labyrinth.

There were a few different types of special monsters, including "rare named monsters" and "rare monsters." As their names suggested, they were exceptionally rare indeed, and did not normally appear in the labyrinth at all. They also had unique features. To make things worse, such monsters were much stronger than their normal counterparts in most cases. If one was not adequately prepared, one's life could easily be forfeit.

Consequently, the Ghoul that appeared before Rina seemed to possess traits that most special monsters did. While its features were telling, the aura that emanated from its being was an even more obvious indicator.

This is bad...

Such was the conclusion that Rina Rupaage had arrived at.

As if to compound her fears, the Ghoul charged toward the Skeleton, the very same one that was about to take her life, and easily sliced it in half with a single flash of its blade. So clean were its movements that Rina momentarily forgot the blade's wielder was a Ghoul.

After calming down, Rina immediately realized that she was in a dire strait. It was now clear to her that she could not possibly defeat this Ghoul, and that her life as an adventurer would now end.

Rina prepared herself.

However, it had seemed like Rina's encounter with the Ghoul was a good thing. For one reason or another, the monster that appeared before Rina began to speak, eventually asking for her assistance. To be more specific, the Ghoul had requested that she purchase clothes for it.

Quickly agreeing, Rina hurriedly ran off in the direction of Maalt. She had been speaking with a monster, after all. As an ad-

venturer, it would be common sense not to trust a monster, and to simply report what she had seen to the guild. At least, that was how common sense worked.

Rina, however, understood that the Ghoul had saved her life. As a result, she felt like she had to repay the favor in some way.

While she was an adventurer now, Rina was once the daughter of a proud family of knights.

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Rentt Faina did not return. Sheila Ibarss, staff member of Maalt's adventurer's guild, felt that this was highly irregular.

Although Sheila had only worked at the guild for five years, and was a junior compared to her colleagues, she had known Rentt for a much longer period of time. Rentt was the first adventurer she had met when she first started working at the guild. While Rentt was younger then, an adventurer 20 years of age, he had already been adventuring for five years prior; even so, he was still a lower-Bronze-class adventurer. It was plain to see that Rentt was not exactly cut out for the job.

Most adventurers who did not make the cut were content to quit adventuring after a few years. They would return to their hometowns or seek other means of employment upon realizing that they were lacking in any adventuring talent or aptitude. Though it may sound as such, it was not exactly a shameful thing, and a fair amount of adventurers made such a choice.

Although there were fools who would accuse those who retired as merely not working hard enough or unwilling to risk their lives, those who knew better understood that adventuring was not a job to be taken lightly. In response, those who were unable to understand this were seen as fools themselves—such was the common sentiment amongst most adventurers with good sense.

In other words, Rentt was already close to a suitable age for retirement, and it fell upon Sheila Ibarss, who had been assigned as his supervisor, to inform him of the news.

Sheila, however, resented becoming Rentt's supervisor at the time. The reason was not due to a personal dislike of Rentt. Staff members of the adventurer's guild had a duty to guide and assist adventurers until their last days. Looking at Rentt's age and history, it was evident that he should soon retire as an adventurer—and it was also her job to unfortunately tell him as such. It was a job that someone had to do, but also one that no one had wanted to do. Most of the time staff members usually avoided such an assignment.

Sheila found herself somewhat depressed that her first job was to dismiss an adventurer. But it would seem that Sheila worried for nothing in the end.

To the adventurer's guild of Maalt, Rentt was apparently exempt from such considerations. Although his years of experience and his simply being an adventurer (without much significant progress) did make him a good target for retirement recommendations, he was seen as too valuable an asset to lose. This was due to the fact that Rentt's activities in and out of the guild had undeniably positive effects for Maalt's populace. As such, it was determined that Rentt would not be promoted, but simply remain as he was for the time being.

In fact, the adventurer's guild master of Maalt would scout Rentt himself into the guild as a staff member should Rentt ever retire from adventuring—such was Rentt's value to the guild.

For starters, Rentt served multiple purposes, and he fulfilled numerous roles in the guild. Not only was he a good judge of aptitude in new adventurers, he also introduced them to party members who would be a good fit. He also educated newcomers on the rules, common sense, and field knowledge required to properly explore a labyrinth. To complete the picture, Rentt also fre-

quently foiled the plots of adventurers who were up to no good.

This was, by and large, basic knowledge that anyone could impart. But due to a shortage of personnel actually willing to perform such tasks, Rentt's existence was a blessing to many newcomers to labyrinth exploration.

Under normal circumstances, much of this work would fall to representatives of the guild. Rentt, however, performed most of these tasks free of charge. Although the guild occasionally contracted him to perform these tasks, such occurrences were rare. Even so, Rentt went about his tasks happily and without complaint.

In addition, as a direct result of his endeavors, the death rate of new adventurers in the surrounding labyrinths of Maalt fell greatly compared to that of other areas. The greater propensity for local adventurers educated by Rentt to follow laws and rules also translated to a better coexistence between local adventurers and townsfolk. It was perhaps obvious to say that Rentt was a rarity.

Sheila, on the other hand, was not a native of Maalt, instead journeying to the capital to take the guild's entrance exam. After passing the test, she was dispatched to Maalt, which was quite different from the hometown she had left behind.

In stark contrast, the adventurers in Sheila's hometown were mostly individuals of questionable character. Despite there being good-hearted adventurers as well, they were as a whole not liked by the townsfolk, who were either reciprocatively unkind to or afraid of them. While most adventurers there engaged in opportunistic, petty crimes, some of them were outright full-time criminals.

Maalt, on the other hand, was radically different. Adventurers in Maalt were trusted, and if any in their number were to perpetrate crimes, they would be speedily brought in by the hands of

their fellow adventurers. Sheila, being Rentt's supervisor, fully understood that Rentt Faina's existence was the very thing that was responsible for the positive morals of Maalt's adventurers.

The reason for Sheila being introduced to Rentt, however, was not simply to let her build experience on a hapless adventurer. If anything, it was the opposite: Sheila, being new, would learn greatly from working with Rentt, whose experience in odd jobs and other thankless tasks made him a good candidate for imparting important knowledge—such was the decision of the guild. Over time, Sheila learned much from Rentt about the guild and about the desired traits in guild staff, and she was now a highly-valued member of the adventurer's guild of Maalt.

The extent of Rentt's guidance was by no means narrow. In fact, a quick look around the various corners of Maalt revealed many new adventurers, most of whom had been guided by Rentt's hand. It would not be strange if one of these new adventurers eventually rose to Mithril-class, as Rentt himself often watched over his juniors, ensuring they got the guidance they needed.

While Rentt dreamed of becoming a Mithril-class adventurer himself one day, he also did put in the work—engaging in a strict daily training regimen, unbeknownst to Sheila or other adventurers. However, Rentt was more aware than any other individual when it came to accepting that he had little talent for adventuring. If Rentt had a sliver or shred of talent in his body, his efforts would surely have paid off. Unfortunately, reality was not as kind. There was not much to be done about the matter.

While Rentt could have simply teamed up with other strong adventurers and found fame as a united party, many local adventurers of Maalt knew of Rentt's goal—his dream of becoming a Mithril-class adventurer.

But Rentt did not seek to become such an individual because of fame. No, he wanted to become a Mithril adventurer on his

own power and capability. As such, depending on another individual, or a party of adventurers, defeated that purpose. In order to fulfill his dream, Rentt had no choice but to press on, as unlikely as he was to succeed. After all, that was the only path available to him.

As adventuring and fighting alone were the quickest ways to build one's strength, Rentt did exactly that. Other adventurers, in turn, avoided partying up with Rentt outside of emergencies. Maalt's other adventurers did this out of consideration for Rentt, knowing of his dream. No matter how unlikely it would seem, it was not in their interest to belittle Rentt's quest for strength—even if the truth was plain for all to see.

Rentt was, for the lack of a better word, weak. As such, other local adventurers knew that death would knock on his door sooner or later. But Sheila and the other adventurers thought that this possibility was relatively low. Yet in the end, they let Rentt do as he pleased, not saying a word as he continued his lonesome quest.

While Rentt was a Bronze-class adventurer and had the strength of one, his knowledge and experience of adventuring was more than enough to rival that of seasoned veterans. Even if he were somehow faced with a dangerous foe, he would surely remain calm and make the right decisions—at least, that was what the other adventurers of Maalt thought of Rentt.

With all that said, however, one fact remained true: Rentt Faina did not return.

Rentt Faina, the lower-Bronze-class adventurer who would enter the same labyrinth at the same time every day, return to the guild at the same time with similar ingredients, sign off his assigned tasks, and then be off to train elsewhere.

Such was the daily life of Rentt. This would happen every single day, without fail, and yet—

No one knew where he had disappeared to. Sheila was merely one of many who were concerned about his absence.

Rentt...

Rentt Faina—

Please, be safe—such were the unheard prayers of Sheila as she continued her daily tasks at the guild.

"Um..."

The voice of a young girl shook Sheila out of her thoughts. Raising her head, she found that the owner of the voice was, indeed, a young girl—and a familiar one at that.

The girl was a new adventurer who had been assigned to Maalt from the capital mere days before. Due to her arriving at a somewhat unfortunate time, neither Rentt nor other senior adventurers were present—and as such, she had eventually wandered off to adventure alone.

Sheila recalled her name—Rina Rupaage. With that, she tidied up a sheaf of papers in her hands, before lending an ear to what Rina had to say.



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With a swing of my sword, I sliced through the Skeletons before me. I no longer knew how many I had defeated, as I stopped counting long ago. While I had to put in considerable effort to defeat a Skeleton in life, those memories seemed to be lies. I maneuvered to the back of my skeletal foe effortlessly, bringing down my blade and once again slicing my opponent's white bones into two clean halves.

It was unbelievable.

The changes were not exactly brought on by an improvement in technique, but instead, I had simply become stronger—physically, that is. My reserves of mana, spirit, and divinity, too, seemed to increase with each monster I defeated. Utilizing these three aspects, I was now capable of reinforcing my body in various ways; I was finally moving as I had always wanted to.

These speeds were unthinkable for me in life—and yet, my body moved smoothly and quickly. I had suffered from blood blisters, many of them, as I continued my training. But no matter how hard I trained, I did not get any faster or stronger.

The reality now, however, was different. My body moved as I instructed it to; there were no mistakes in my movements. I could also see my enemy's movements clearly—my senses were sharper than they had ever been. Adventurers who had surpassed me surely saw the world this way, as well.

I remembered how I was in life, how I'd been unable to see anything at all. If possible, I would have wanted to reach this degree of power while I still drew breath; although I supposed that was now impossible. But perhaps I should be grateful for the fact that I was still fully in control of my faculties, even in death. With this, I might even be able to reach my dream of becoming a Mithril-class adventurer…

It was with this thought that a question rose up in my mind:

Will I continue being an adventurer after all this time?

Of course, there were many different kinds of adventurers. One became an adventurer if one wanted to, but many adventurers stopped after plateauing at the Bronze level, much like myself. With some special exceptions, anyone could become an adventurer as long as they were at least 15 years of age.

However:

Could a monster be an adventurer?

With that, another question rose up from the depths of my mind. Perhaps it was possible—such was the answer I had arrived at, as if it were some sort of common sense.

However, reality was not so kind. I thought about the situation some more. If, for instance, a Ghoul simply turned up at an adventurer's guild one day, then simply walked up to the receptionist's counter, extending its half-rotted hand while speaking in its crackled, half-growl of a voice…

"Ay… Adven… Turer. Rev… Revis… Ter… Me!"

It was like something out of a horror story.

The receptionist would definitely refuse. In addition, she would instantly press the panic button under her desk, immediately summoning strong adventurers from the immediate area, or even the guild master himself. And like that, the Ghoul would be disposed of—and that would be the end of it.

With that being said, however… It did not cross my mind, not even once, that I may be unable to continue adventuring—until now, that is.

I supposed I should stop thinking. More importantly, I had to

think of how I would continue living from here on out, as I still had a dream to fulfill: to become a Mithril-class adventurer.

After all this, the bottleneck that I had struggled with for the longest time had been removed. I now had the talent and aptitude for adventuring…in exchange for the perils of my current monstrous form.

If this form prevented me from adventuring, however, that would be a big issue. I came to the conclusion that I had to think of a way to continue adventuring, no matter how I looked, or what I became.

Although I had mentioned the generous policies of the guild multiple times, I supposed expecting the guild to accept a monster into their ranks was asking a bit too much.

I had asked Rina to purchase clothes on my behalf, but that did not solve one other significant problem. A robe could hide most of my disheveled body, but it could not hide my face nor my arms. I would, naturally, have to lean in when reading or handing over gold and ingredients—hiding my arms was impossible to say the least.

I looked at my arms in resignation. They were, as I had expected, very much rotted and dry. There was no other way to put it.

In fact, the color of my skin seemed to have gotten worse—while it was just brown not too long ago, it was now streaked with lines of black. I would be amazed if a living human being did not react to how my arms looked. Though, perhaps there might be some individuals who could look past that and not mind interacting with me…

No. That was just wishful thinking.

I, Rentt Faina, was not exactly famous for my adventuring

prowess—but my face was one thing that was widely known, despite my reputation as "The Thousand-year Bronze-class." I was famous, or perhaps infamous, for not giving up in my endeavors, and was well-known across Maalt as a result.

In other words, more than half of the adventurer's guild of Maalt knew how I looked in life. If I were to suddenly show up with my arms in this shape, I would surely be asked many questions.

The guild's staff would continue asking after me out of worry, thinking that I had been afflicted by one terrible monster or other in the labyrinth. In their quest for information, my robe would inevitably be pulled off forcibly—and that would be that. Though I could see myself making one excuse or another if it were only my arms...

For example, let's say that a monster sucked the life out of my hands; that would be possible. However, it would be over once they saw my face.

Although I was not in possession of a mirror, my face was evidently Ghoulish. I would surely be hunted down and eliminated regardless of my reasons or situation—especially since I had fallen and lost my humanity.

Things did not look very good at all.

The situation did not lend itself to any other interpretations, and once again, I found my will wavering.

But I had already made up my mind.

The only problem here was my appearance. If I could do something about how I looked, a solution would surely reveal itself to me. To do that, I had to calm down, and once again focus on my initial goal—that of achieving Existential Evolution. Until I began to appear at least somewhat human, I should stay away

from the adventurer's guild. It did occur to me, however, that I would no longer have a source of income.

A familiar voice soon jolted me from my many considerations of worries and problems.

"...Rentt! ...Mister Rentt! Are you there? Somewhere?!"

That voice belonged to none other than Rina Rupaage, the girl whom I had sent away to purchase clothes on my behalf.

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"...Eek!"

Accidentally bumping into me as she continued her search, Rina the adventurer inadvertently let out a squeal of surprise. While one would not typically expect a scream as a reaction when meeting with an acquaintance, I suppose it was unavoidable given my appearance.

Rina, apparently still terrified, began speaking in a still-shaky voice.

"Uh... Um... M-mister Rentt...? Is that you...? Or, um, are you another one of his Ghoul friends...?" questioned Rina, with her sword at the ready.

I could not possibly blame her. Ghouls were, after all, nigh impossible to tell apart. Their bodies and dried flesh were by and large of similar colors, which definitely did not help with the task. At the very least, I was equipped with weapons and armor. Though higher-ranked Ghouls did look similar to me, weapons and all, a beginner like Rina was probably not privy to the fact.

As such, I calmly answered Rina's question:

"...Y... Yes. I...am. Ren... Rentt."

While dry, my voice was coherent—I had been practicing ever since my last encounter with Rina. My voice was now clearer and easier to understand—at least, it felt that way. But I could not be sure; I was simply speaking to myself due to a lack of conversational partners, after all, hence my feelings on the matter.

Rina, however, seemed relieved.

"Ah... That's great! I was wondering what I'd do if it wasn't you... Hmm? Your speech seems to have gotten a little better..."

It would seem like I was not just imagining things after all.

"I... P-practice. Practiced. To be... Able. To talk... More."

"Oh, is that so? That's great, too! Then entering town shouldn't be a problem... Oh! Right—here you go, the things you asked me to get! And here's your change!"

With that, Rina held out a bag. Upon closer inspection, it appeared to be a bundle of objects, including the robe that I had asked her to buy for me.

With some excitement, I eagerly advanced toward Rina. She, however, involuntarily retreated, a look of apprehension on her face.

The shock made me stop dead in my tracks. Rina hastily offered an explanation.

"I... I'm sorry. Um. You're still a little scary... Could you give me a while to g-get used to you...?"

It was as Rina said. I suppose this was how things really were. There was nothing much I could do about how I looked—if anything, I was grateful for the fact that Rina willingly communicated with me, given that I looked like a monster to begin with.

I offered my response:

"...N... No. I don't... Mind at... All. More importantly... Can I look... At the bag?"

Rina's reply was, at least, a little more cheerful than before.

"Yes! Please do! I bought some other things along with the robe you wanted; you should have a look at them!"

With her approval, I slowly walked up to the bag, peering at the contents within.

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Reaching into the bag after confirming its contents, I grasped onto the robe with my hands, pulling out the garment and inspecting it closely. It was relatively spacious and billowing, in addition to being pitch-black. It also came with a hood, which I found convenient for my needs in particular. Robes like these were largely worn by mages and the like, and I would have never thought to wear one in life.

If anything, it was a hindrance to swordsmen. As I was now, however, the ability to hide myself in its depths was a godsend, as the robe covered me neatly from head to toe; it even sported long sleeves to hide my arms. With this, paying for items at shops would be a breeze.

I applauded Rina's fashion sense—she had accurately understood what I'd wanted despite my simple instructions. With that being said, clapping was impossible for my dried-out hands.

Shelving that thought, I decided to try on the garment. My arms fit cleanly into the robe's sleeves, and the material was quite pleasant to the touch. Having that sense of touch while being in a body of nothing but dried flesh was somewhat surprising; not to mention my newfound ability to move in such an agile manner. Thinking about it calmly, though, I was still a monster—surely that was the reason for these irregularities.

One must also consider if a piece of equipment presents any issues with movement while in combat, in addition to being comfortable. Quickly raising the robe's hood, I decided to find out, and was pleasantly surprised by the results. While my field of view was somewhat constricted by the hood, I had no issues with seeing straight ahead; I could even safely peek at my surroundings to a certain extent. If I were to be surrounded, however, I would have no choice but to lower it—but that wouldn't be necessary should I be engaged in combat with only one or two monsters.

"...How is it? Is it to your liking?"

"...O-oh. Y... You. Surprised me there."

Rina had apparently seen fit to approach me as I was trying on the hood. She was now a lot closer to me than she had ever been, despite the fact that she had been visibly terrified of me mere minutes ago.

Although she was still holding her sword, the "business" end of its blade was no longer pointed at me.

Is she already getting used to me?

I wondered if she had a habit of becoming comfortable with new things so suddenly.

"...C... Clothes. Good fit. Mo... More importantly. Are you... Not scared? Scared... Of me?"

"No, not at all! I mean, you've hidden most of your non-human parts, so... It's not too hard for me to stand at this distance," Rina said, about three steps away from me.

—A little shorter than the reach of her blade, if I had to put it that way.

It would seem that she was at a clear enough distance to respond appropriately should anything go wrong. Contrary to the initial expression I had of her, it would seem that Rina was relatively cautious. Even so, I saw this as a great improvement—that was what I thought at least as I continued inspecting Rina's movements.

While one could say that the entire chain of events, starting with me being eaten by a Dragon and being reborn as an undead Skeleton, was somewhat unlucky, meeting Rina was probably the most fortuitous thing that had happened to me thus far.

Although it was true that I did save her life, there wouldn't normally be humans that could unflinchingly speak with monsters. And even if I did not know what the future held, the fact that Rina continued to cooperate with me was something I was extremely grateful for.

"Oh, yes... That's right. I bought some other things, too... Here, see? Shoes, and gloves, and even a belt. It'd be bad if you were seen in the streets with those hands and feet, right?"

Saying so, Rina reached into the bag, withdrawing the aforementioned items before setting them down gently on the ground of the labyrinth.

Both the shoes and gloves were made of quality leather; colorwise, however, both items were subdued, presumably chosen so that they would not stand out.

I found this greatly pleasing. To begin with, I hadn't asked Rina for such things—in my situation, I could only think of asking for a robe. And yet Rina had unexpectedly read between the lines, thinking in great detail about the items I would need to make it back to Maalt safely. I could not help but wonder if there was another world out there where young girls chose suitable articles of clothing for monsters.

Having met the first person who treated me kindly since I had turned into a monster, I felt like I could cry—but alas, such was not possible with this body.

In any case, I decided to put on both the shoes and gloves. Due to the nature of my dried flesh, I was not quite sure if either article would be useful for me, but for now, I settled with at least wearing them.

With that in mind, I stuffed my feet into the shoes, while adjusting the oddly spacious gloves with my free hand. It was difficult to hold my weapon through these gloves, and while the implications were worrying, I accepted this as part of a necessary sacrifice in order to return to Maalt.

"Wow... That's quite the intimidating aura. You look like... What do they call those things again? Wights...? Yeah, you look like a Wight! Oh, right, I have a mirror here, too. How's this?"

Sounding more and more like a shopkeeper of sorts with each passing second, Rina showered me with praise...if being called a Wight could be considered praise. Withdrawing a mirror from the seemingly bottomless bag, Rina once again set it down upon the ground.

While Rina's refusal to directly hand the mirror to me was a little saddening, I suppose there was little discussion on the matter.

Rina's thoughtfulness in bringing me the mirror alone was definitely a helpful gesture. After all, I had been unable to see how I looked like ever since becoming a Skeleton, and the question had been floating in my head all this time. Of course, I was not expecting to look like how I used to—I had had a somewhat youthful face that seemingly did not change between the ages of 15 and 25. Just for the record, my appearance was by no means stunning or breathtaking in life.

If anything, a fearsome face was not too much of a bad thing either. It was good to have an intimidating expression; at least, it was for an adventurer.

With those thoughts in mind, I picked up the mirror, its surface apparently some sort of polished metal. Peering into it, I was hardly prepared for what I saw.

"...Th... This... Is..."

That's not to say that I hadn't anticipated this, however, to see the dried-up face of a corpse. It was also very dead, with eye sockets sinking deep into my skull. In fact, one of my eyeballs was missing—that was one thing I did *not* anticipate. While it was a mystery as to why I could still see out of both eyes, that was not the problem I currently saw reflected—

No matter how I looked at it, this was the face of a corpse.

The one thing that did stand out, though, was a series of complicated, glowing tattoos on my face, pulsing in a soft, blue hue. Although they were actually somewhat pretty to look at, the tattoos also gave off a mysterious, almost incomprehensible aura. I deduced that these tattoos had something to do with my transformation into a member of the walking dead.

But putting that all aside, it was undeniable that the situation was dire, and my efforts at disguise were all but ruined by these glowing tattoos. If anything, they made me stand out like a sore thumb.

The tattoos themselves would have been fine, but the fact that they were glowing made matters so much worse. After all, they could clearly be seen even if I had my hood raised. Determined to see if I could remedy the situation, I raised my hood several times and tried out different resting positions, but my efforts proved fruitless. Light steadily streamed out from inside my hood—no matter how anyone looked at it, this was not a very human thing

to occur.

In the end, I would have to live my life as a Wight; one with a fearsome and terrible glowing blue hood.

...No. No!

That would be bad!

What should I do?!

I held my head in despair.

"Ah, that's right. You didn't ask me to buy this, but it was cheap, and I figured you'd like to have something like this... What do you think?" Rina asked, once again retrieving something from her bottomless bag.

The item that Rina held out was not something I recalled seeing upon my first inspection of its contents. Was it truly a magical bag of some sort?

For the time being, I was forced to put aside that thought.

More importantly here, the object that Rina had taken out of it was none other than a mask. It was a large, full-sized face mask, made of what appeared to be bone. As its size suggested, it was large enough to completely hide my face, tattoos and all.

"...What... Is that...?"

I had meant to ask her why she'd purchased this to begin with, as opposed to the nature of the item. Rina, however, quickly offered a cheerful response.

"Mister Rentt... You *do* want to go back to Maalt, right? You'd have to hide your face to do so, and I don't think you'd be let in with a glowing face, you know?"

Again, it was as Rina said.

This girl... She really was something else. While I felt my facial regions heat up, there were regrettably no tears of gratitude to be found. I tried my damnedest to cry, but Rina likely did not notice any changes in my demeanor.

Approaching the mask that Rina had set on the ground, I picked it up, inspecting it closely. It appeared to have adequately-sized holes for one's eyes and mouth, so it did not seem like I would have many issues seeing or breathing. Whether I could even breathe as I currently was, however, was another issue altogether.

With that in mind, I held the mask up with both hands, and tied it on. Without warning, the mask suddenly adhered itself to my face, almost plastering itself into my dry, dead skin.

"...Ugah!" That strange sound escaped my lips.

Before I knew it, the mask was firmly fitted over my entire face.

"Wow... It fits you, you know?" said Rina, once again showcasing her unique sense of praise. At her words, I looked up into the mirror—

Reflected there was what appeared to be a suspicious-looking swordsman of the dark magic persuasion, who also conveniently had a skull-shaped mask covering his entire face.

Indeed, it seemed to fit me well. I had, after all, been a Skeleton mere days ago; as such, a skeletal mask would definitely fit me.

—At least, that was my logic.

However... This mask felt very tight, almost like a second skin. Would it even come off?

Suddenly filled with a sense of unease, I attempted to remove the mask, positioning my fingers to pry it from my face. It was then that I realized—

"...Stu... Stuck. Won't... Come off."

"Ah..."

At my words, Rina's cheerful praises quickly died down.

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"...Is it really stuck on that bad?" Rina inquired, sympathy evident in her voice as I continued wrestling with my mask.

While I had valiantly fought to remove it after putting it on, my efforts were in vain. As if it were plastered to my face, or perhaps fused to it, the mask remained resolutely in place.

"N... No... Good. It's no good..."

Rina offered an apology, a remorseful expression on her face.

"...Oh, no... I'm sorry, it's all my fault... Actually, now that I think about it, the person who sold me this mask was kind of weird... He had this stall on the street, and all of his products were surprisingly cheap..." Rina said, seemingly unaware of the gravity of her words.

Rina's description of the merchant fit the bill, with the exception of his incredibly low prices. I came to the conclusion that the merchant in question was probably a fraudster, although some merchants were swindlers to some degree to begin with.

"By... The way. How... Much? How much... Did it cost...?"

"Three copper coins. It was made of metal and looked pretty solid... I guess it was too cheap...? I mean, it looked kind of cool, and I really liked it, so..."

She *liked* it.

I suppose there was no choice… But this was not something I could easily accept, of course. Also, it was three copper coins.

It was perhaps worth noting that masked adventurers were not all that rare, nor were the existence of masks catered to such a clientele. This was due to the fact that many adventurers often accumulated scars and injuries over their careers, with many of the scars not able to be removed or healed with simple first aid or healing magics. Severe injuries to the limbs and body were often only treatable by church-sanctioned priestess-saints, and those seeking such treatment were often expected to pay an exorbitant price for the church's services. As such, those unable to afford healing were, quite often, resigned to living with their injuries or prosthetic limbs.

Wounds to the face, such as burns or severe scarring, were in turn commonly hidden by masks. After all, even a low-tier Slime's Acid Blitz attack contained enough power to melt one's features. To make matters worse, such monsters were not exactly rare.

This was why masks were quite a common adventurer's accessory, with most adventurers wishing they would be able to live a full life without ever having to use one.

With that being said, I should mention that the metallic mask currently stuck to my face did not feel cheap at all. If anything, one would at least have to pay one silver coin for it, as purchasing an item like this with bronze coins was almost unheard of, unless the merchant in question was in the business of accruing losses. In other words, the scrap value of the mask itself was definitely worth more than three bronze coins—and yet, that was exactly the price Rina had purchased it for.

She should've had some reservations about such a cheap item, but she purchased it anyway, probably unable to resist its value at that price.

"…" I stared at Rina intently, despite the fact that I was missing one of my eyeballs.

As I did so, Rina frantically waved her hands in front of her face, as if to deny all responsibility.

"Ah, um, no, see, it's all right, isn't it! It didn't feel like it was cursed or anything… See, look—I held it with my bare hands and I'm fine! Although I did think there was a reason for it being so cheap… And I *did* hope it wasn't cursed…"

It would seem it was as Rina said. She did, for her part, also take out the mask without much fanfare, and had placed it upon the ground without incident.

So… Was the mask not cursed after all?

—No. Focusing my attention on the mask that was currently stuck to my face, I felt a trace of evil: the unmistakable stench of dark energy. This was, without a doubt, some sort of lingering curse.

As for why Rina had not been affected… Well, it was simple: the girl naturally did not attempt to try the mask on in the first place. Even I myself did not feel anything amiss when handling the mask with my hands. To be precise, it was a curse that only took effect once the mask was placed on a potential victim's face.

How terribly unlucky—and that was perhaps an understatement.

A curse… If it really were such a thing, I had several ideas of my own.

With a deep breath, I focused my thoughts, activating my inner reserves of divinity. Responding to my summons, a faint, blue glow spilled forth from my body, enveloping the mask in a silent aura.

“W-What is…this? Don’t tell me… Is this divinity…?” Rina said, surprise plainly written across her face.

Once again, I could not possibly blame her. Divinity, and the aptitude to utilize it, was a very rare ability indeed. Although one could observe it being used by priests or other such divine peoples during festivals, watching it actually being used up close was not exactly an everyday experience.

The reason for me using this ability now was self-explanatory, as divinity had the ability to cleanse that which was most foul and unnatural. It could also, of course, lift curses and the like, and this was often a skill monopolized by the aforementioned priests and their ilk. Even I had no precise knowledge on how to lift curses. Instead, I simply worked with the assumption that a burst of divinity, even without the acute understanding of how curse-lifting worked, would at least serve to weaken the curse imbued in the mask.

This would have been impossible for me in life. The most I could do back then was purify water so that it was safe to drink—and that was that. I would have been unable to lift curses even if I had tried.

But I was different now; I had undergone Existential Evolution and defeated numerous monsters. Thus, I put my mind to the task.

Honestly speaking, there were *some* results. While the mask had remained stubbornly stuck up until a while ago, it suddenly began rattling in response to the aura generated by my divinity.

Will… Will it come off?

I certainly hoped it would.

“…Eh… Oh? Mister Rentt… That white-blue aura of yours… Is it getting dimmer, or is it just me?” Rina spoke in a worried voice,

continuing to observe me.

Like she said, my aura had definitely begun to dim. My inner reserves were running dry, to be more precise. Although the amount of divinity I had at my disposal had certainly increased, it was not an overwhelmingly huge difference. Up until now, the force within the mask seemed almost threatened by my divinity. Now, however, the tides had turned, and it almost felt like my divinity was being pushed back. I supposed this would be too much for me to handle—for now, at least.

Giving up, I slowly halted my aura release. Similarly, the mask stopped rattling a short while later. Immediately after it stopped, the mask once again glued itself onto my face—it did not feel like I had any chance of removing it as of now.

As I suspected, I was still not strong enough to lift its curse quite yet.

"...So... I suppose it was no good..."

"Yeah... No... Good. No good."

Tired out by my exertions and initial shock of the unmoving mask, I sat down upon the labyrinth's ground.

"I'm so sorry... I didn't mean to buy a cursed thing like that..." Rina promptly apologized.

Did she interpret my actions and behavior as disappointment, perhaps? Rina, with her eyes half-filled with tears, seemed incredibly remorseful about this unfortunate turn of events.

It was unexpected, to say the least. While true that the mask could not be removed, I had no reason to blame Rina for what she did. She had merely found me a mask out of the goodness of her heart.

I offered some words of comfort to Rina:

“Don’t… Mind. It’s… Fine. I… Must hide… Face. Anyway. I will be… Fine. Like this… For a while.”

“But—”

“It felt like, it would come off… Just now. I… Become stronger, it may… Come off. Also could… Get a priest… A priest. Lift… Curses.”

I tried to comfort Rina to the best of my ability. I held out my hand to pat her on the shoulder, but stopped myself in time. My hand awkwardly remained suspended in the air. How could I forget? I was a Ghoul now, and Rina was not yet used to me—I shouldn’t traumatize her any further.

However, as if to accept my gesture, Rina reached out, holding my outstretched glove with her hands.

“Wh… What… Are you…” I was shocked.

“I… I get it. You’re not a bad person… Or, um, monster? Mister Rentt—you’re not scary… Not…scary at all…”

Despite her words, Rina’s hands shivered, albeit slightly.

I understood. Contrary to her claims, Rina was still afraid. Even so, she had thought of reassuring me—that much I understood.

This was why I said to Rina, “Thank… You. But… Until the day… When you really… Are not… Scared. No need… To force… Yourself.”

Saying so, I let go of her hand gently, taking care not to injure her. Rina, however, was adamant.

“I’ll get used to it quickly! Really quickly! Really!” She smiled, without a shred of evidence to back up her declaration.

An almost childlike view, as if this were a normal situation one could observe anywhere. It was at that point, however, that I felt like I was truly alive. I was filled with happiness at being able to hold a proper, human-like conversation with another human being.

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“Um… So, this may be sudden, but do you just…want to go back to Maalt now?”

Such was the question posed to me as soon as I finished equipping the rest of Rina’s provided clothing. I found myself at a momentary loss at those words, if only because I remained unsure if such a feat was even possible.

Although I had set out to achieve Existential Evolution just to return to town, the prospect of it actually being possible now was somewhat baffling to me. To actually carry out the task, I thought, was deeply unsettling.

“Do you think… It will go… Well?”

—That was why I asked Rina such a question.

To an average human, I was robed, gloved, slouched over, and equipped with a sword at the waist. I wondered if this would be sufficient enough for me to walk around town. I had no one but Rina to provide a human opinion, after all.

“Hmm… You do look a little strange, but then, many people are like that. Even if someone demands that you show your face, that mask is cursed, for better or worse. It simply won’t come off, right? Then you should just tell the guards at the gate that. Hey, maybe they can even try pulling it off for themselves. That way they’ll know it really won’t come off.”

Rina’s response was surprisingly detailed.

“But… If I do… That. My… Skin…”

“You’re supposed to bluff your way through that…! Say a monster got you good and sucked the life out of your face or something like that. If they knew the truth, they’d probably identify you as an undead monster, but common sense would tell them that speaking with an undead is impossible. Even though you still have some trouble speaking, they won’t immediately jump to the conclusion that you’re an undead. If anything, they’ll think that you’re some veteran adventurer who has scars all over from combat. If they could see your face, that would certainly be a long shot—but now they can’t! It’ll work!”

Rina’s words gave me great courage. If I thought about it calmly, most of what Rina said was right. Only extremely high-tier undead monsters would be capable of communication and logic in the first place. While one would feel the strength of its aura should one approach such a being, I currently did not give off that impression. For starters, if I really did have such powers, I would not trouble myself over something as simple as finding a way back into Maalt.

I would bluff if the guards became suspicious, and then it would work out. I felt like I could do at least that much. The rest was up to my own personal performance.

“All right, then… Let’s… Give it… A shot.”

“Yes! Let’s go!”

I tilted my head to one side at Rina’s statement.

“What… Do you mean?”

“Eh? Aren’t we going together…?”

Rina’s response to my question was swift. If anything, she seemed confused as to why I was even asking.

I was terribly surprised; of all things, I did not expect Rina to go with me, given that I was currently an undead monster. She was undertaking a great risk, facilitating the entry of a monster such as myself into town. If we were somehow found out, she would be treated as an abnormality who had allied herself with a monster, and would be readily persecuted.

Was she not thinking of the consequences? I had to ask her at least that much.

"...If... You went... With me. You would be... In danger... Rina."

"Ah... That's probably the case... But there's an even greater chance of success if you come with me! If someone were with you and spoke of you as a human, why would a guard at the gate have any reason to think of you as a monster?"

"That... Is true. But is this... Fine? If... If anything hap... Happens..."

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it! ...Mister Rentt, if it hadn't been for you, I would already be dead. I feel like it would be all right for me to risk my life at least once for you, no?" Rina spoke these words as if it were the most obvious thing to do.

With that, though, it suddenly occurred to me that Rina was a very considerate person—maybe too much so. Either way, I was thankful for Rina's kindness.

Thinking about it from the angle of Rina's welfare, I should have definitely refused her help; even so, I had to return to Maalt. In addition, it was like Rina had said: if there was a human being vouching for me, my chances of success dramatically increased.

It also only took one safe entrance into Maalt for me to pass without relative alarm in the future. If the guards became familiar with me, their inspections would surely become much more relaxed.

And so, I decided to entrust my future to Rina.

"Well… Then. I'm… Counting… On you. But don't… Risk your… Life. If anything… Happens. Say… Say I tricked… You." Even if I were to be found out, Rina would probably be all right if she played that card.

While I had my doubts about the whole thing, it was true that talking undead were, in general, not very common at all. In fact, claiming that I was an adventurer with hideous injuries because of my battles was far more believable.

Nodding at my words, Rina responded in kind.

"It'd be great if we didn't have to do something like that… If it really comes down to it, I'll definitely think of something," she said, a soft smile on her face.

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"…Next!" The strict voice of a gate guard echoed through the grounds of Maalt's western gates.

Upon hearing that, Rina prodded me, encouraging me to move.

"…It's our turn, Mister Rentt…" Saying so, she walked up to the guard with her chest out, as if nothing were out of the ordinary.

This girl is really something else…

Thinking so, I quickly followed after Rina.

"One woman and…a man? I think? …Permits, please." Although he had hesitated somewhat, it would seem like the soldier identified me as a man.

On top of that, he was a soldier I had never seen before. It

would seem like choosing a gate I had seldom ever used was a good idea after all. If the guard had been one who was familiar with me in life, it would only lead to all kinds of inconvenient questions. On the other hand, it could have worked out in my favor… It was a complicated subject, no matter what.

Regardless, Rina handed the guard her permit, which was a somewhat dull-colored card. Withdrawing my own permit from my tool belt, I did the same.

"…Rina Rupaage and…Rentt…Faina. Both of you seem to have acceptable permits; there seem to be no issues here—huh. You there."

I had thought that we would be able to breeze through the inspection easily, and enter Maalt before we knew it—it would seem like that was no longer the case.

Damn. Stopped after all—but I had to do something about it without panicking.

"…Yes. What… Is… It?"

"…You speak quite strangely, you know that? Could you please remove your mask…?"

At the soldier's words, Rina interjected.

"I'm sorry… His mask is cursed, you see. We tried removing it, but it just won't come off. The reason he speaks like that is… Ah, a monster got his throat… Well, not just his throat—his entire face…"

Such was Rina's explanation.

The soldier listened on, a mixture of suspicion and surprise on his face.

"…You could… Give it a shot… Too. It won't… Come… Off."

Saying so, I leaned forward. The soldier, in turn, attempted to pull the mask off with all his might.

"...Ughh... Huh. It really doesn't come off... Is it actually cursed?"

"We wouldn't lie about something like that... He bought a mask to hide the scars all those monsters gave him, but accidentally got one that was cursed instead... He truly has some bad luck... Apparently the curse doesn't activate by simply touching the mask with your hands... It has to be put on first, and it's been stuck to his face ever since..."

"Ahh... Yes, I've heard rumors of items that work that way. Could you maybe ask a priest to remove it?"

"It seems like a strong curse, and I think a normal priest would have some trouble with it... We'd have to ask a skilled individual and... Well, you know..."

"The payment, huh? Yeah, it'd be difficult for Iron- or Bronze-class adventurers. So, that's why he still has the scars, huh... I see..."

Rina's explanation did not show the slightest hint of hesitation. Due to this, the soldier no longer appeared apprehensive.

"Okay, I get it. You're good to go!"

And that was all the soldier needed to say.

Upon hearing that, Rina slightly narrowed her eyes, a soft smile once again lighting up her features.

CHAPTER 3
A Certain Undead's Town Infiltration

"Town... Of Maalt..." Those were my first words as I looked around me.

It was unmistakably the busy town of Maalt. Although I had only been gone for a few days, it felt like an eternity. I had thought that I would never be able to return to town again.

That was what I had thought anyway—and yet, here I was, in the town of Maalt.

Maalt—I was in the town of Maalt!! I wanted to jump for joy, as I never thought I would see Maalt again. It would be strange for me to do so within walking distance of the gates, though.

I also had a lot to do; my backlog was long, to say the least. Perhaps I could celebrate to my heart's content another time.

"We walked right through, huh? I'm glad, Mister Rentt!" Rina spoke, still walking closely by my side.

She really was a kindhearted girl, so much so that she would show kindness to an undead such as myself. To think that Rina had done all this for me...

But I could not let this go on any further. Any more involvement would surely cause trouble to befall her at some point or another. And that was why I said:

"It's true... All... Thanks. To you, Ri... Rina. From... Here. I can go... On my own..."

“Huh?”

“...Rina. Our... Time. Together has come... To an... End. If you... Stay. With me any... Longer... Trouble... Will find you... One way... Or another.”

Rina looked genuinely surprised at my words. Rina began to raise her objections.

“Mister Rentt... I...”

But I did not let her finish—I simply couldn’t.

“Rina... Thank... You. For everything... Up until, now. When I... Am. More human... I will definitely... Come find you.”

With that, I sprinted away. I was a Ghoul, after all. My speed and physical strength far exceeded that of a normal human’s. An Iron-class adventurer like Rina could not possibly keep up. I put my all into it and ran as hard as I could, all so Rina would not be able to catch up with me.

From behind me, I heard her voice—Rina’s voice, pleading with me to stop.

But I... I could not stop.

Although I had spent only a short time with Rina, it was more than enough for me to become aware of her potential as an adventurer. Associating with a strange, almost illogical existence such as myself would only serve to threaten her bright future, and I could not allow that to happen.

It seemed like I had simply abandoned her after attaining my goals, even if I had depended on her for many things prior. Maybe I wasn’t such a good person...but I had no choice. If I did not do so, her continued association with me would surely leave a negative mark upon her life. And while I certainly did not look very human at all now, that would change in time. When that

time came...I would surely seek her out once again. After all, I owed Rina an apology.

But until then, all I could do was watch over her...

This is for the best —was what I thought.

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With all that being said, however, it was undeniable that I still needed a human assistant of sorts. After all, entering the guild with my current appearance would be an intimidating prospect. Still, I had adventured from a young age, and had worked incredibly hard all these years. I did not know of anything else to do other than earn my keep by my continued adventuring.

Of course, there was still the issue of my appearance... As long as there were requests of slaying monsters or gathering ingredients, I would be able to complete those with ease. I did have a decade of experience, after all.

And yet...entering the guild myself was the most difficult part of the equation.

The reason for me feeling that way was plain as day, perhaps overwhelmingly so: all members of the guild were experts on monsters and their physiology. Even if I was equipped with a robe, a mask, and gloves, the possibility of most of my garments being removed should I rouse anyone's suspicions was uncomfortably high. And I, for one, had no intentions of taking such risks.

Which brings us back to our first point—the only way out of this conundrum was through a human assistant.

Ideally, they would not be a bright and simple person like Rina, but someone who could be discreet about things. Perhaps they would even have a few secrets of their own to hide. That is to

say, it had to be a mutually beneficial relationship. If that were not the case for any reason, I felt like I would surely receive the short end of the stick. Common decency and kindness were not things I could rely on any more.

But did someone like that even exist...?

In reality, I *did* have someone in mind already. Someone who, in the town of Maalt, could at the very least be said to be my best friend. I had been walking to this person's home this entire time, after all.

With a few more steps, I promptly found myself on their doorstep.

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...Toch, toch!

A series of strange-sounding knocks emanated from the other side of the wooden door.

...But there was no response.

Without any other options, I knocked once more. Again, I was met with silence. Under normal circumstances, I would simply give up and leave. However, these were not normal circumstances —far from them, in fact.

If I didn't wake up this home's inhabitant quickly, all I could see in my future was an endless cacophony of problems. Though I might not need sustenance because I was undead, there was also no place I could safely reside in. If I were to wander around town dressed like this, the soldiers of Maalt would surely capture me for questioning.

I had a spot in an adventurer dormitory in life, but I could not exactly return to it now, dressed as such. Fortunately, rent for the

dormitory was paid at the beginning of each month. It would simply be cleared and rented out again once my contract ended. It was perhaps worth noting that dormitories everywhere usually did the same thing when an adventurer had failed to return after a long period, with the common assumption being that they were, for lack of a better word, dead. And that was why leaving my dormitory room in its current condition did not pose too much of a problem.

Speaking of problems, I now returned to the one at hand—gaining entrance to this abode. This was why I gave up on knocking, and instead placed my hand on the knob, giving it a good turn.

To tell the truth, I had intended to do as much from the very beginning. The person who lived here was not really in the business of receiving guests. In fact, they hardly ever had guests to begin with, and I was encouraged to freely enter when I pleased. And so, that was exactly what I had been doing all this time.

At the very least, considering my circumstances from today of all days, I absolutely had to knock, as the resident would surely be surprised to see me in this state. If I could safely make it through the door and close it behind me, we would at least be able to have a conversation. That was how I felt about the matter, anyway.

But no matter what manner of courtesy I attempted, it would seem like my friend had no intentions of answering the door.

Deciding that there was no longer a need for me to hold back, I turned the knob, intending to enter like I always had. As expected, the door was unlocked, and the knob turned smoothly; it did not offer the slightest hint of resistance. One could say that my friend was a careless person...or perhaps, one without many worries.

With that, I took one big step into their familiar home.

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Nothing's really changed in the short time I've been away...

That was the first thought that came to my mind as I entered. The ever-present, towering piles of books, the dusty atmosphere —one could not walk forward without stepping on a book, or tripping over one mysterious tool or another. Although there were some normal pieces of furniture present, most of them were used as makeshift shelving for books and other knick-knacks. The chairs alone hardly looked like they had been sat on.

The one place in the small home that was not littered with books was where the person I had been looking for slept. Currently sprawled out on what seemed to be a bed, there lay an individual with long, wavy hair, dressed in a somewhat messy and crumpled robe.

Approaching, I put a hand on her shoulder, giving her a good shake.

"...Hey... Hey. Wake up."

"...Un...nn. A bit more...sleep... A bit more..."

Despite her sleepy protests, I continued to shake her. Maybe more persuasion was needed here...

"...If... You say. The same thing... Again. I will drop... A book. On your head..."

"...Come on now, don't do that... Anything but that. Ugh... What, it's you, Rentt? What do you want from me at this hour? Aren't you usually somewhere in the labyrinth at around this ti— ahh?!"

Slowly opening her eyes as she spoke, she was promptly bolted awake as she laid eyes on my face, with her previously sleepy sen-

tence ending on a shrill note.

Affirming that I was merely wearing a mask, she seemed relieved. Feeling somewhat apologetic that I had to do this, I raised my hand before her face, removing my glove as I did so. Bits of dried flesh clinging onto bone—that was what my hand looked like.

One would normally be surprised at such a sight. However—

"...What happened to you?"

Suddenly adopting a serious expression, I found my friend's enthusiasm for such matters strangely reassuring. With a deep breath, I began my explanation of everything that had happened up until this point.

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"...A Dragon, huh. It's hard to believe no matter how you spin it. But..." Looking at me halfway through her sentence, she shook her head slowly.

"I guess I have no choice but to believe you, given how you look. ...And as unbelievable as it is. To think that an old friend of mine would suddenly become an undead... It's not something you think of every day, you know."

Removing my robe, she squinted her eyes as she carefully inspected every inch of my dried-out body. She did so with the fervor of the scholar-adventurer she was, for she was my old friend, Lorraine Vivie.

She was dressed in that same messy and crumply robe she always wore. Her hair, wild and untamed, cascaded past her shoulders in long waves. Although it seemed like she hardly cared about her appearance, there was a sense of glamor emanating from her in her own strange little way.

I had known her for a long time—about, say, ten years since coming to Maalt. While I had known her for a decade, we only grew closer recently—her knowledge always came in handy, and it was a great help in ways more than one. As such, I could not think of a better person than Lorraine to discuss my current situation with.

She was clearly surprised by what I had to say, but never once did she doubt me, or refuse to believe my words. If anything, Lorraine seemed to have already accepted my account of events as reality, and was now deep in thought.



“I… Am the one… Who does not want… To believe it. Becoming… Like, this.”

Lorraine nodded at my words.

“Yes… Very much so. Who even was the one who said that people become undead if eaten by a Dragon…? A Dragon in the labyrinth… Unbelievable. Is it still there now?”

“No… It was… Already gone. When I… Woke up. Its aura… Also gone. Probably… Not there. Anymore.”

Reporting its presence to the guild was one of the first things I thought of when I had woken up—but of course, it was already gone by that time.

Gone without a trace, as if my experiences up until then had been some sort of dream… I wondered how the Dragon could simply appear and disappear as it willed so. Although the reason for its behavior escaped me, one could also say that looking out for it would not do much good if it was capable of phasing itself out of existence.

While an investigation was definitely warranted, filing a report without some sort of evidence on hand was a risky preposition. As such, it would be treated as either a hoax or a lie. Even if I were to show them my body and claim that this was the result of my encounter with the Dragon, that would be, once again, exposing myself to terrible risk. To begin with, I had no idea why I became an undead just because I had encountered a Dragon, so my guess was as good as theirs.

Basically, the lack of evidence was a severe problem indeed, and if it went poorly, then I’d be in great danger. As such, I decided to put notions of reporting my Dragon sighting on hold for the time being.

Lorraine seemed to agree, nodding at the conclusion I had arrived at.

"Your logic is sound. Even if you were to say you saw a Dragon, few, if any, would believe you. I've known you for a long time now, so I can tell you're not lying... But I doubt that'd fly for everyone else. If they did want to believe you, common sense would tell them otherwise. I mean, if you showed up in your current state, they'd probably send adventurers after you right away. Maybe even put your face on a quest list, too. Just give it up, Rentt." Waving her hand this way and that as she continued her description of the scenario, Lorraine smiled.

You know, Lorraine was oddly relaxed around me despite me being a member of the walking dead. This could perhaps be attributed to her personality—she was quite bold, in her own way. In all my time knowing her, Lorraine was never the type to obsess over small details, although it remained to be seen if my becoming a Ghoul was such a small detail or not.

The second reason was perhaps the more significant one: she was a scholar. More precisely, a scholar of monsters and magic. If anything, she would be more interested in how a living, breathing person could become this way, and would bury herself into her work, searching for the answer to her questions. Her long periods of thought during our conversations were probably spent thinking about those very same questions.

"But you know, the more I look at you, Rentt...the more undead you actually look. I hate to ask you this, but...are you the same Rentt I've always known? What if you're someone—something similar, but not quite the same...?"

It was a difficult question—one that even I wanted to know the answer to.

Although I could consciously identify myself as Rentt Faina, I had, as a living thing, died once. There was no doubt about that.

In fact, I was a pile of bones when I woke up. It was difficult to claim that I was a living thing, at least while in that state.

But I still had my memories and consciousness. Even if that alone could not prove that I was the same Rentt Faina as I was in life, undead monsters were fundamentally changed from their living origins from the moment they became undead. I could say that I was a different kind of existence, at least; but even then, I wasn't so sure. And that was why I said what I did—

I had no idea.

Upon hearing my explanation, Lorraine seemed convinced.

"Yes, yes. The truth cannot be gleaned by simply thinking about it. If you asked me, I could tell that you are Rentt from how you answered my question alone. While you possess the same memories and personality…the question of you being 'the same existence' or not would be quite a departure from our initial line of inquiry.

"…Yes. I, too, have no idea. So let's put that aside; I'll think about it later. More importantly, Rentt… What are you going to do from here on out? That's the biggest thing to deal with now, isn't it…?"

Lorraine had apparently seen fit to advance the conversation in a sensible direction. That was what made her so easy to talk to. The point she had brought up, in turn, was one of my main reasons for visiting.

I started speaking once more: "Still… Want. To be an adventurer… But. But… Cannot. Go to guild…"

"You'd be hunted down, wouldn't you? Hmm… Then how about I go and get your quests and turn your collected items in? That's why you came to see me, right? And, of course…you wish to stay here, having no other place to go."

With those words alone, Lorraine had correctly deduced my entire request. As expected, she knew me all too well.

However, her eagerness at accepting my proposition left me worried.

“Are… You sure?” I could not help but ask.

“I don’t really mind. Even I go to the adventurer’s guild sometimes, so it isn’t too much of a hassle if you think about it. Ahh… But then, even if I told you I’d do it for free, you wouldn’t really like it, right? So… You might as well help me out with my research, then.”

Lorraine’s response was swift.

“Re… Search. Research… Huh.”

I had imagined such an outcome. It was perhaps more accurate to say that I was here precisely because of this line of thought. I had, after all, become a member of the walking dead. At the very least, I would be of use to Lorraine’s monster research. But I didn’t think of exactly how I would go about accomplishing this.

As if reading my thoughts, Lorraine continued her explanation.

“Don’t worry about it; it’s easy. You know what I study, right?”

“Monsters… And. Magic…?”

“Yes, verily so. It just so happens that the topic of Existential Evolution falls neatly within the boundaries of my research. Realistically, I also haven’t been able to research this topic very much, for obvious reasons… But now you’re here, Rentt. A real-life specimen, a treasure trove of information.”

“…I don’t… Mind. But… I don’t… Want to be… Dissected.”

“Hey, now, I know I get pretty deep into my research, but I’m not some mad scientist, you know. Well…maybe some skin and flesh samples wouldn’t hurt…”

“…”

It occurred to me that Lorraine was mad enough for such a title. However, I kept my thoughts to myself…for now. It would be troubling if my refusal to hand over samples overturned our prior agreement.

I was, however, surprised to find that there was insufficient research on the topic of Existential Evolution. Though I did not know much apart from the basics, I assumed that professional scholars and the like would have much more information than I did.

At that, Lorraine said the following:

“Yes, yes. Occasionally we get cooperative monster tamers who help us advance our research, somehow. But then, said tamers are rare—at least, as rare as the skill itself already is. To make things worse, monsters that have been completely tamed seem to no longer evolve. Requesting them to exercise the full extent of their abilities and bring back a relatively unharmed specimen is very difficult to begin with. Of course, after that comes the question of research rights and fees… It’s a very difficult process, you know?”

It would seem like that was the case.

Once again reading my thoughts, Lorraine went on to explain the many ways in which I could be of assistance.

“First things first: it is impossible to get verbal consent and civilized agreement from a monster. Also, you have already experienced Existential Evolution once before. In other words, you have a high chance of going through the process again. If you

could report to me when it happens, that would be very helpful.

"Although... I suppose your circumstances make it difficult for me to publish my research. But my curiosity needs to be sated, and I suppose you want to know more about yourself, too."

"Know... More? About... Myself?"

"Yes, specifically about the evolutionary routes you would take from here on out, and so forth. Of course, I will lend you my knowledge and converge my thoughts with yours when appropriate. You may know a lot more about monsters than the average adventurer due to you having read most of my books, but I do this for a living, you know. You'll benefit from my research—without a doubt."

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Having obtained the title of "Great Professor" at the young age of 14, Lorraine Vivie felt, from the bottom of her heart, an unbridled sense of boredom in this world.

She was referred to as a genius ever since she was young, and that changed little as she grew older, having been admitted into the kingdom's most prestigious educational institution at the age of ten. She then went on to achieve the title of "Professor" at 12, and that of "Great Professor" at 14. To Lorraine, there were not many things in the world that were left unexplained. Even if there was a subject she did not know much of, a brief period of study saw her understand much more than specialist researchers who had studied the topic for years.

For Lorraine, the world was very, very boring. Perhaps this was the reason behind what she had done.

One day, without any warning or prior notice, Lorraine abandoned everything and traveled to one of the most rural kingdoms in the land—the Kingdom of Yaaran. Her destination was not the

capital, however, but the smaller, somehow even more rural, town of Maalt—it was there that Lorraine had settled.

Lorraine had her reasons for doing so. She had specifically gone to Maalt in search of a medicinal herb that could not be found anywhere else. Intending to pick it by her own hand, Lorraine had ended up moving to Maalt as a result.

Although she could have simply put up a request and sent one adventurer or another to find the herb, Lorraine was truly and utterly bored. She desired some sort of excitement in her life, so this was the very reason why she held the unreasonable notion of deciding to go find, and thereupon pick, the herb herself.

It was very much an absurd sentiment—anyone would be worried if the youngest and, historically, most talented adolescent girl worthy of a "Professor" title suddenly vanished into thin air without any trace.

Lorraine's rivals at the time, who were at least four times her age, frantically searched the imperial capital for her. It's perhaps difficult to imagine just how worried the scientific authorities in question were. Of course, with the passing of a decade, even Lorraine herself was aware of how childish her actions had been back then. Even so, such concerns were hardly on her mind at that age.

Although gifted at her studies, Lorraine was but a child at the time, and she did not know much of the world outside her books. Fortunately, there was someone who had taught her exactly what that world was—a youth adventuring in Maalt at the time, going by the name of Rentt Faina.

It all began during a search of the forested areas surrounding Maalt—a search in which Lorraine had met Rentt for the very first time.

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Although Lorraine already held the title of “Great Professor” at the age of 14, there was another requirement to obtain the title in addition to the academic achievements. Specifically, one also had to have a certain level of magic proficiency. As such, one would be required to use magic, and use it well. By the standards of the guild, that level of proficiency would be seen in a Silver-class mage.

That classification and rank, however, was not equivalent to a Silver-class adventurer, but instead only took into account one’s aptitude for magic and spell casting. Under normal circumstances, a Silver-class mage would probably also be an adventurer with a proportionate amount of experience. But Lorraine’s case was slightly different—due to her academic nature and fields of study, she had reached a similar level of magical aptitude without ever setting foot in the field.

While an individual with such a history could never hope to become a full-fledged mage due to a lack of combat experience, Lorraine was blessed—or perhaps cursed in this aspect—by having already wielded the required aptitude due to her talents. Even though she lacked any sort of combat experience, she was able to wield various magical spells instinctively, and eventually learned many of the spells in the Silver-class category.

At the time, Lorraine was faced with a particular conundrum: she needed permission from the guild to enter a certain area for the express purpose of collecting ingredients. As such, Lorraine visited the guild in hopes of registering herself so that she could collect the required herbs. The receptionist at the time, however, did not pay much heed to Lorraine, and had assumed from her title of “Great Professor” that she was a Silver-class adventurer in some capacity, hence registering her as such. Although adventurer registration was something that could only be done if the individual in question was over the age of 15, Lorraine’s title superseded her age, so it was prioritized during her registration.

Strictly speaking, the handling of Lorraine’s registration

process was riddled with errors. While it was true that she held the title of “Great Professor,” the guild’s ruling on age restrictions always came first.

Yet this ruling came with a somewhat persistent problem in its semantics. The general consensus or assumption of the guild and its members with regards to the title of “Great Professor” was simple: such a title could not possibly be earned by someone under the age of 15. The writers of the rule did not think to account for such a possibility. The problem was further exacerbated by the actions of the receptionist, who had made various assumptions regarding said situation.

It was also worth noting that this particular rule was still very much intact and unchanged. Due to this, someone under the age of 15 would end up able to register as an adventurer—at least, they would if they held the title of “Great Professor.”

Although Lorraine herself thought that there were some issues with the process, she was not about to tell the receptionist how to do their job, and as such, she kept quiet on the matter. Due to the previously mentioned circumstances, Lorraine found herself holding a shining Silver adventurer’s permit, and with that, was about to set off for her destination in a relatively happy mood.

Lorraine’s aim was self-explanatory: she was going to make a little money for herself, in addition to collecting the herb that she had originally come to get.

A voice, however, called out to her before she stepped out of the guild’s doors. Turning around without much of a second thought, Lorraine was greeted by a large, muscled, and somewhat peculiar-looking swordsman.

“Hey, young miss… You took that Azuul Forest quest, didn’t you? Then bring this guy along—he’ll at least carry your stuff.” Saying so, the swordsman jovially pushed a young man toward Lorraine.

Although Lorraine did not think much of it at the time, this was in fact a huge turning point in her life, as this young man was none other than Rentt Faina.

Of course, the swordsman knew that Lorraine would have her reservations; recommending an adventurer to another in this fashion was not something that happened every day, after all. As such, the swordsman readily offered an explanation for his actions.

"Y'see... This guy here is still kinda new. He wants to gain all sorts of experience, and usually follows me into the forest to collect ingredients. But then, y'see, I'm busy today—something else on the schedule—so I've been searching for someone else to take him out for a bit now. That's when you came along, young miss... So, what do you say? Not a bad deal, right? He'll carry your stuff."

Quite the sudden development. It wasn't exactly common practice to bring along someone one has never seen before on adventuring trips. Judging from the conversation, the youth in question was probably Bronze-class or lower. In other words, they would be nothing more than a hindrance to Lorraine, a (newly-christened) Silver-class adventurer.

Just as she was about to refuse, the strange swordsman, once again displaying his telepathic faculties, interrupted Lorraine.

"Hah, don't worry about it—I won't even ask you for a hiring fee! Just bring this fool along with you. The quest you accepted just now was a gathering assignment, right? If you bring him along your rewards will only go up—more hands, y'see. Of course, you get to keep everything... And he's going to carry all of it for you. So, y'see. Come on, young miss. Throw me a bone here."

The swordsman was pushy—very much so. He showed no signs of backing down from his outlandish request. And so it came to be that Lorraine, having no choice but to nod, ended up taking a youth she hardly knew along on her assignment. Little

did Lorraine know, however, that she would soon be thanking this very youth from the bottom of her heart.

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The Azuul Forest was large, stretching out as far as the eye could see. In fact, it was a bastion of nature, home to all kinds of flora and fauna. Lorraine, having gleaned all of her knowledge from books, knew of the forest to some degree. Seeing it in person, though, was another experience altogether, with the many differences between what she saw and what she read about continuing to fascinate her.

With that being said, however, Lorraine was not doing too well in her trek through the forest, as she had hardly covered any ground. The problem here was not exactly a lack of stamina—if anything, stamina shouldn't be a problem for a 14-year-old. Plus, Lorraine had strengthened her body with various enhancement spells.

Unknown to Lorraine, however, there were basic techniques and insights with regards to traversing forested terrain—specifically, it was knowledge she did not have. Lorraine found herself getting increasingly tired as she waded through the brush, her stamina seemingly being sapped away by the forest itself with every step.

Conversely, the Bronze-class youth accompanying her, while much lower in adventurer rank, did not seem tired at all. Conjuring up water from seemingly nowhere, he offered a cup of it to Lorraine, who was currently resting due to her exertions.

Glancing at the youth, Lorraine noticed that his tool belt, having previously been empty, was now filled with medicinal herbs of all sorts that he must have been gathering from somewhere or another while she wasn't looking. At Lorraine's request, the youth handed over some of the herbs to her. It didn't take long for a scholar such as herself to notice that each and every one of the

herbs had been harvested correctly and methodologically.

Although she had ordered herbs of all kinds from apothecaries and the like before, she did not recall seeing herbs prepared to this degree, nor with such skill. Such was also the case when they encountered monsters.

Up until this point in her life, where she had decided to wander into a forest in search of herbs, Lorraine had not fought monsters in any shape or form. Of course, as a "Great Professor," Lorraine's magic had more than enough power to dispose of the average monster. But seeing as how Lorraine was usually accompanied by a companion or escort on her travels, she hardly had any chance to use her magic, as the monster would have already been defeated by the time she had even thought of doing so.

This was perhaps why Lorraine had simply stood and stared blankly when faced with a monster. Barring the youth with her, she was now alone this time around. It was only at this point in time that Lorraine realized just how ferocious monsters could be.

Her mind was in a daze—she knew that she had to fight, that she had to cast a spell of some sort. Her body, however, did not move.

It was then that the voice of the youth rang out, snapping her out of her stupor.

"Lorraine! A fireball! Foteia Borivaas! Use it!"

If not for what Rentt had shouted, Lorraine would have stood eternally frozen, and that might have been the end of her then and there. But instructions were given, and Lorraine followed them through. Indeed, Lorraine seemed little more than a puppet during the course of this incident.

As the charred remains of what was once a monster continued smoking in the aftermath of Lorraine's magic, she was once more

found to be standing still, a vacant expression splashed across her features. Rentt, upon discovering that Lorraine had little to no combat experience, decided to impart upon her various details about monsters, combat techniques, and common movement patterns of said monsters while in battle.

Lorraine was wise; in fact, she was much wiser than any run-of-the-mill mage. As such, she quickly absorbed the knowledge that Rentt had to offer, absorbing it all at an astonishing speed. She was, however, only able to do this due to Rentt's intervention in her first battle, and she had fully come to realize this.

It was the same way in learning the details of her assignment—namely, the retrieval of certain medicinal herbs. According to her books, the herbs were quite common despite the fact that they only grew in certain places. Due to this, the herb would not be very difficult to find at all.

But reality was very different, as Lorraine found herself empty-handed. After half an hour of searching, Lorraine could not help but be disappointed, with their big discovery being a single herb, only one of the many required for her quest. Frustrated with the state of affairs, Lorraine mentally noted that she would give the author of the book she studied a good punch the next time she met them.

Yet despite all this, and Lorraine's increasing frustration, Rentt, who had been walking behind her all this time, simply smiled wryly as the herbs in his tool belt's pouch continued to grow. Turning around, Lorraine realized the herbs he collected had doubled since she last checked—and amongst them were entire bunches of the herbs she had been tasked to collect.

It turned out the book's author was right. Lorraine had merely failed to notice the herbs in question when passing through the marked locations. At that, Lorraine finally realized just how little she knew of the world.

Lorraine then requested that Rentt demonstrate and educate her on a variety of topics: from the basics of combat and adventuring, to the picking and preservation of herbs, and even where said herbs grew. Rentt, for his part, happily obliged. And so the pair eventually returned in the evening, somehow completing Lorraine's assignment on time.

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It wasn't until later that Lorraine was informed of the truth from the strange swordsman. He, understanding that Lorraine had no combat experience just from her movements and equipment (or lack thereof), had intended for Rentt to function as her guide. Lorraine, surprised at the development, could not help but ask if the adventurer's guild took such great care of each and every new adventurer. However, this was not the case, as Rentt, who had been stationed at the tavern at the time, had simply taken notice of Lorraine. Discussing the matter with his swordsman companion, Rentt realized that Lorraine would probably not come back alive if she were allowed out into the wild as she was. This was why the two had hatched a plan to approach her, introducing Rentt as someone to carry her bags so as to avoid hurting her pride.

While Lorraine had felt that their little scheme was troublesome and, to some extent, time-consuming, she was grateful for their intervention—it had ultimately saved her life. Once again, Lorraine realized just how constrained her knowledge of the world was, since she had barely seen anything beyond her books, and her fingertips.

Lorraine once fancied herself a master of knowledge—understanding the known, and counting the known unknowns easily in her mind, while also accounting for the unknown unknowns that she might one day come across.

In reality, though, Lorraine did not know very much at all—and that was all there was to it. In the end, it was Rentt who had

taught her, and she who had subsequently learned from Rentt's adventuring experience.

Lorraine found herself staying in the town of Maalt after that incident. For the first time in her life, she saw color—where things had once been gray and boring, it was now filled with joy. For the first time, Lorraine found it difficult to leave a place—specifically, the town of Maalt.

But Lorraine already belonged to another place, as she was only in Maalt for an assignment, a mere task. After many requests and communiqués from the capital begging for her return, Lorraine finally made up her mind:

She would return to the capital—and then, she would once more set off for the town of Maalt. This time, she would be without regrets or loose ends.

To begin with, scholars were allowed a relatively free life—she did not necessarily have to be in the capital to continue her studies. This was why Lorraine had returned to the capital, settling various affairs and matters that required her attention, all the while planning to return to Maalt after everything was said and done.

Upon returning to the capital, however, Lorraine was surprised to find that what she had previously seen as lifeless and gray was instead the exact opposite. Opening her eyes, Lorraine saw that her colleagues and friends at the capital were worried for her, and it was then that she realized her position at the capital was more than an empty chair—people truly cared. That was, once again, something she only realized after her meeting with Rentt.

If anything, adventuring with Rentt in and of itself opened her eyes to the world, and Lorraine herself understood that.

Despite all that, yet again, Lorraine found herself pining for

the town of Maalt. Although she was not necessarily elated in leaving her colleagues and friends, both old and new, behind at the capital, she felt like she had no choice.

As expected, her announcement was met with a sea of disappointed faces, but in the end, Lorraine's friends and colleagues relented. Perhaps it was because they realized that something about Lorraine was different—that her will, this time of all times, would not be so easily shaken.

In exchange for her request, however, there was one condition: Lorraine was to return to the capital once every year. In turn, she was given permission to stay in Maalt, establishing her own facility there for scholarly pursuits. This arrangement allowed for Lorraine to forge new connections in Maalt as she continued her research, publishing her findings on an annual basis. This would also maintain a line of contact between Lorraine and the capital.

Promising to do her part with a casual wave, Lorraine finally moved from the capital, doing as she said she would. Summarily, Lorraine bought a house in the town of Maalt and continued her research in her spare time. It was then, however, that Lorraine's slovenly nature finally reared its ugly head.

Although Lorraine's passion and love for research was true, as reflected by her relentless pursuit of knowledge, her punctuality with regards to communications left much to be desired. While she had initially been relatively punctual with correspondences, that would quickly prove to be more of the exception than the norm.

While missives from the capital always arrived on time, Lorraine found herself hard-pressed to respond. Even her promise to return to the capital once a year soon fell to the sidelines, as year after year passed, with Lorraine occasionally entertaining the notion here and there. Before she knew it, Lorraine had tasked Rentt with replying to her letters and planning her homecoming

trips.

The reason for this was somewhat simple—one of Lorraine's friends from the capital, understanding the futility of the entire venture, had written to Rentt, asking him to take care of Lorraine to the best of his ability. It would seem that the friend in question knew Lorraine and her tendencies well.

In reality, Lorraine depended on Rentt from the very start—everything from purchasing her house to her living arrangements was casually left to Rentt, who took care of more than half of the overall procedures. Rentt taught Lorraine various kinds of life skills, often repeating himself until she, too, was able to take care of herself in a reasonable way. Should Lorraine fall behind on her duties, Rentt, on one of his many visits, would sort things out for her.

But this was not exactly something Rentt had done for free. In exchange for his domestic help and assistance with other affairs, Lorraine taught Rentt a great deal of things from her end of the table.

Lorraine, for all her faults, was still a "Great Professor" and scholar. More accurately, she was one of the best scholars when all things were said and done. In other words, while Rentt would have normally had to pay a handsome fee for a tutor of Lorraine's caliber, he instead did all her housework and chores, receiving the lessons in return as payment.

Rentt did not set out with this in mind, however—

For starters, he knew little of Lorraine's history. He had only inferred as such from tidying up Lorraine's fallen books, with Lorraine explaining the rest after his initial questions. While Lorraine did not exactly lie, she didn't really tell Rentt much about her past, either—specifically not about how she had abandoned her fancy life in the capital to live in Maalt, or how her friends had tried to stop her, or the fact that she still wielded some influ-

ence in the affairs of the kingdom, or about the fact that she was one of the best scholars in the land.

Thankfully, the person she was speaking with was Rentt. Although Lorraine was not sure if he believed her explanation, Rentt did not dig further, and he left matters as they were.

Ten years would eventually pass. Lorraine, for her part, was happy with the arrangement. She was content, and she wished that it could go on forever—perhaps, at least, up until her death.

If Rentt wanted to continue adventuring, that was fine. She was content with just watching and standing by his side. In fact, Lorraine was all right with doing her research, as she always did, with Rentt close by. She was fond of the meals they sometimes shared while talking about mundane affairs—she did not have the slightest suspicion or doubt that these days would not continue indefinitely.

But one day, Rentt Faina disappeared.

Lorraine was filled with a foreboding sense of apprehension, as it was unlike Rentt to not show up for several days in a row. Thoughts of Rentt falling to monsters filled Lorraine's mind. If that were indeed the case...

Lorraine found her heart filled with a swirling chaos. It was a violent force—one that she had never felt before. She very much wanted to patrol the streets, shouting Rentt's name as she searched—that was how she felt.

In her bright and logical mind, however, Lorraine quickly realized the futility of such a venture. If such a method proved fruitless, one would simply have to change the methods at hand. It would be prudent to ask other adventurers to search for him; money was of no import. She did, after all, have a fair amount of savings.

Just as she was about to raise her quill, Lorraine was interrupted by a familiar sound from her door's knocker—a familiar, rhythmic knocking...

In her ten years of residing in the town of Maalt, Lorraine had many, many friends and had forged quite a few connections. It was possible that her visitor could be one of these many friends. However, there was something else about this sound—something different.

Lorraine, with her typically inquisitive mind, quickly discerned the special characteristics of this knock's rhythm. There was no mistaking it. Only one person knocked in this particular way—

Rentt Faina.

With that thought in mind, Lorraine had wanted to rush out to be sure that it was indeed him—but that would no doubt be seen as strange. In any case, Rentt lived. That much was enough for her.

Yet Lorraine could not help but notice something else. In all his years of vising, Rentt had rarely knocked. The fact that he was currently knocking meant that something was wrong—or at the very least, different. Under normal circumstances, Rentt would probably enter on his own after a while—at least, that was how it had always been. This was the reason why Lorraine decided to meet him as she usually would. There was just one problem, however:

She was usually asleep on her sofa by this time of day.

With that in mind, Lorraine decided to do just that. Running her hands through her hair to give herself a frazzled appearance, Lorraine lay down haphazardly upon the sofa and closed her eyes.

It was then that a familiar click resounded through the room—

the doorknob had been turned. With the approaching footsteps came a familiar voice...

"...Hey... Hey. Wake up."

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Ever since then, Lorraine had been visiting the guild on my behalf, handing over ingredients and magic crystals that I ended up gathering on my trips through the labyrinth. She was, of course, provided with gold for those materials. While I once had to save religiously and monitor my expenses, I now found my pockets considerably heavy.

In the end, Lorraine herself purchased the vial of slime fluid from me—for a pretty sum of coin, at that. Although it was a somewhat valuable ingredient to the guild, there were no rules dictating who I could sell my spoils to. That was up to the discretion of each adventurer.

Lorraine was somewhat skilled in alchemy to begin with, and she often made her own medicines and potions. In return, she needed a variety of materials to work with, and it just so happened that I was carrying one of those ingredients—an expensive ingredient, I may add—for which Lorraine paid a fair price. In fact, buying direct from the source resulted in a cost savings for Lorraine, who usually had to buy it at elevated prices from the adventurer's guild.

But that aside, it was perhaps noteworthy to mention that I was currently walking around the streets of Maalt. While I did want to bask in the atmosphere of the town, having been away for what felt like a long time, I did not exactly set off on a stroll without purpose.

I did indeed have a purpose. An important one, actually—I was on my way to purchase a weapon. After all, I'd been using the same weapons and armor I had used in life when I became a

Skeleton, right up until I evolved into a Ghoul. I was actually still using them now, but said weapons and armor were now battered, perhaps irreversibly. Although this sword had served me faithfully for many years in life, recent changes to my physique and internal reservoirs of mana and the like had taken a toll on its surface. The sword was now jagged and visibly damaged.

Perhaps that was a given. I had used the spirit arts only once a day, and never even thought of infusing my weapons and armor with divinity or magic. Due to those considerations, I had mostly purchased cheap equipment. Considering the fact that I had been using magic, spirit, and divinity repeatedly over the past few days, the resultant toll on the blade was to be expected. It was unfortunate, yes, but there was nothing much I could have done about it.

While I had intended to use it for one more year, I did not have any other weapons on me, so my continued abuse of the weapon resulted in the current situation. It was truly a tragedy.

The combination of various factors, such as the overall increase in my abilities resulting in more efficient monster hunting, to Rina returning my change after purchasing my robes, and even my resultant sale of monster materials, it all contributed to one thing—I was now considerably well-off. So much so that now would be a very good time for me to invest in a new weapon.

I made a mental note to hold off on the armor, though. After all, measurements were required for the creation of such equipment—something that necessitated the removal of my robe.

It was not like I had a fear of being naked; it's not like I'm a young girl. But I had my reasons. In some ways, it would terrify me even more than it would a young girl to show any kind of skin. I mean, how could I calmly show my Ghoulish, half-dried body to a living person?

No, it was impossible. ...Perhaps only to those I trusted.

At this point in time, the only one I could trust in such a way was Lorraine... This was largely because of her nature, and how she tended to not care about the smaller details in life.

This wasn't just a matter of trust—if my identity and state of being as a Ghoul were to be discovered, there was no telling what would happen to me. As such, it was difficult for me to show myself to anyone but Lorraine at this point in time. This was the reason why I only set out to purchase a sword today.

Finally reaching my destination, I looked up at the shop's familiar signboard. Then, with a deep breath, I steeled my resolve, and entered through its doors.

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"Welcome! ...Huh?" The voice of a woman greeted me as I entered the shop.

The shop in question was none other than the local blacksmith, better known as the "Three-Pronged Harpoon."

With her blonde hair, blue eyes, and demeanor befitting that of a noble lady, I had no idea why she saw fit to marry someone like Clope. Speaking of which, those very blue eyes were now trained upon my being. Perhaps my robed and skull-masked appearance was a little bit too suspicious. While adventurers sporting masks were not exactly unusual, my exact combination of clothing unfortunately made me stand out.

As I continued ruminating, Luka slowly approached, as if to say something to her odd-looking customer.

"...Apolo...gies. For looking... Suspicious..."

"Oh, no! Not at all." Luka quickly shook her head at my words. "It's just that... You look somewhat similar to a person I know. My apologies. Masked adventurers are not much of an oddity, at

least to my knowledge. I apologize if my gaze has made you uncomfortable."

Such was Luka's apology. I suppose she was used to customers like me after all.

With that, Luka continued speaking: "...Which brings me to my question: how may I help you today? Have you come to the 'Three-Pronged Harpoon' to purchase weapons or equipment? Or, perhaps you were seeking maintenance and service?"

"Y... Yes. I would... Like. A new... Sword. H... Here." Saying so, I placed my sword, scabbard and all, onto the shop's counter.

Without explaining my intent, Luka quickly understood the meaning of my gesture.

"But of course. Excuse me, please." With that, Luka promptly drew the sword from its sheathe, examining it closely.

Although she was the wife of Clope, the resident blacksmith of this store, Luka also played an important role in customer service and interaction. As befitting her position, she was armed with an adequate knowledge of identifying various weapons, in addition to evaluating their quality and degree of wear. In fact, I'd heard that Luka herself could even forge simple items.

After a short inspection, Luka offered her assessment, her eyes still fixated on my sword's battered blade.

"I'm afraid this may be beyond repair. From my observations, I would say this piece of equipment has been utilized to the best of its potential. Would you happen to have any preferences for its replacement? I see marks and straining characteristics of magic and the spirit arts... Is this indeed the case?"

Identifying what abilities a weapon's owner had simply by looking at its scuff marks was no small feat—Luka was truly capa-

ble of this much.

I decided to honestly tell her the extent of my abilities, mainly due to the fact that I was not exactly trying to hide anything to begin with.

"Ah… Yes. Magic… Spirit… Divinity. I use… Them all. So I would… Like. A sword… That can channel… All three."

"…Thrice-blessed… I see. How very rare indeed. You're the second customer I've seen with such a disposition."

"If… Possible. Could you… Keep it a… Secret?"

"Of course—loose lips would sink an establishment like ours. But…with that being said, the nature of this order would result in…considerable fees, in addition to taking quite a few days to forge. Would that be acceptable…?"

I had assumed as much. Individuals who could use all three of these abilities were rare in the first place—almost unheard of, actually. Perhaps one would have met one or two in their lifetime—but a third would be highly unusual.

It therefore went without saying that an adequate amount of time must be spent crafting a weapon for such an individual. As a matter of fact, blacksmiths such as these commonly crafted weapons for those who used magic or the spirit arts.

Those who could use divinity, on the other hand, were comparatively rare. Priests and the like often had specialist shops they favored, as opposed to the common blacksmith. Because of all this, the nature of my order made it a rarity in and of itself—

But I was mentally prepared for the expenditure.

"I… Don't… Mind. But… This is… All I have…" I grasped my coin purse, placing it firmly upon the shop counter.

It was filled with a considerable amount of gold and silver coins—this coin purse basically held my entire fortune. (Though it's worth noting that it probably was not worth very much at all to high-ranking adventurers.)

Confirming the pouch's contents, Luka started explaining the payment process. "...This is more than enough for us to forge a quality piece. With regards to payment, we'll gladly take half for it now, as a deposit. The other half will be collected when the weapon is ready."

"Is that... All right?"

It was a very special order, after all. To tell the truth, the materials involved would probably cost a small fortune.

"Yes, very much so. In return—well, not quite, but a favor, if you will. Could you please have a few words with my husband, Clope? He's the blacksmith of this shop, and he'd definitely want a word with you, given his character. To tell the truth, he would probably call for your input quite a lot during the forging process."

I had known Clope for quite a long time since becoming an adventurer. Needless to say, I was also familiar with his personality and quirks. He was serious about his work, even if it was just a common sword, let alone a special order. He would surely have me test the blade over and over again as he continued to forge it—I knew Clope all too well. This was why I half-expected what Luka had to say, and I promptly nodded at her words.

"I... Do not. Mind. When... He needs. Me. Contact... Scholar... Lorraine."

I explained to Luka that Lorraine had kindly allowed me the use of her abode while I was in the town of Maalt. At those words, Luka's eyes widened, more than they ever had before. That was, however, quickly replaced by a well-practiced smile.

“Oh, of course. I understand. Well, then, first, I’ll return this to you…” Removing half of its contents, Luka picked up my coin pouch and handed it back to me.

“I am sure Clope will have many questions for you regarding the new sword you wish to have forged.”

And with that, Luka led me to the back of the shop, into the smithing chambers.

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The back of the store where I had been led to contained the smithing chambers: forge, blacksmith, hot steam, and all. As expected, a muscle-clad but somewhat slim man was swinging his hammer calmly and methodically, striking red-hot metal over, and over again. I steeled myself—he was impossible to talk to when he was like this.

As if reading my mind, Luka had a similarly penitent explanation to offer. “…I do apologize. You may have to wait for quite a while… He’ll be ready to speak in, oh, say, an hour. It might be better if you spent your time at another establishment while waiting…”

A truly apologetic expression.

Perhaps a first-time customer might be taken aback at these developments. I, however, was not, having known Clope for so many years. It was a quirk of his to fall into an almost trance-like state when he was hammering out a weapon; that’s just how he was.

Of course, speaking to him in this state was impossible. In fact, Clope was so focused that any interruptions might simply be met with a single swing of his hammer. It was better for all parties involved to simply wait for him to put his hammer down after reaching one point of progress or other. Again, I was by no means

unfamiliar with the proceedings at the Three-Pronged Harpoon.

"...No. I do not... Mind. Can I... Wait, here. Instead?"

"Of course, that's quite all right, but...would that be acceptable? Nothing of interest really happens here. Do you not find it boring?" Luka asked, seemingly curious about my decision.

"Watching... Black... Smith. At work. Not... Boring." I replied.

A slight expression of surprise once again flitted across Luka's face, before quickly being replaced by her business-as-usual smile.

"In that case, there's a chair in that corner from which you can closely watch the process. I shall bring refreshments—do excuse me." Saying so, Luka left the room.

Honestly speaking, my decision to stay was not an act of any kind. I genuinely enjoyed watching skilled individuals perform their work. I found that those who were at all skilled at their craft had a sort of flow and rhythm to their work—it was something one could feel just by spectating.

Clope was, for his part, unmistakably an extremely skilled blacksmith, and one could feel a sense of fluid beauty in the various aspects of his work. There was no way I could find such a spectacle boring—no way, indeed.

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After what seemed to be a considerable amount of time, the rhythmic clanging of metal finally stopped, dispersing along with the intangible cloud of tension that had been hanging over the smithing chambers for the past hour.

Clope held up the sword he had been working on, and slowly smiled. It was plain to see from his expression that this was a piece he was very satisfied with. I, too, felt that it was a thing

worth celebrating. At that moment, though, Clope turned around to face me.

"My bad. Kept you waiting, huh?"

From Clope's words, I could see that he had indeed noticed my presence. He was merely too focused in his work to greet me. A first-time customer would probably offer a complaint or two at this point. But the nature of his work meant that it could not simply be stopped midway through—I, for one, had no qualms with that.

This was why I answered: "...Not.. At all. I don't... Mind. It was... Interesting."

Upon hearing my words, Clope smiled. "And here I was thinking it's pretty rare for Luka to bring someone in here... Seems like you're an interesting guy."

Clope's expression was more befitting of a battle-worn warrior staring down an adversary with an unfaltering smile—as opposed to that of a typical blacksmith. His facial features, however, indicated that he was a little more ahead in his years—somewhere in his forties would be a good estimate.

Though he looked quite a bit older than Luka, in truth, the two were not that far apart in their years. Of course, I had not asked them this up front. It was more of a conclusion I had gleaned from Clope's statements across the years. Particularly telling was the one where he claimed Luka was his childhood friend, hence my assumption.

Although the practice of directly asking for someone's age wasn't non-existent, it proved extremely difficult to pose such a question when faced with the pressure emanating from Luka's unfaltering smile. Basically, one would probably not find out even if they had asked her directly.

“I… Don’t know… About being interesting. But I… Was told. You could forge… Me. A sword.”

“Oh, would you like a piece specially order-made? There are many swords already displayed out front, though… And they’re all high-quality pieces, I can attest to that. Instead of an expensive custom order, maybe you’ll find one that fits you if you looked around?”

Clope was a blunt man, and one of not too many words. While someone who was unfamiliar with him would simply assume that he was turning down my request, the reality was quite different. Clope was only concerned about customers unnecessarily spending copious amounts of money.

With his sharp eyes and occasionally intimidating expression, it would seem like Clope could make someone cry just by looking at them. To make things worse, half of his statements sounded like threats or expressions of displeasure. But I knew better than anyone else that Clope, contrary to his appearance and mannerisms, was actually a very gentle person. This was why I answered in kind, not intimidated by his mannerisms in the slightest.

“The… Blades… You have. Up front… At the store. Cannot… Handle. Divin…ity.”

“Divi…? Oh, divinity! What, you a practitioner of the holy arts? You don’t seem like a priest to me. If you are, wouldn’t you have a specific smithy you go to?”

Indeed, it was like Clope had said. I did not, for all intents and purposes, look anything remotely close to a priest. If anything, I seemed to be the direct opposite of one—yet, with things as they were, I had no choice but to fully explain myself.

“Not… A priest. I also… Use. Magic… And… Spirit arts.”

“What… You mean you’re one of them thrice-blessed…? Huh, I

see. All right. Well, then… Seems like you can't use any of those out front. That's why Luka brought you to me, huh. You have the money for this?"

"The… Person. At the front. Told me I had… Enough for… The order."

"Hmm. If Luka says so… All right, I get it.

"Well, then, this may be sudden, but let's get down to it. About the fees, too."

Saying so, Clope retrieved a chair from a corner of his workshop, lifting it by one of its legs. Placing it at a small table, the blacksmith and I finally started our discussion.

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"…Well, that about settles it. All that's left are the finer details… I'll send word when I need you, that good?" Clope said after finalizing the calculations involved in the weapon's overall cost.

"I don't… Mind." I nodded in response.

"All right, then we have a deal. Look forward to working with you and all that, yeah?" With that, Clope stuck out his hand.

A handshake—but of course.

For a second, I hesitated. These hands were the hands of an undead—they were dirty. I felt like it would be a big problem for anyone to touch them.

But that hesitation did not last very long at all. After all, I could not simply discuss my circumstances, or my new fate as a member of the walking dead, with Clope. Instead, I just responded as normally as I could, gripping Clope's hand with a firm shake.

“I… Leave it. In… Your hands.”

And that was all I could say.

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The customer stepped through the doors, and then, he was gone. He was certainly a strange one, dressed in a robe weaved from the darkness of night. On his face sat a skull-shaped mask, white as bone, seemingly made in the land of the dead itself. But the most unsettling thing about him was how much he reminded me of a youth who, just up until recently, often frequented our establishment.

But then…

“Hey, Luka. What’s wrong? You have a weird face on.”

Clope, my husband, and the blacksmith of this establishment—our establishment. With his usual rugged smile, he called out to me from behind, having finally exited his workshop.

Turning around, I could not help but say to him: “…You know, right? You know who that was…”

Clope picked up where my words had trailed off, as I could not bring myself to finish that sentence.

“Well… Yeah. Haven’t seen him on the streets or at the tavern recently… Thought he went somewhere, you know. Seems like he’s gotten himself into a bad spot…”

“Why won’t he ask us for help? Does he not trust us?

Clope seemed to nod at my words—words that escaped from the depths of my heart, bearing a heavy hue of sadness.

“Yeah, maybe… Hey. Hey, I was just joking! Joking.”

I was ready to cry at those words; the reaction was probably enough to jolt Clope out of his callous mood. He waved his hands somewhat dramatically, as if to dispel the notion.

I stared at Clope—I wanted his opinion, not his horsing about.

"...Well, see, maybe he doesn't want to trouble us? Don't know why he has that robe and mask on, but... Maybe he got cursed or something? You know, that stuff occasionally happens to adventurers.

"If he really did get cursed, detractors of our establishment will sure come crawling out of the woodwork. Well, people like that were always there in the first place.

"Or maybe he thinks we won't recognize him, and we'd just tell him to scram because he's cursed, you know. Maybe he just needs some time and will tell us later... Or something like that, see?"

"What do you mean, 'something like that'! You haven't said anything of the sort to him, have you?!"

"...Yeah," Clope quickly answered, sensing the increasing amounts of pressure and distress in my words. "I don't talk to random punks, you know. But that's just how he is, see. He's always been like that. ...It's probably fine. We know he's alive, so for now we'll just let him do what he wants. He'll tell us in time... He did give us enough hints about who he was, you know. I can't be exactly sure, but maybe that's all he can bring himself to do for now.... He did still visit, see. Like he used to."

Clope's words were convincing. A thrice-blessed individual with free access to Lorraine's house—

That, already, was a large hint.

It was unmistakable—he had intentionally given us that hint to tell us who he was. But even then...we still had no idea what ex-

actly happened to him. It seemed like he could not talk about it freely himself.

But he came to us in search of a weapon—that in and of itself was indicative of the amount of trust he had for our establishment... And us. I felt like I understood the situation a little better.

"Yes... Yes, I suppose so," I said, turning to my husband as I slowly rubbed away the tears in my eyes.



CHAPTER 4
The Labyrinth Of The Moon's Reflection And Troublesome Restrictions

I stood in a particularly narrow passageway in the Labyrinth of the Moon's Reflection, facing two clattering Skeletons blocking my way. Leisurely closing the distance between us, the two Skeletons had raised their arms to strike, now merely a single step away from my being.

My sword, however, had other ideas, cleaving into the Skeletons right before their attacks could land. In the next moment, the two Skeletons had been slashed into neat halves, once more scattering into unidentifiable piles of lifeless bone. Bending over, I searched through their remains, looking for magic crystals. The crystals were small, about the size of my little finger. Placing them in my trusty tool belt's pouch, I once again set off on my journey through the labyrinth.

A day after placing my order at the Three-Pronged Harpoon, I had set off once more. To where, you ask? Why, there was no other place—

I had to chart the unexplored area where I had first laid eyes upon the Dragon. Even if the Dragon's presence was now long gone, I had to at least inspect the surroundings. A simple report to the guild would not suffice—they might not even believe me. As such, I decided to go in person—such was my assessment of the situation.

As for my weapon, Clope had handed me a loaner sword in-

stead so that I would have something to use while waiting for my custom piece. He wouldn't even charge me, he said. The sword in question, while capable of channeling magic and the spirit arts, was apparently incompatible with divinity. But taking everything into consideration, it was a sword of acceptable quality. If anything, it was much better than the weapon I had been using up until now. Plus, its compatibility with magic and the spirit arts meant that I could freely use the relevant techniques without forcing it through the blade. It was a great quality of life improvement.

I was a creature—or perhaps adventurer—of habit, after all. Having placed an order for my new weapon in addition to finishing the rest of my errands, there was only one thing left to do: explore the labyrinth.

With that in mind, I made various preparations, adequately informed Lorraine of my departure, and then duly set off for the Labyrinth of the Moon's Reflection.

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However—

"Wow, you really saved me there! I had no idea Slimes could move that way... It makes me shiver thinking of what could have happened to me! Ugh!" the person next to me said, walking alongside me as he repeatedly slapped his large hand against my dried, but thankfully robed, shoulder.

He seemed to be a swordsman of some kind, and in his forties. The keyword here being that he seemed to be someone of that nature. The way he moved in his prior battle was problematic at best. I could tell that he didn't quite have the knack for it, and hardly practiced, either. I had just happened to pass by as he was struggling with defeating a Slime. I couldn't just leave him to die, now could I?

However, it was standard practice and knowledge amongst adventurers that one was responsible for one's own self when exploring labyrinths. Other adventurers were not necessarily obligated to help their compatriots, even if said person was in a life-or-death situation. In fact, if an adventurer were to die while exploring a labyrinth, their fate would merely be chalked up as a result of their inherent weakness and lack of strategy—at least, that was public opinion on such affairs.

With that being said, though, adventurers were also human. Just as there were humans who harbored ill-intent, there were adventurers who desired to do good, and it was not strange for the latter group to rescue individuals in trouble. But such decisions had to be made quickly, as many a life had been lost to a ponderous potential rescuer taking too long to decide if they should come to the unfortunate victim's rescue...or not.

Adventuring wisdom dictated that one was to focus one's efforts on self-defense, and to only help others if they could afford to do so. Such was, realistically speaking, the correct choice—adventurers should seek to avoid getting themselves into disadvantageous positions. For instance, if one were to heroically come between a monster and its victim, defending the latter with one's life, then it would be all too tragic, but common, for the victim to stab their rescuer in the back. Said victim would then kill both the weakened monster and their wounded rescuer before making off with the equipment and possessions of the latter. It was quite unfortunate that such immoral adventurers existed in these lands.

In addition, evidence was hard to collect in these instances, mainly owing to the fact that labyrinths seemed to be self-cleaning, for some unknown reason or another. Scattered pieces of viscera and other body parts were all but absorbed when the next monster reappeared in its slain counterpart's place, leaving no trace of the previous one's grisly fate.

With all that said and done, one could possibly understand why adventurers mostly remained responsible for themselves. If

anything, they had to be constantly wary and on guard, as it was by no means a safe job. But I made the choice to step in, all the while being painfully aware of the aforementioned facts.

While I would not have taken on something that was beyond me, I would also not come to the aid of adventurers with evident ill intent. I would, however, intervene in cases where none of those factors were true. Perhaps this was because of my relatively positive alignment in life, and the fact that this was probably the only way I could exhibit my humanity. After all, if I had left someone to die in cold blood in the form I was currently in, would I be any different from a typical monster?

Not offering aid to a person who might lose their life, living for its own desires, keeping an inhuman existence—these lifeforms were what humans referred to as "monsters." This was exactly why I could not leave this adventurer to his fate.

But as previously mentioned, I did not see a need to help each and every single adventurer. In cases like this, where I could easily offer my aid and yet not be exposed to much danger, following my positive alignment in life wouldn't bring about too much trouble—so that's why I did what I had done.

With that being said, however, I now felt that it would have been acceptable for me to have abandoned him to his fate. This was due to the fact that he had decided to stick by my side instead of returning to the surface where it was safe. Maybe it was because he was in awe of my power—or was it for a different reason? While I could not exactly guess his intentions, I could be sure of one thing: this man was very annoying.

I was currently headed to the uncharted area where I had first encountered the Dragon. If he continued to stay with me, he would surely get in the way, and perhaps even endanger his own life if danger reared its head. Frankly speaking, I should be saying something about this, but instead I found myself somewhat at a loss for words—such was the situation I was currently in.

I was not exactly trying to endear myself to other adventurers with my charity—there was no one else here to witness such an act, after all. To make things worse, if I had simply told him to go away on account of him being a bother, he probably wouldn't take me seriously. While I had been attempting to dismiss him from quite a while ago, even using a stronger tone of voice, there appeared to have been little effect. I eventually realized that words alone would not get rid of this man.

"Why… Are you. Following me?"

Deciding that I had had enough, I looked at the man, finally posing my blunt question. With that, however, the noisy chatterbox of a man suddenly sank into an uncharacteristic silence.

"…Because you're strong, yeah?" It was almost as if the words were being forced out of him.

It would seem like I had hit the nail on the head. Not exactly behavior worthy of praise. There was no denying that such a choice was open for adventurers on the weaker side of the spectrum, but I could empathize to some extent.

Most adventurers would choose to leave him behind, though. For starters, this particular labyrinth—the Labyrinth of the Moon's Reflection—hosted monsters that were mainly oriented towards weaker adventurers. In other words, he did not have to follow me to stay alive, as the situation was nowhere near being that dire. In fact, the relative weakness of this labyrinth meant that adventuring with someone else would result in a decrease of one's overall profits. It was a strange thing, indeed.

As if sensing my apprehension, the man offered an explanation, albeit in a tone that suggested his hand was forced: "I really need the money, see. I need three gold coins by the end of this week… If not, they'll take my store and everything in it…!"

Deciding to inquire further, I pressed the man for more de-

tails. It would seem that he was the proprietor of a small restaurant, but said restaurant had fallen on hard times as the years went by. Eventually falling into debt by borrowing money at aggressive rates, the man had fallen into decrepit poverty. The restaurant would be repossessed if he didn't pay an installment of three gold coins, or alternatively, pay off his debt of 50 gold coins by the end of the week. With no ideas on how to quickly earn large amounts of coin, the man had turned to adventuring instead, convinced that it would earn him what he needed.

With so little time, the method was reckless at best. While it was not impossible to earn said amount in such a short time, it would be very, very difficult indeed. After all, even considerably more skilled adventurers would take about five days to earn 50 gold coins. This man, however, lacked such skills—and he himself was aware of this.

And so, this would be the reason why he'd been sticking with me all this time.

"... If. You want to... Do that. You would be... At the New Moon. Not... Here. Right?"

There was one other labyrinth near the town of Maalt—a large-scale labyrinth, commonly referred to as the Labyrinth of the New Moon. Compared to the Moon's Reflection, many different types of monsters inhabited its halls. A skilled adventurer with a higher rank than me, who was Bronze-class, would probably be able to make such earnings there. If, say, a skilled Silver-class adventurer put in some effort in the New Moon, 50 gold coins was not as unrealistic as it sounded.

It mattered little if I allowed him to follow me, or if he was following me of his own will—both posed notable problems. If we came across a stronger monster, he might lose his life in a split second, owing to the fact that he was not very skilled in the first place.

With that in mind, I came to the conclusion that this man was not exactly making the best decisions since the odds were greatly stacked against him. With some concern, I expressed my observations to the man.

"I said I would do it, you know… Earn all that coin. I can't believe I'll have to go back empty-handed…"

It would seem like all the strength and bluster had left his words. Perhaps that was to be expected. A companion who was unskilled was nothing more than a hindrance in a place as unforgiving as the labyrinth, after all. Even if they were to be tasked with carrying items and equipment, they would at least need to have the ability to escape and return to the surface in the event of any emergencies. As such, this man, who could not even escape from a Slime, was hardly suited for adventuring.

I, too, made such a judgment of him: he was of no use to me.

"… I'm… Sorry. But… I am. Busy. I don't… Have time. To play around… With… You."

Although I would have entertained him if I had the capacity, I already had enough problems of my own currently. While I was much stronger than I was in life, I was probably still only in the upper Bronze-class regions in terms of strength and capability. To expect me to earn 50 gold coins in this state—

Impossible.

While adventurers did receive a considerable sum for their rewards, said sum scaled with their rank, so lower-ranked adventurers did not exactly get paid extravagant amounts. Unless some special circumstance or windfall were to transpire, low-ranked adventurers could not even begin to hope for that amount of coin.

Special circumstances…

Come to think of it, I actually did have something in mind—as a matter of fact, that was why I was here in the first place.

I was not referring to me having become an undead. Maybe one would be paid 50 gold coins for tipping me off to the guild, but that would bring about all sorts of trouble for me. The special circumstance in question was not me becoming an undead, but the place in which I had become one.

Yes—I had discovered a previously uncharted area of the labyrinth.

This was valuable information, and the guild would surely pay a great sum to anyone who provided them with it. But there was no guarantee that this great sum would be 50 gold coins. However, I suppose having a positive expectation in mind was not exactly a bad thing. Honestly speaking, I would have greatly preferred to report this myself, but that would prove to be quite difficult given my current physical form.

As such, I had to depend on someone else to deliver this information—of course, I originally intended to ask Lorraine for help either way. There probably wouldn't be much harm in me asking this man for help.

In that case, though, the discovery of the uncharted section would be attributed to this man. If it was revealed that I had known about it earlier but did not report this information to the guild, there would surely be many inconvenient questions I would have to answer. I was already in enough trouble as-is, so somehow attracting more trouble was the last thing I wanted to do. In addition, a normal-looking person providing this information would probably be more readily believed by the guild—I did, after all, look somewhat suspicious.

Perhaps it was not such a bad thing, given that this was for the benefit of adventurers who would eventually chance upon this uncharted sector. Although my being unable to receive a reward

was a pity, I would probably earn back 50 gold coins over a reasonable period of time. Of course, that had been impossible for me in life, but in my current form, it did not seem all that impossible anymore.

This is the conclusion I came to.

This was why I found it acceptable to give up on the riches before me—it was for the best.

With that conclusion in mind, I turned to the dejected man, informing him of the good news. "I... Guess. You can... Come along. After all. You... Can. Carry my... Things. Right?"

"Eh...?" The man, considerably surprised, quickly followed behind me.

"H-hey! Wait! Are you sure? I can follow you?"

"Y... Yes."

The man had an expression of disbelief—perhaps he did not think it possible that I would allow such a thing.

While he seemed to be driven to begging out of necessity, it would seem like he was not a bad person at heart. Of course, he could be lying and all of this could be some sort of scheme, but I would cross that bridge when I came to it. But with that being said, I was not exactly doing this out of the kindness of my heart—this was yet another action I was undertaking as proof of my humanity.

As to why that was necessary... Ever since becoming a Ghoul, I had found myself occasionally filled with a deep sense of unease. I was unsure of how to describe it—a strange feeling from time to time, perhaps. This was why I had decided to help as many people as possible. Perhaps then I would not forget about who I really was, when all was said and done.

If I did end up losing my sense of self, everything would end then and there. I could not accept that—I could not accept it at all.

With those thoughts in mind, I set off for the location where I had last met the Dragon. Following closely behind me was my new luggage carrier, a look of apprehension on his face. Did I have a similar expression on mine, as well, in the past?

For one reason or another, those memories now felt far, far away—I could not recall them even if I tried. Come to think of it, not much time had passed, and yet I was forgetting so many things.

But this was a feeling I still knew—that of impending disaster.

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"Hey... That's a dead end, right?" the man said, checking his map as he did so.

The map he carried was, of course, a commonly published version sold in the town of Maalt. Maps of labyrinths varied greatly in price, so depending on various factors, a map could cost a small fortune. For example, factors such as the overall difficulty of the labyrinth and the number of floors contained within could easily impact its value. Plus, maps that included information on specific characteristics of a labyrinth, in addition to details of the monsters that lived in certain areas, often came at a premium.

Some maps could go into even deeper detail, with monster repop locations clearly marked, even including tips and other pieces of valuable information from adventurers who had been to those areas. The extreme end of the spectrum would include maps made by dedicated cartographers and other hobbyists, who released increasingly detailed maps to outdo the competition. Past a certain point, though, excessive details become somewhat meaningless. All in all, the more detailed a map was, the higher

its price tag. Such a map would be, without a doubt, very useful indeed.

With that being said, the map that the man currently held was a standard, off-the-counter product. While it held details on floors that had already been traversed, it held little, if any, information on other salient points. In other words, it was just a map, and a simple one at that.

Due to that, it would seem like the map he was holding declared my current direction a dead end. Of course, even I knew that, if only because I was holding the same map myself.

There were differences between the two maps, however—more specifically, mine was filled with notes and markings of all kinds. I could even go out on a limb and say that my map had mutated into something else altogether. My past decade of experience was not simply for show, after all. If anything, I probably held the most detailed map of the Moon's Reflection in the entire town of Maalt. Although I could probably sell the map for a pretty sum of coin, I had every intent of monopolizing this information—I wasn't about to up and teach it to just any- and everyone.

It was on this very map that I had marked a new, previously undiscovered passageway mere days ago. Of course, that was the area in which the Dragon had appeared.

"...Just... Get. Over here."

Although the man did not seem convinced at all, he had no choice but to move as I had instructed him to, giving in to my request in the end.

It had become obvious to me as I walked with him that this man had little in the way of combat prowess. Although he was equipped with an average sword that could no doubt do good work, the man himself did not appear to have the skills to use it. If anything, leaving my side in this situation would be extremely

dangerous—but it would seem like the man did not have a good sense of danger, either.

Without saying much else to the man, I turned, continuing to advance down the halls of the Moon's Reflection.

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"...W-what is this? What? But it's not on the map!"

Evidently stunned, that was what the man could manage to stammer out as we emerged on the other side of the passageway.

I already knew what the man had to say—I mean, I had felt the same way when I had first discovered the place. In fact, so taken was I by the discovery, I had simply walked straight into the place, unaware of the dangers that lay ahead.

Indeed, it was a very dangerous and foolish thing to do. Under normal circumstances, one would retreat back to Maalt and search for an adequate partner before continuing to explore this unknown area.

Although I was a veteran adventurer, I had an excuse as to why I had acted differently: if one did not chart the area posthaste, there was a chance that some other adventurer could deliver a report before them. This was the very reason why I had panicked and walked deep into the uncharted sector back then.

Thinking back on it, though, I realized that few individuals, if any, would even visit this specific location to begin with since it was marked as a dead end. In reality, I had arrived at this location while cornering and hunting monsters, so maybe it wasn't too big a stretch to say that no one would visit this location on the map.

Plus, I usually adventured alone.

In other words, I didn't exactly have anyone to drag along with

me to this newfound discovery. Lorraine was an option, of course, but she was first and foremost a scholar. I had taught her the basics (and much more) of adventuring, so that, combined with her proficient skill in magic, made her more than capable as a Silver-class adventurer. Her actual field experience in adventuring, however, was still relatively low. Perhaps it was fitting for a scholar, as Lorraine commonly left the gathering of ingredients and other tasks to me.

As of late, it would seem like Lorraine's research had entered a new, intense stage, with her becoming busier and busier. She had become so busy to the point where she hardly asked for my services. The last factor in all this was most likely due to a bad decision made by me—I had, quite assuredly, assumed that it would be impossible for a large monster to exist at the end of a relatively normal-sized passageway. This was why I had entered alone.

Strong monsters and their ilk commonly gave off a great aura; if one concentrated, one could easily detect it. Although high-class monsters and the like may have skills to conceal their aura, the Moon's Reflection was not known for stronger monsters to begin with. Even if a special monster of sorts lay in wait for me, I was confident I would have the ability to do something about it. Of course, by that, I did not mean engage with it in combat, but to instead ready a proper plan and route of escape.

With that being said, I had no idea what to expect. I was simply working with the assumption that the chance of such a powerful monster appearing in the relatively more forgiving Moon's Reflection was somewhat low. One could hardly be considered an adventurer in good capacity if one remained constantly worried of the unknown. But to be fair, I didn't exactly give the matter much thought at the time, resulting in my encounter with the Dragon.

Thinking back on it, perhaps there really wasn't much I could have done. In addition to the Dragon not giving off an aura of any kind, my body had refused to move when I attempted to run. It

wasn't exactly an opponent that could be beaten by numbers or simple strategy—even though I was somewhat careful, I had met with it, and that was the end.

Reflecting on the past did me little good—I simply did not have any good information to work with at the time.

I turned my attention back to the present, and to my current foray of returning to the same spot, but I did not feel that anything was amiss here. I couldn't feel the Dragon's presence in any shape or form.

Although it could easily appear suddenly as it had in the past, there was nothing I could do about such a possibility. Part of adventuring was learning how to take risks, after all. If something like that really did happen, I could use the man behind me as bait and escape. It would be extremely immoral, yes, but my hand would be forced in such a situation.

Thinking about it logically, if the Dragon had two targets, one of them could possibly make it out alive. Even though the man in question would receive the money he needed if we were successful in our expedition, he had come all this way without knowing anything of the risks involved. I tried to convince myself that this was acceptable, but ultimately failed to do so. This was a terrible thing to do. But there was nothing much to be done about it now.

"...Let me. Walk... Ahead."

At the very least, the man had not rushed off on his own. If he stayed behind me, his chances of survival would at least increase somewhat. If a Dragon had appeared before him like it did during my previous exploration of the sector, it would all be over. With me walking ahead, he would probably have some distance to work with.

I advanced along the path, creeping along at an overly cautious and slow pace. The passageway was not very different from

the ones that we had been walking along all this time. It appeared to be populated by the likes of Skeletons, Goblins, and Slimes—none of which gave me much trouble.

Though the man had tried to assist me in combat, it was clear that he lacked any sort of skill in that department. I suppose people truly did make impulse decisions out of curiosity or necessity. Maybe he could have trained to become an adequately skilled adventurer in time, but this man's time was up in a few days. Even I could not train him up in such a short amount of time. The man should give up adventuring—and that would settle it.

However, with his shocking lack of skill, the guild would probably not be so willing to believe that he had discovered and charted an unknown sector. As such, I decided to impart unto him some basic skills, as well as knowledge on escaping from monsters. If he knew that much, the possibility of him reaching this area would not be too far-fetched; it would at least be somewhat possible. This was a relatively lower-leveled labyrinth in the first place.

Continuing to progress down the path, we reached it at last—an open, cavernous space, stretching out from beyond the end of the passageway.

The place where I had met the Dragon, and the very same place in which I had turned into a Skeleton.

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"A dead…end? Seriously?"

Breaking away from my slow but cautious advance, the man left me behind, walking into the middle of the cavern. After looking around at his surroundings from the middle of the chamber, that was apparently all the man had to say.

It was as he said: the cavern really did appear to be a dead end

of sorts. A disappointing discovery, if nothing else—to think that, after all this time, this previously undiscovered sector had nothing to show for its mystique other than an empty chamber.

Perhaps it was typical for a human being to feel like there should be something at the end of the tunnel—maybe a treasure of sorts, or even a monster of some kind. In many ways, though, it was safe to assume that whatever had been here at some point in the past was now gone.

Basically, that would be none other than the Dragon I had encountered.

If that were indeed the case, then all that was left here would certainly be nothing more than a large, empty space. It was somewhat...lonely.

The man circled the chamber, as if to check for a forgotten detail or something. As if on cue, his voice soon rang across the chamber.

"...Hey! There's a gap here!" the man said, with newfound vigor.

Deciding to affirm his discovery, I walked forward, pausing to inspect said gap. Sure enough, a hole was present, in addition to a small but constant breeze steadily streaming out of the dark crevice. It seemed that his discovery was sound, as something appeared to lie beyond this hole in the wall.

With that in mind, I placed my hands on the cold, damp walls, feeling for any suspicious mechanisms. It did not take me long to find something fitting that exact description—a depression of sorts, which I immediately pressed down upon. With an audible click, part of the wall slowly slid up, exposing a new path.

"A... Hidden. Pass... Passage."

“Oh… Yeah, seems like it. Really, though? Wow… If you report this uncharted path and hidden passageway to the guild… Wouldn’t you be rewarded pretty generously?”

The possibility was undeniable. Thinking that I had solved the man’s debt problems, as well, I turned to face him, only to find him nervously shaking his head.

“No, no! Of course, I understand that you found it first! I’m just following you, and I can’t fight any monsters, after all. I won’t say anything, not a thing at all, about how we found it together…” Still shaking his head, the man continued his self-deprecating monologue.

I had assumed that the man would at least ask for a small cut of the profits, having come all this way with me. So it was somewhat unexpected for him to say that. Although a large sum of gold would indeed be useful to me, I couldn’t exactly spend it anywhere I wanted, especially given my current appearance. But it wouldn’t be a bad thing if I were to simply earn a large sum here and now, slowly spending it as the days passed.

Perhaps I was being a little too charitable; but then again, it was impossible for me to report my findings to the guild.

“I… Have no… Interest. In the… Reward. Better… For. You to… Take the. Reward. More… Importantly.”

The path stretched on, leading into the darkness. I found myself more drawn to what lay beyond this hidden door, and I set foot through it, not stopping for a second to hear the man’s response to my statement.

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The hallways beyond the hidden doorway did not differ much from the typical scenery of the Moon’s Reflection.

While the strength of its monstrous inhabitants increased, they were hardly noteworthy, being Slime subspecies and the like. Specifically, they were called Poison Slimes. In addition, some Soldier Skeletons were wandering about, their bony appendages equipped with cheap-looking swords and battered equipment. Although I wasn't at a level where I could ignore them altogether, they were opponents I could safely fight and defeat, as they were by no means challenging.

This particular passageway quickly proved to be shorter than the previous one, and we soon found ourselves in yet another open space. Somewhat concerned about the Dragon's reappearance, I advanced slowly and carefully, but apparently my concern didn't amount to much.

The chamber, while not exactly empty, did not seem to hold anything in its depths—save for one sight. In the middle of the chamber was what appeared to be a magic circle of sorts, made up of various lines and shapes carved into the ground. Yet another rare sighting—but even still, they were common enough for adventurers to know of their existence.

These magic circles commonly functioned as teleportation devices, and they were usually found in the deeper areas of a labyrinth. A party would typically be unable to progress unless they found some way to utilize said magic circle. If anything, there was a possibility that the magic circle here, too, was one such device, but this was the first time I had seen one in person.

The man, stepping into the open space, craned his neck, looking around the chamber once more.

"...Really? There's nothing here, too. Is there another hidden path somewhere?"

The man seemed to have completely failed at noticing the existence of the magic circle in the middle of the chamber.

"...You...?"

Looking down at the circle to give him a hint, the man only looked at me with a puzzled expression, brushing off my hint. As if not understanding my concern, the man merely shook his head, continuing to stand where he did.

"...Something happen?"

That was, apparently, all he had to say.

Judging from his words, it would seem like the man was incapable of perceiving the circle. I didn't know how to put it into words—was it a magic circle that only I could see? If this man could not see it, what about other adventurers?

But of course, I had no way of knowing. It would perhaps be too reckless a thing to simply jump into the magic circle without knowing what it did.

Thinking so, I raised my head, only to see the man approach me, as if to discuss some topic or other. Before I could stop him, the man had placed a single foot into the outer rims of the circle, stepping into the very device I had been attempting to caution him about.

"Ah..."

In the next second, the man was enveloped in a bright light, before promptly disappearing into thin air.

I was immediately filled with a deep sense of regret. I probably should have stepped on the circle before he did, or at least warned him of its existence. Alas, there was not much to be done about it now.

I should instead be thinking about the next step—

What should I do?

There was a silver lining, though—with the man's disappearance, I understood that the magic circle was indeed a teleportation device of sorts. He was probably unharmed, just whisked away to another part of the labyrinth.

Teleportation circles—magic circles that were created for the express purpose of navigating a labyrinth. It was truly a special type of magic. For example, it was not uncommon to find circles on the fifth and tenth floors of a large labyrinth consisting of dozens of floors. Unfortunately, these circles could not be crafted by the hands of man.

Similar attempts at recreating magic circles were attempted by scholars and the like to little effect—the circles just did not work at all. Research had revealed that the composition and writing used in said circles were completely different than those used by humans, so it was seemingly difficult to gain any sort of useful information from them. While many researchers had tried their hands at replicating this specific sort of magic circle, they had not succeeded to date—and that was just how it was.

In other words, such magic circles were a special feature of the labyrinth. Due to not being a professional of any kind, I couldn't exactly conduct research to discover where it would warp me to.

I had but one option: to step in the circle and see where it would take me.

I did have two choices originally, though—I could simply follow after the man, or I give up and return to Maalt. From a cautious point of view, giving up and returning to town would be the more correct option. After all, if the magic circle had warped me away to some faraway place with no means of return, it would be quite the dire situation indeed.

—But I couldn't just leave him to die.

It was my fault in the first place for not warning him that there

was a magic circle there; even if he could not perceive it, I could. Leaving him to his current fate would leave a bad taste in my mouth. In addition, there wasn't necessarily no way to return from beyond the magic circle.

Thinking of the information that I had gleaned of such circles, I recalled that they usually came in pairs, mainly to enable two-way warping. My unfortunate companion, however, did not have such knowledge. This was a logical assumption considering that he hardly knew anything about adventuring to begin with.

It would be silly to think that he would somehow know how magic circles worked, or what they even were. On top of that, the circle was invisible to him—with all those factors in mind, I concluded that I couldn't expect the man to simply step through the other circle and return to me.

"...Damn... It..." The more I thought about it, the more agitated I became.

I had to make up my mind one way or another. I would be unable to sleep at night, knowing I had abandoned him to die deep inside a labyrinth.

Slowly approaching the magic circle, I stared at its softly pulsing lines for a short while before finally stepping into its confines. As expected, a bright light rose from the depths of the circle, enveloping my entire body and robbing me of my vision. Surely, I would now be flown off to some unknown location—such was the impression I had of magic circles in general.

Although I had stepped into the circle by my own free will, I still remained somewhat apprehensive. But now that I was in the circle, I could no longer turn back. If I stepped out of the circle during the process, something terrible could happen, and I was not eager to find out if my body would be ripped in two. This was why I prayed for the circle to drop me in a safe location—

At this point, that was all I could do.

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It would seem like my expectations and hopes for a safe location were very quickly betrayed. The reason for me saying that was right in front of me—the scenery that lay before my eyes as the wall of light slowly receded.

It was a place with a high stone ceiling, evidently made of hewn stone. It was a large, open space, but still probably a part of the labyrinth. That was my assumption as I looked out at the sight that lay before me. The very walls of the chamber itself seemed to instantly absorb any kind of magic spell thrown at them.

Does the uncharted sector of the Moon's Reflection continue on even deeper past this point...?

While I would have liked to continue pondering on it, I did not have such an option, for there was a much more pressing matter before my eyes.

Standing before me was what appeared to be a monster of gigantic proportions, tall enough to almost touch the ceiling. At its feet was the crumpled form of a man—to be precise, it was the very same man who had been with me earlier. I could see that much from his hairstyle and equipment.

Although I was somewhat far away, it was likely safe to assume that he had taken an attack from the monster head-on, and was now out cold on the ground. His hands and feet seemed to be slightly moving; he *was* alive.

I had to help him. However, a large obstacle stood between me and my companion—the monster in question.

It was a large, but somewhat familiar, sight, at least to me. An

abomination made of bone, living in an eternal pocket of still time, with an equally eternal life that flaunted the divine laws of the land—

It was none other than a Skeleton. More accurately, it was a Giant Skeleton, one that was leagues ahead of its smaller compatriots in terms of power. Its clattering laughter echoed threateningly throughout the chamber, accompanied by ground tremors as it moved its feet forward. One could hardly think it was made of nothing but bone as it shook the very earth it walked upon.

One would usually escape after seeing such a thing in the labyrinth. A Giant Skeleton wasn't just a larger variant of the common Skeleton. Despite it being made of bone, it had absorbed the powers of a Giant at some point in its life, and it was at least two to three times stronger than its common brethren. To make matters worse, its physical strength was proportionately increased, and one would surely be sent flying with only a single blow.

Will I have to do battle with…that?

Even if I had become a little stronger than I was in life, to take on a foe of that level would be a fool's errand.

And yet, with that being said, nothing could change the fact that the collapsed man was still at the Giant Skeleton's feet. If I did not want to leave the man to die, I had no other choice.

Above all else, however, there was an even bigger problem: there were no visible exits from this cavernous chamber. I was familiar with such a space, colloquially referred to as a "boss chamber."

The room's gimmick was simple: all exits were shut off upon entrance. This would remain true until the adventurer in question defeated the master of the chamber. The existence of rooms such as this was a well-known fact amongst most adventurers. But this

room was not a commonly encountered phenomenon at all—

For starters, most boss rooms allowed for some form of retreat, and they did not immediately seal their entrances as soon as adventurers stepped into their bounds. If this were not the case, the mortality rate of adventurers would most likely skyrocket, along with an inevitable decrease in those seeking to be adventurers in the first place. The ability to retreat from a situation was an important ability in and of itself. Adventurers were to slowly hone their abilities, advancing at their own pace, for it benefited no one if they rushed to their deaths.

Self-sealing chambers, however, represented the next tier in the myriad of challenges adventurers had to face. In fact, rumor had it that boss chambers in a labyrinth's uncharted sectors were all self-sealing by nature. Other rumors also spoke of how such chambers increased in frequency after a labyrinth's fortieth floor.

Put simply, self-sealing boss chambers like this represented one of the most daring challenges to adventurers. One would have to stand above all their peers, be they beginners, veterans, or expert adventurers, in addition to clearing at least forty floors worth of labyrinths, before hoping to stand a chance in such a chamber.

With all that being said, I became aware of the fact that I was standing in the middle of one such chamber—I had no choice but to do what needed to be done.

Strengthening my resolve and drawing my sword, I slowly advanced upon the Giant Skeleton. Luck seemed to be on my side, as my appearance had apparently drawn the Skeleton's attention away from its previous victim. The unfortunate man, being nearly unconscious, did not seem to pique the Skeleton's interest any longer. I had to end this quickly and tend to his wounds—

With that thought in mind, I slammed my foot down upon the ground, rushing toward the giant monster. With a burst of speed

I hardly experienced in life, I propelled myself forward, almost immediately reaching the Giant Skeleton's feet. Raising my sword, I brought its blade down on the monster without a shred of hesitation.

However—

Clonk!

With an unpleasant whine, the blade bounced off the monster, hardly leaving a mark. As if on cue, the Skeleton's large hands swung downward in a menacing arc.

Panicking, I immediately retreated, dodging the monster's counterattack—all the while not forgetting to grab the body of my fallen companion, placing some distance between him and the Skeleton. I could not exactly leave him there until the fight ended; if he were stepped on at some point, that would be the end for him.

There was a silver lining to this entire affair, however—while the Giant Skeleton excelled in destructive power, it was no match for my speed. Although I did not know much of its capabilities, owing to the fact that this was the first time I was facing such a monster, I felt a glimmer of hope.

With that hope filling my mind, I left the man in a corner of the room before rushing to face the Giant Skeleton once more.

My speed was sufficient for the task—the main problem I currently faced was actually that of damaging the monster, given the firmness of its bones.

The blow from before, infused with a good chunk of my spirit, was the equivalent of my strongest possible spirit-art attack. The fact that it continued to stand, in addition to not even flinching from my attack, made victory seem like an unlikely prospect.

Under normal circumstances, this would certainly be the end. Even if I were somewhat faster than my opponent, one would automatically lose in a battle of attrition if one had no means of dealing damage to one's foe. As long as I was unable to even scratch the enemy, it would all end with a single blow once I ran out of stamina.

Monsters of the labyrinth were strange, if not mysterious, existences. It is a known fact that monsters in boss chambers would never run out of stamina. Many explanations were offered to describe this phenomenon, from the monster somehow drawing energy directly from the labyrinth, to simply having an infinite reserve of power in its body. While it was not known which of these theories were true, the experiences of adventurers across the ages had all but proven its veracity. As such, waiting for a boss chamber monster to run out of stamina was a pointless venture. This was why offensive power was required—one had to be able to pierce the monster's defenses, or lose one's life to the labyrinth.

Keeping all that in mind, it would seem like my current situation was utterly hopeless. I, however, was different from the average adventurer, as there was still something else I could do.

Although I was no priest or holy adventurer in service to the church, I had a reserve of divinity in my body. While the Giant Skeleton was indeed a large foe, it was still very much an undead monster, and this made it automatically vulnerable to the cleansing forces of divine purification.

One would wonder why I did not simply utilize my ace in the hole from the start of the engagement; I *did* have my reasons. For one, I hardly used my divinity in combat, and I did not know of its effectiveness. In addition, the issue was compounded by the nature of my weapon—this loaner sword that I had borrowed from Clope, while expertly crafted, was not made for the channeling of divinity. Due to that, I was unsure of how well the blade would hold up if I forced a good amount of divinity through its edge.

I did not have much choice in the face of this situation, however—if I did not act here and now, both the man's life and mine would surely be forfeit. As long as something could be done, I owed it to myself to try it; that was what it meant to be an adventurer.

Adventurers fought and never gave up, right until the very end.

Making up my mind, I injected what divinity I could muster into the sword's blade. The faint golden aura that had enveloped the blade up until a while ago slowly receded, instead replaced by the bright, bluish-white glow of a divine aura.

Upon seeing the sword's new hue, the Giant Skeleton took a step back, as if fearful of what it had just witnessed. Divine purification was the natural enemy of all undead; with it being a life form that went against the natural laws of life and death, it was perhaps not strange for the Skeleton to show fear in response to my blade's aura.

While it was a mystery as to why I, a Ghoul, was unharmed by the divinity that dwelled within me, the fact that I had become a Skeleton was equally mysterious and unexplained. Wondering about it now would do me little good—for now, I was simply grateful for the fact that such an ability was available to me.

Readying my sword once more, I charged toward the Skeleton again, my feet pounding against the ground of the labyrinth. Infusing my legs with the power of spirit, I hurled myself forward, closing the large distance between the Giant Skeleton and myself in a matter of seconds.

The Skeleton, for its part, soon tracked me to my new location—but it was far too late. Raising my blade over my head, I brought it down upon the thick, tree trunk-like leg bone of the Skeleton.

It was a clean blow—the Skeleton's bones seemed to melt as it came into contact with my blade, before cleanly disconnecting from the rest of its body altogether. Losing one of its feet to my attack, the Giant Skeleton fell down on its back, no longer able to balance with only one functional leg. Not willing to let the opportunity slip, I immediately readied my sword and rushed toward the fallen Giant Skeleton's head.

Tightening my grip, I swung my sword once more, finally bringing its blessed edge down onto the monster's skeletal head. With a resounding crack, the blade cut through and cleansed corrupted bone, shattering its skull completely.

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I felt a familiar sense of power course through my body. This power was unmistakably that of the Giant Skeleton, the very same one that I had defeated moments ago. The rush of energy was more intense than any I had felt up until now, which was proof that it had truly been a formidable foe.

With that being said, however, one had to be at least Silver-class or above to defeat such a foe. Yet even so... I had somehow triumphed.

I looked down upon the Giant Skeleton's scattered bones, which had lost their undead traits after I had shattered its head. I sighed in relief. Of course, this was only a manner of speech—as I did not, after all, have functional lungs to breathe with. It was more about the mood.

Unlike the earlier, skeletal version of myself, I could feel the existence of such organs in my chest. Unfortunately they weren—t functional unlike those of the living. While I could breathe, I did not feel like I was taking in air. But I could feel myself breathing as I swung my weapon, or when I was executing certain complex movements.

Perhaps it was merely a force of habit—having known the basics of combat breathing in life, little could be done about my tendencies in death. It was said that certain experts could read and predict the movements of a person simply by observing their breathing. If I were to become a Mithril-class adventurer, I could not lose to such an individual.

With that in mind, I resolved to eventually do something about the breathing methods I had learned in life. But at the moment, I was reminded of a more important thing to tend to: the man I had left in the chamber's corner.

He could have been injured before my encounter with the Giant Skeleton, and could have possibly been wounded this entire time. If I did not administer aid soon, he could very well lose his life. He was still drawing breath then, but what about now? I did take quite some time to defeat the Giant Skeleton.

With that in mind, I approached the man and inspected his wounds. It would seem that luck was on his side, as his wounds seemed shallow. Upon closer inspection, however, I discovered that this wasn't the case. His injuries, while not easily visible, were still problematic—namely, a broken part of the rib near his sternum, in addition to some crushed bones in one of his feet. If I had left him here, he would have surely passed on due to the severity of his injuries.

But luckily for him, I was here. While I could not use any directed, curative magics, I had a reserve of divinity within me.

Though magic did need to be studied in earnest, with the user understanding the logic behind it in order to cast spells, such was not the case with divinity. Many individuals instead used divinity simply as it was, almost instinctively. In fact, this was the reason why even someone like me, who was by no means a priest of any kind, was able to purify water immediately after being blessed. The only problem was the lack of a teacher, as I had mostly learned by trial and error.

This man was fortunate indeed; my reserves of divinity had only increased following my transformation into a Ghoul. In addition, I felt more recharged than ever due to the surge of energy flowing into me from the Giant Skeleton I had defeated.

I could feel my body growing stronger—the fonts of mana, spirit, and divinity all seemed to intensify within my being. Each of them were markedly stronger than before due to the Giant Skeleton's defeat—at least, it felt that way to me. If my observations were indeed true, I should be able to do much more than just purify water; I might be able to heal this man's wounds right here and now.

It was perhaps worth noting that healing wounds with one's divinity was usually in the territory of priests and the like, and were commonly treated as divine miracles. In fact, such a skill was not exactly common even amongst those who worked for the church. It was also said that the amount of divinity and aptitude one had was directly proportionate to one's faith. Basically, if one was unable to use such techniques, it would simply mean that one was short on faith.

Due to this series of assumptions, members of the church who were capable of curative feats, as well as those wielding great fonts of divinity, were often worshiped as Saints and were greatly revered in the eyes of the public.

From that point of view, though, the fact that I could use divinity in and of itself was a little strange. The reason for this was pretty cut and dry: I was not exactly a man of great faith. For one thing, the reason I had been blessed with divinity in the first place seemed little more than coincidence. Although I was deeply grateful for it, I couldn't exactly say I religiously worshiped the spirits or faeries responsible for my powers.

This was why I found my continuously increasing font of divinity strange. No matter how hard I thought about it, I could not come up with a reason for it. I supposed that was fine, since it

wasn't exactly a bad thing.

To be clear, the usage of divinity to purify and cleanse undead such as myself was not a good thing for me at all—but my continuous use of divinity did not seem to have hurt me in any way. If there was no problem with it, then that was that. Such was my adventurer's reasoning at work.

With that out of the way, I supposed I should start treating the man. While I had not done anything remotely similar to this before, I could at least try.

Honestly speaking, though, this amounted to the first time I would attempt anything like this in my life, so I had severe doubts about succeeding. I was operating on gut feeling alone—I *felt* that it would go smoothly, although I did not have any sort of empirical evidence to back up my claim.

For a while, I stopped and wondered: was it really all right to work on a severely injured man off of gut feeling alone? I did, however, also feel like it wasn't too different from purifying dirty water. Perhaps they were similar in principle…

Either way, I had to do something about the situation. Placing my hands on the afflicted parts of the man's body, I concentrated, directing the well of divinity within me into my palms, as if I were enchanting my sword with its aura.

As expected, a blue-white glow enveloped my hands. While it might have been a better idea to remove my gloves, I would be asked many troublesome questions should the man awaken halfway through his treatment. As such, I decided to err on the side of caution, keeping my gloves on. If the gloves were really posing that much of a problem, I would cross that bridge when I came to it.

Fortunately, though, it seemed like my divine aura cared little for my gloves—the bruised reddish-black surface of his skin

slowly reverted to a more natural color as the divinity did its work. Slowly but surely, the man's bones began healing, with previously broken pieces moving back into their rightful positions.

Although I had no idea as to how long it would take to fully heal the man's injured sternum, I eventually stopped, judging the treatment to be complete. I did, after all, have another injury to tend to; with that in mind, I moved my hands to his crushed foot. Upon activating my divine aura, the man's skin and bones began to heal at once, much like my previous observations. Finally, the last broken bone seemed to snap back into place, and the man's foot now looked as good as new.

But is he fully healed?

While I was responsible for his recovery, I did not know for certain if I had done a thorough enough job. At the very least, he looked much better than he had a short while ago. Even if he wasn't fully recovered, I was sure it wouldn't be a huge problem. He would most likely recover after some rest.

The contrast was somewhat jarring, though—he had been at death's door mere moments prior, but now he seemed healthy enough to make it back to Maalt if I just left him alone. All things considered, he did break several bones; it would be bad if complications of some sort arose should he make any sudden movements.

In the end, I decided to watch over him until he regained consciousness. After all, I should at least check to see if he was hurt anywhere else before returning to Maalt. Keeping that in mind, I sat down and waited.

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"...Ugh. Where...am I?"

Although I had shaken him gently in many attempts to wake

him earlier, my efforts were in vain. Resigning myself to a long wait, I quietly listened for sounds in my surroundings—it was then that I heard the man speak. It would seem like he had finally woken up.

Standing up, I slowly approached the man.

"...Are. You... Awake?"

"Yeah..." The man simply nodded. "Where is...this? ...Right, that's right! That huge Skeleton was—ugh!"

Holding his stomach in pain, the man's eyes shot wide open. It would seem like my treatment was, indeed, somewhat incomplete. As such, I did what I could in the moment—I had hardly expected him to make a complete recovery from my emergency measures alone. I suppose a trip to the Sanitarium was due. He should, at the very least, get treated by actual healers.

My response to him was equally simple: "...I... Defeated. The monster... This. Is the... Proof."

With that, I held out my hand, showing him the glistening magic crystal in my gloved palm. I had discovered this crystal amidst the remains of the Giant Skeleton.

The process, however, was by no means short, as I had to dig through a small mountain of debris and bone parts. But then again, I had plenty of time on my hands, and I eventually managed to locate the crystal after a concentrated effort. Perhaps its large size made it somewhat easier for me to locate...

The man could only stare at the crystal with a dumbfounded expression.

"...From its size alone... That's a Gold-class magic crystal, isn't it? I don't know much about these things, but it's sure worth a lot of money..."

Though one would easily come to such a conclusion looking at the crystal alone, I had my doubts about the claim. Personally, I hadn't thought defeating a Gold-class opponent was even possible for one such as myself. If anything, this could have been a stroke of luck, and the crystal would in turn be a relatively rare item from this type of monster.

This sort of thing happened occasionally, where monsters that had lived for a relatively long time usually housed higher-valued magic crystals within their bodies. The Giant Skeleton I had fought had probably guarded this chamber for a long, long time, hence my discovery of such a crystal from its remains.

In any case, it was definitely a crystal that would sell for a decent amount of money.

The man started speaking once more, his eyes fixated upon the crystal in my hand.

"...If I had a magic crystal like that... Ah, no. Never mind..."

Stopping himself mid-sentence, the man looked away, as if to avert his eyes. It did not take a scholar to understand the meaning behind his words—

This crystal could probably sell for more than 50 gold coins. In other words, it would be the man's salvation as it would immediately clear him of all his debts.

The man, however, did not ask for the crystal, or beg for it in any way. I supposed my deductions were not too far off the mark based on that.

This was why I said to the man: "...If. You... Want it. You... Can. Have it."

As with all things, however, it would come with a suitable price.

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"...Are you serious? Really? But you're the one who defeated that monster... I can't simply take it from you..." the man said, but the desperation in his eyes was plain for all to see.

Shaking my head, I continued my statement: "...I am... Not. Giving it... Away. For... Free."

With that, the man seemed somewhat more convinced.

"But... I've already told you about my circumstances, no? I don't think I can do anything for a strong adventurer like you..."

It was just as the man said. If I had to make an honest appraisal about my power, I could say with confidence that I was far stronger than I had been in life. Perhaps this wasn't an unreasonable assumption coming from someone like him, who wasn't an adventurer in any shape or form. He would naturally assume that he could not be of any assistance to me.

What he had said did hold true in some aspects; he was debt-ridden, and his skills as an adventurer were almost nonexistent. The man probably assumed that he could not assist me in any way, be it financially, economically, or physically—

However, that was only from the man's point of view. To me, this man held more value than he gave himself credit for. I was an undead, after all. I could not simply waltz around the streets of Maalt. It was difficult, if not impossible, for me to visit the shops in Maalt. Even if I were to employ a middle-man of some kind, it would be difficult to find such an individual to begin with.

What I'm getting at here is that this man could very well be the perfect middleman and errand runner I had been looking for all this time.

There was just one problem: even if I described my situation

to him in detail, it didn't seem like my words would be so easily believed. If I just told him that I was an undead, he could simply report me to the authorities whenever he pleased. Even if he didn't do anything of the sort, he might become apprehensive toward the idea of assisting a non-human.

This was why I decided I would skimp on the details—all I had to do was convince him to assist me.

"It isn't... Anything. Too... Difficult."

"Well, what is it, then...?"

"As... You can. See... I look. Like... This. I can't... Really. Go into... Shops or... The. Guild. All you... Have to... Do. Is go... In my. Place."

Saying so, I took my glove off, showing the man my hand. I had assumed this was a relatively safe gamble, so long as he didn't see my body or face.

In addition, I didn't exactly lose my arm—it was merely dried up. This sort of thing occasionally happened to adventurers, especially veterans, who had seen a fair amount of combat in their time.

This particular man, though, was newer than the lowest Iron-class adventurer. Judging by his reaction to my combat ability, he was clearly not familiar with the dangers of adventuring.

The man, however, did not seem to avert his eyes or suspect that I was a monster in the slightest. Instead, he seemed somewhat convinced that my dried-up arm was just an old injury. Relieved that I had easily won the man over, I continued speaking.

"A monster... I fought. A long... Time. Ago. Got me... Good. My... Voice. Too. Injury... From... That time."

"...I see. I suppose strong adventurers do face such great

risks…”

Apparently the man had become an adventurer without putting much thought into the dangers of the job. It was probably more accurate to say that he did not have the luxury of thinking about such affairs. But the sight of my arm seemed to have awoken him to his folly.

After spending some time quietly in thought, the man finally spoke.

“I understand. If it’s just that much, even I can do it, yeah. But…is that really all right? It’s a little strange for me to say it… but this deal is heavily in my favor…”

“Those… Are. Your… Circumstances. Aren’t… They? But… Yes. I see… What you. Mean. How about… This. Then…”

The man, upon seeing that I had another condition to add on to the offer, seemed like he was able to make more sense of the general situation.

Ironically, me making the deal less sweet seemed to put him more at ease. The words I was about to say would truly betray the man’s expectations, however.

“Then… When your… Debts. Are all… Paid off. I want… To be able. To eat… And drink… At. Your shop… For free. For… As long… As I… Live. How’s… That.”

As if not believing what he had just heard, the man put a single hand to his head, a bitter smile slowly forming on his face.

“…Are… Are you serious? Are you…stupid or…something?”

“Why… Do you. Ask?”

“I’m saying—! I’m saying something like that can’t even *begin* to pay off a magic crystal worth more than 50 gold coins! You get

it, yeah?!"

"So... Is... That. A bad thing...?"

"I'm not saying it's bad...! ...Ugh! Eat however much you like... I'll... I'll work hard...so my shop doesn't ever go under again...! I'll work like I've never worked before! Thank you so much... Boss...!"

With that, a smile finally broke out across the man's face. His eyes, however, were red, with large beads of tears flowing rapidly down his face. Upon seeing his reaction, I couldn't help but feel like I had done some sort of good deed.

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With the problems of finding a cooperative human and the man's debt both being settled by the giant magic crystal, I decided to ask for his opinion on what to do from here on out. With that said, however, I already had a clear-cut answer in mind:

We had to relocate. Specifically, we had to leave the confines of the Moon's Reflection and head back to Maalt. The man did, after all, get what he came for, and there was no longer any reason to expose him to danger. Even I couldn't help but feel like it would be troublesome to have him continue exploring the labyrinth with me.

Although the Moon's Reflection was primarily inhabited by normal monsters such as Goblins, Skeletons, and Slimes, the occasional exception did exist, as demonstrated by previous events. If another Giant Skeleton appeared, I wouldn't be able to guarantee the man's safety, let alone his life. This was the reason for my suggestion that we should return to Maalt. The man, with no reason to disagree, quickly followed after my footsteps.

While there were certainly concerns as to how we would return, I had already solved that problem as the man slept. A magic

circle had appeared after the Giant Skeleton was defeated; there was no such thing there before. Although I did not test the circle to see where it went, I felt like it was reasonable to assume that it simply brought us back to the room that had sent us into this chamber. Even if that were not the case, all we had to do was search for another way out—the chamber's lack of exits meant that we had little choice either way.

Stepping into the circle, we were transported back into the room from whence we came, much to my relief. After that, the way back was relatively uneventful. This was probably because the man was now considerably different, as his strength, courage, and nerves all seemed more tempered.

Perhaps it was due to us having witnessed the Giant Skeleton, or me teaching him the basics of adventuring, but the man now remained calm even if a monster did appear. He also held a more concrete understanding of what he should do in such a situation. Although he could not win against a monster in a one-to-one fight just yet, he had advanced to a stage where he could put some distance between himself and a monster and quickly look for an escape opportunity. If he continued gaining experience at this rate, he would no doubt progress to at least Bronze-class in two years or so. Thankfully, such was not necessary for the man.

I did, however, consider it somewhat necessary for him to at least understand the basics of combat, considering that he would be running errands and turning in assignments at the guild on my behalf from now on. Assignments of a certain difficulty still had to be turned in by Lorraine, though, but nonetheless the man had to at least look like he was capable of exploring the shallower floors of the labyrinth or forest on his own power. It was a reasonable expectation.

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"…Haa… We're finally out of there. Seems like forever since I've breathed in the outside air… It feels nostalgic, even though I

haven't been away for long," the man said as he took a deep breath, stepping away from and out of the labyrinth's entrance.

It was not too difficult to empathize—he had been in a near-death situation, after all, and could finally afford to relax after leaving such a dangerous place behind.

However, even outside the labyrinth, monsters still lurked in its surroundings. Although one was not supposed to let one's guard down even after exiting the labyrinth's halls, I decided to let that slip today. But I did tease the man for his carelessness.

"Maybe... I should. Continue... Exploring... Until we are... Back. In Maalt..." With that, I turned and quickly walked away, the man's alarmed voice trailing behind me.

"Hey, wait up, Boss—I get it, I get it!"

The man's voice reminded me of how it felt to be an adventurer, and for the first time in a long while, I smiled. More accurately, I attempted to smile, but the dried-up skin on my face could not hope to emulate such a human expression. I wished to one day smile like a human again, but was that even possible?

With that in mind, I headed off for a nearby rest spot, where fiacres heading back to Maalt would often stop.

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"Here it is, Boss... This is my shop. What do you think? Not too shabby, yeah?"

Upon returning to Maalt, the man promptly led me back to his store. It was located in a strange corner of the city, and to be honest, I had not seen such a shop in my ten years of living in Maalt.

Maalt was pretty large for a rural town. The presence of two labyrinths nearby meant that there were more than enough watering holes for the town's adventurers—as such, it wasn't too

rare to not know of certain establishments outside of one's social circles.

It was worth noting, however, that the man's shop was, per his words, not too shabby at all. It was a somewhat elegant-looking brick building; if anything, its elegant air would seem somewhat intimidating to the average adventurer. It had a unique atmosphere, and perhaps it wouldn't be a bad thing to visit every now and then—that was what I thought as I looked on.

Maybe the food here is terrible...?

I could not come up with any other reason as to why such a respectable-looking establishment would fall on hard times.

Seemingly satisfied, the man pushed the shop's doors open, with me following closely behind him.

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"...Darling! You're safe...!"

The first thing to greet my eyes was the sight of a beautiful woman flinging herself onto the man, almost shouting as she did so. With her backswept amber-brown hair and slim build, she exuded a reliable, hardworking aura.

In all politeness, she was a beauty *and* a gem.

From the way she had addressed the man, however, I could more or less understand their relationship.

It was the man's turn to exclaim loudly next.

"Isabel!! I told you not to worry... See? I'm fine, yeah?"

"But...you went off to the labyrinth... Darling, you can only cook, not explore a dungeon! I've told you so many times not to do something so foolish!"

“Hey, now… I’m a man, yeah? Something like the labyrinth is nothing…… Is what I would have liked to say, but I’m afraid you’re right… To be honest, I was about to get done in by a monster—but I was saved! In fact, the only reason I’m standing here now is because of him! Gotta thank the Boss!”

“Ah…? Oh! Pardon me, I didn’t see that we had a guest… Thank you very much for saving my foolish husband’s life…”

Finally noticing me standing behind her husband, Isabel blushed and lowered her head deeply as she gave her heartfelt thanks. Beautiful and cute—such was Isabel’s charm that I could hardly understand what she saw in this man. But with that thought, I was not as callous as to simply remark upon something like that out in public.

In response, I slightly nodded at Isabel.

“No… I was… Just. Passing… By. Don’t… Worry. About it.”

Isabel seemed somewhat curious at my odd manner of speech, but the man quickly offered an explanation in my stead.

“See here, Isabel, the Boss is a really strong adventurer, but he’s got plenty of injuries from fighting monsters. He’s not very good at talking, but he’s really a good guy! He helped me out and —oh, that’s right! He gave me this magic crystal, too!”

At that, the man reached into his pocket, holding out the large magic crystal that I had fished from the remains of the Giant Skeleton. Isabel’s eyes opened wide at the magic crystal’s gleam.

“This… This… Eh…? What’s going on? How did you get something like this…”

“The Boss here… Well, I explained our situation to him, see, and he gave me this to help out…”

While the man wanted to go into an in-depth explanation, Is-

abel cut him off abruptly, not allowing him to finish.

"No! You can't accept something as expensive as this, Darling! You've caused enough trouble for this nice passer-by already! He even saved your life! You can't just take something like this from him...!"

Isabel's voice rang out through the entire establishment. Though she did seem agitated, it did not seem like it was out of distaste for being in my debt—rather, she seemed genuinely concerned that her husband had inconvenienced me in some way.

I should probably reiterate the fact that the crystal was not given for free. Thinking so, I pointedly stared at the man, hoping that he would continue his explanation.

"Isabel, listen... This isn't charity, yeah? Well, it *is* a good deal for me... But I'm going to work for the Boss from now on! In return, he gave me this to help with the situation... I did also promise him that he could eat here for free, so there's that, too..."

"...Are you going to do something dangerous again?"

"No, no, it's nothing like that... Right, Boss?" Turning to me for reassurance, I could not help but notice that the man did not seem very confident in his own statement.

I, however, simply nodded.

"See? It's nothing dangerous, just simple things, yeah? Like going to the guild with materials... Or going to shops..."

"Wouldn't he be able to do something like that by himself...?" Isabel said, utterly unconvinced.

"...I... Look. Like this... After. All. I don't... Really. Want to show... Up. At the... Guild. You... See."

Saying so, I took off my glove, casually showing her a bit of my

arm. Although I had shown the man my entire forearm, I decided to be a little more conservative with his wife, so as not to startle her.

As expected, Isabel swallowed deeply, apparently terrified of what she had just seen. She did seem more convinced than she was moments ago, though.

Lowering her head once more, Isabel offered an apology: “I am deeply sorry for having said such insensitive words… This foolish husband of mine, the fool he is, often gets tricked by scoundrels and the like… It was out of worry that I stopped him. If it is indeed all right with you… Could we, in this case, accept your kindness?”

She was referring to none other than the magic crystal. Having fully understood the current situation, Isabel seemed more ready to accept the gift. Of course, I had no intentions of denying her what I had already promised, so I slowly nodded.

“That was… What I… Said. From… The start. We… Have. A deal… Then.”

At my words, Isabel offered her hand, extending it toward me. “Yes, we are in your debt!”

I was somewhat surprised—she would ask for a handshake after what she had just seen? Did it not terrify her?

Looking at her husband, who seemed to be eagerly nodding, I came to the conclusion that this was just the type of person Isabel was.

With that in mind, I slowly offered my hand in return. “You… Are. Welcome…”

And with that, we shared a firm handshake.



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"You… Know. Come… To think. Of it. I never… Asked. For your… Name."

Even the man himself seemed surprised at my statement as we stood on the road outside his shop.

"You know, now that you mention it… Guess that's true. Since you didn't state your name, Boss, I thought you wouldn't care about mine… I should introduce myself, yeah?

"The name's Loris—Loris Cariello. I'm the proprietor of this eatery, the Red Wyvern Pavilion. What about you, Boss?"

"Isn't… It. Better… For you to… Not know. My name…?"

While that was the excuse I had given Loris, I had other reasons for not wishing to reveal my name. Loris, however, was not convinced at all.

"Why not?! You saved me, yeah? I should at least know your name, Boss! Is that such a bad thing to ask for?"

Loris had apparently seen it fit to throw my words right back at me. I guess I had no other choice.

"I could… Tell. You. But could… You. Promise… Me. One thing?"

"What is it?"

"You… Can't. Tell anyone… Else. My name."

"I don't get why it's such a secret, Boss…but yeah, I get it. I'll only call you 'Boss' from here on out, yeah? Even if someone asks for you by name, I won't say a thing. That good?"

“Yes… That. Is good. Well… Then. My name… Is. Rentt… Rentt… Faina.”

Upon hearing those words, Loris slowly nodded, probably thinking it was somewhat pointless to hide such a plain-sounding name. He did immediately reassure me of his promise, though.

“I get it, Boss. Thank you so much for… Well, pretty much everything, yeah? Come by for a meal anytime. You’re always welcome here.” As promised, Loris did not make any mention of my name.

Nodding, I turned around, and once more walked into the busy streets of Maalt.

CHAPTER 5
Proof Of Inhumanity

Honestly speaking, I found it extremely regrettable that Loris had a family. If he had said he had no family, on top of having no debt, then it would mean that he had lied to me. If that were the case, then it would actually have worked out in my favor—at least, that was what I thought.

The reason for this being that the primal instinct within me had intensified as of late, and it was telling me to do one thing:

Eat a human being.

If I really was to do such a thing...wouldn't a villain of some sort be best? What about a liar? If someone had lied to me, would that be acceptable...?

And yet... Loris was, for all intents and purposes, a good-hearted person. That was why I ultimately couldn't eat him. After all, if I was going to do so, it would have been best for me to not know his name. It was indeed a pity—I had even steeled myself for the act to a certain extent.

Upon noticing that I was having such thoughts, I quickly shook my head, dismissing them.

This is bad.

I continued to shake my head violently, attempting to get those thoughts out of my mind. But it was difficult to think otherwise. I felt as if a heavy curtain had been draped over my mind.

My next destination was Lorraine's house.

How does human flesh taste? Is it delicious? Would its taste spread across the tip of my tongue?

Surely, human blood would be like wine, serving to quench my thirst.

No… No. That's wrong.

That was…not something I should think of. But I could not control my thoughts any longer.

Yes… Lorraine. Lorraine's house. Lorraine's… House…

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The door…opened. Of course.

Lorraine's house. I could enter…freely.

This is my hideout.

Lorraine…had difficulties, at least living in a normal dormitory. This was why she lived in this house, and it was only possible with my help.

She had lived here for about ten years. Although it was from so long ago, the memories were fresh, as if the events just occurred yesterday. We were almost like friends who couldn't get rid of each other. That was how long we had known each…other.

But more importantly…Lorraine was my friend.

Lorraine is forgetful; she seldom locks her door, and today, as usual, her door was unlocked.

No matter how messy she was…it was still a young woman's house. She was too careless. Too careless.

But that's how she is.

That was how her character was. She was messy, and lived just as messily.

She did many things in broad strokes, and probably treated the security of her house in a similar fashion. Maybe she only acted like this because she was strong. That could have been a large part of the reason.

No one would simply attack a Silver-class magician out of nowhere, and Lorraine herself was well aware of that. Even if she was faced with the burliest of hooligans, she would not be in too much danger.

Yes… She knew that. That was why she was careless.

I am…not a danger to Lorraine. Not yet.

Lorraine is strong—strong.

That's why… That is *why.*

Yes… Of course.

Of course Lorraine would be fine… Even if a flesh-starved Ghoul were to enter her house…

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"…Rentt? Is that you? …You're back," a voice greeted me as I entered the house.

From the sound of rustling clothes, I knew. I knew it was her—her logical, but glamorous voice. Sleepy, but not brusque. A gentle, calm voice…

I answered as I usually would.

"...Yes. Yes..."

"I see. You were off exploring in the Moon's Reflection today, weren't you? Was the Dragon there?"

"...No. No..."

Barely keeping up with her banter, I slowly approached Lorraine. As I got closer, I could make out her silhouette—she was sitting on the sofa.

Lorraine.

A heavy-looking book was on her lap, but her eyes, her gentle gaze, looked straight at me.

This strange feeling...

I was a Ghoul, after all. I was not human—I was the enemy of humans...

But then... This woman—

"Rentt...? Is something wrong? You don't seem to have much to say... Are you in shock because the Dragon wasn't there?"

"...No... Nothing... Like. That. I am... Very... Happy..."

I slowly approached Lorraine, until I was a single step away from her. If I reached out, I could touch her; that was the distance I was at.

I stared at Lorraine's face blankly.

Her hair was messy...as usual. Her robes and clothing...put on haphazardly. But...there was a hidden charm to her...

Charm...? What charm...? What...was it?

Lorraine innocently asked me a question: “You’re happy? Why, did something good happen—”

Before she could finish her sentence, Lorraine was in my arms. In…*my* arms.

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“R-Rentt…! What are you…? Are you drunk? But wait…the undead can’t get drunk…”

With a somewhat more flustered voice than usual, Lorraine questioned my actions. Somehow, this only served to bring out even more of her charm.

Her skin, flushed with a red hue and slightly glistening with sweat, gave off a familiar scent—one that distinctly wafted through the dusty air. Feeling dizzier by the second, I latched onto Lorraine’s scent—and consequently, Lorraine herself, holding her tight as I spoke.

“Lo… Rraine. I…”

“Y-yes. What is it, Rentt?”

I wanted to say something—something important. Those thoughts, however, vanished, almost as if someone had gone over them with a paintbrush. Broad strokes of red stained my field of vision. I could no longer think—chaos filled my mind. The only thing I could sense was Lorraine’s…scent. Her scent seemed…

…very delicious indeed.

With that thought, I opened my mouth wide, displacing part of her robe with a free hand to expose her shoulder.

I sank my teeth into her white flesh.

"...?!"

Lorraine did not scream. Instead, she seemed to swallow deeply, pushing her cry of surprise back down into the depths of her throat. Her body was tense; while she shivered considerably from the pain, not a sound escaped her lips. If she screamed, someone would surely hear her—and then someone would come along to investigate.

The town of Maalt was, after all, known for its relatively high public safety standards. If anything did happen, the average passerby was sure to intervene. Perhaps it was specifically because of this that Lorraine did as so—

She endured the pain with all her being.

Her resistance, however, only seemed to enhance the scent drifting forth from her flesh. I bit down further into her shoulder—and with that, the fresh taste of blood filled my mouth, flowing down into my throat.

Ah... What a divine taste.

It was a taste that was foreign to me, as I had tasted nothing like it prior to this. The 20-year-old wine that I had once drank in life greatly paled in comparison—mere swill compared to the delightfully sweet taste of blood.

I wanted more.

More, more...

That one thought filled my mind as I sucked on Lorraine's open wound, drawing sweet blood from her broken veins.

"...Ugh... Ahh... Ren...tt. You..." I heard Lorraine call my name,

but I did not feel like stopping.

Another thought crept into my crimson-stained mind:

If blood tasted this good, what would human flesh taste like…?

It would certainly be a divine, otherworldly taste. It had to be.

I bit down hungrily on Lorraine's shoulder, exerting more force than ever before.

Rrrip

"…Ahh…?!"

I had bitten off a piece of Lorraine's shoulder. There wasn't much of it; I had only torn off a small piece, much like the size of one's little finger. But of course, this taste… It was as I expected.

I chewed down on the piece, relishing it. I could be forever content with this taste. This was all I needed—such was the intensity of its flavor. But there wasn't enough of it. To think that a small piece could bring me such joy…

My joy was unceremoniously interrupted, however. I was thirsty once more—I had no choice but to feel this way.

I turned to face Lorraine once more.

"Rent… Rentt. Are you…still…there?"

Lorraine, however, stared straight at me—into me—even as blood continued flowing from her lacerated shoulder.

Ah…?

Rentt. That was my name.

Was I still here? That was the meaning of her question.

But of course I was still here.

I am here.

So… Give me. More of your… Blood.

For a second, I stopped—before lunging at Lorraine once more. Yet Lorraine nodded at my reaction.

"Seems…like, you're still…in there somewhere. Good. Then… for now, you should… SLEEP!" Suddenly raising her voice, Lorraine lifted her palm, pointing her hand in my direction.

Although I could sense the tendrils of magic gathering in Lorraine's outstretched hand, it was far too late. A magnificent fireball sprung forth, hurtling straight at me. Its force and power was fitting for a Silver-class magician, as the impact sent me flying for a good distance, before finally slamming me into a wall.

Slowly sliding down onto the floor, I felt my consciousness slip away, drifting far into the distance. I could make out Lorraine's silhouette as she approached, in a somewhat haphazard and panicked way. She placed a hand on my cheek.

"…Good, you're alive. You can apologize when you wake up…"

Her tone of voice was markedly different. It was no longer flustered, but instead strict and controlled. I could make out the incantations for a sleeping spell in her words.

My consciousness seemed to slip at an even faster pace. I appeared to hear Lorraine's words whispered softly into my ear right before I fully slipped away.

"…You probably won't remember this, and that's fine. But if you're going to attack me… At least do it when you are in full possession of your faculties. You can take a bite of me anytime,

then…”

Perhaps I was just hearing things—but even with my awareness rapidly fading, I could at least make out that much.

A strange power seemed to course through my body.

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For one reason or another, my body felt very heavy. It was a strange feeling.

Wait—something was amiss. What had I been doing? I was, after all, in the Moon’s Reflection up until a short while ago. We had left the confines of the labyrinth, and visited Loris’s shop. And then…?

When did I fall asleep?

Seemingly triggering a reaction in my mind, that thought jolted me wide awake. A bright light of sorts seemed to invade my eyelids, prying them open.

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“…You’re awake, Rentt.”

What greeted me as I opened my eyes was an oddly familiar sight—the ceiling of Lorraine’s abode. Her voice brought back a stream of memories—a flashback, as one would call it. I slowly recalled the chain of events that led me here.

Organizing my thoughts on the situation to a certain extent, I finally opened my mouth to speak.

“Ah… I…. Apologize. My… Head. Does not feel quite… Right.”

“No, it isn’t much to worry about, though I will accept that apology. More important is how you feel right now. Do you feel…

dominated by some strange force? Do you feel compelled to do anything...unusual?"

I shook my head at Lorraine's question. I mean, nothing seemed to be particularly out of place.

There was one thing: the mild scent of blood in the room did pique my appetite, but it was nothing like the crimson-stained state of desire that I had previously been in.

Moving a hand to her shoulder, Lorraine seemed satisfied by my response.

"Is...that right? Then that's fine... Also, I should say again... Don't let what happened bother you. That was merely an unfortunate accident. With that being said, we should still do something about it... How much do you remember?"

Lorraine held out her hand, interrupting my rapidly offered apologies. Had it not been for her gesture, I would probably be stuck apologizing for a considerable amount of time.

Having known Lorraine for this long, she sometimes seemed to understand what I was thinking without me having to put it into words. While slightly bristling at times, I had now found myself grateful for Lorraine's understanding. After all, I could be myself around Lorraine—and that was why I could accept her words for what they were, and not remain hung up about what had transpired.

Of course, it would be impossible to forget right away, but perhaps it would fade with time. At the very least, I should endeavor to answer Lorraine's questions for now—specifically, how much I remembered before losing consciousness.

What exactly did she mean?

I had lost control of myself while visiting Lorraine; everything

before my eyes faded into a deep crimson, and I had struck out at her. After that... Hmm.

No... It was no good. There were too many strange discrepancies in my memories. It was like a surreal dream—I recalled feeling excitement, as if heavy restraints had been lifted off my being. I did not recall making any logical decisions.

Lorraine nodded as I continued describing what little I could remember.

"Yes, yes. Of course. I thought it would be something like that. You behaved quite differently than you normally would. To begin with, this was perhaps to be expected... It was not too surprising, considering all the factors involved. I had it under control, as well. It is fine."

Finding myself lying down on Lorraine's sofa, I asked her for an explanation of the events that had transpired between now and then. Lorraine, who had been seated next to me the whole time, offered a plain response.

"There isn't much to talk about. When you got home, you suddenly attacked me, and I sent you flying with a spell. I aimed well, you know? Although that probably would not have hit you as you normally were..."

Was that true? Despite her appearances, Lorraine was a skilled individual. Unlike how she was before, she could now easily explore the average labyrinth by her lonesome—I didn't think dodging her magic would be a trivial feat.

Lorraine continued, as if reading my mind: "Well, maybe that would be the case if I were fully prepared for the situation. I was caught unaware and panicked, you know. Under normal circumstances, I would never approach a monster up close. You know I prefer to attack from afar after observing them from a distance. Since you were that close...even magic was difficult. It was a des-

perate move to suddenly compress a large amount of magic into a concentrated blow, you see. And, well…it worked, so I have no complaints."

Despite her words, Lorraine did seem shaken. Although she appeared calm and analytical about the situation, any normal girl would at least be somewhat unsettled when a close friend suddenly turned on them—violently, at that. But Lorraine hid this as best as she could—perhaps out of concern for my well-being.

"…I thought I would make sure—do you feel all right? Any problems anywhere? I wanted to tune down the spell's output, but I don't really have much experience in that field. It was…too sudden. Do you feel any mortal wounds or the like anywhere…?"

If anything, I actually felt somewhat better than usual. Lorraine seemed relieved at my conclusion.

"I see. That's a relief, then. Even so…you still need your rest. You've only just recovered, after all. Take it easy for today. I will… clean up the room—ack!"

Lorraine's room was indeed more of a tragedy than it usually was, with books, furniture, and the like scattered haphazardly across every nook and cranny. Lorraine, however, did not look in the state for any cleaning. Standing up, she held her shoulder tightly, her face scrunched up in pain. I wasn't thickheaded enough not to understand why she was behaving in this way:

It was the wound I had inflicted upon her.

I stood up, supporting her body with my arms.

"…Ugh. Nearly fell over there. Sorry for the trouble, Rentt…" Lorraine quickly attempted to step away, as if eager to stand on her own strength.

"Show… Your wound. To me…"

Saying so, I displaced her robe with my hand. A series of bloodstained bandages greeted me, haphazardly and messily applied, with blood soaking through its layers. It was not a pretty sight. It was evident that Lorraine had not done much for herself —this was rudimentary first aid at best. I demanded to know why Lorraine had not been to a Sanitarium or a place of healing.

"If I show them something like this, they would want to know what caused it... Don't worry about it. I'll cook up a potion or two later. I do have some in stock, but they are marked for sale to the nearby apothecary...so I'm currently out. Don't worry... I can make something to take care of a wound like this easily..."

Apparently that was Lorraine's justification for wanting to clean up her room first—I stopped her, of course.

"Let me... Do it." I was referring to the question of treating Lorraine's wound.

While I did not know of any healing magics, I had enough divinity within me to help. Loris was a prime example of this point. A wound of that size could be easily handled even without a potion.

Lorraine, as usual, spoke like she had already read my thoughts. "But...your body..."

It would seem like Lorraine was more worried about my health than herself. I was fine, however. More importantly, I had to treat Lorraine's injury. Even if it could be easily healed with a potion of sorts, an injury like that would surely leave a mark.

Though even a cheap potion could heal one's wounds, the resulting treatment would leave blemishes, scars, and the like on one's skin. As such, female adventurers commonly used expensive potions, specifically to avoid such a problem. Lorraine, however, was never one to be bothered by such things. In fact, she had only used her own homemade potions for personal healing

up until this point. Knowing how she was, she probably would not put much effort into said potions. This would, in turn, leave her with a scar—or, at the very least, the possibility was there.

I would be the one responsible for said scar, and I could not live with that.

With that in mind, I placed a hand on Lorraine's shoulder, holding her in place. As if resigned to her fate, Lorraine sighed, making a face as she accepted the treatment.

"...It's the first time I've...been healed by divine magic. It's... very soothing, you know. I feel...so warm."

Having never attempted to heal my own wounds before, I had no idea how it would feel. But I was grateful for the fact that it did not seem to be a painful process.

Upon closer inspection, there were clear teeth marks on Lorraine's shoulder, along with rough marks consistent with a laceration wound. As I thought, a normal potion would definitely leave ugly scars. I had to put my all into it. I focused, concentrating a good amount of divinity into my hand. Slowly, the wound began to fade, her skin mending as it gradually reverted to its previous state. Lorraine's shoulder was now smooth and pale-white, as it used to be.

Visually confirming that her wound was gone, Lorraine pressed down upon her shoulder with a free hand, as if to check for injuries beneath the surface.

"...It doesn't hurt at all. The usage of divinity for the treatment of wounds, huh... As expected, it really is something else." After pausing, Lorraine continued, in a softer voice, "...Guess I can't say I'm damaged goods now, huh."

Strangely, Lorraine seemed a little disappointed at the notion. Confused, I looked straight at Lorraine, only to have her shake

her head slowly.

"No...it's...nothin—?"

There seemed to be something amiss with my face. As if finally finding her words, Lorraine spoke once more.

"Hey...Rentt. Your mask... Is it coming off...?" Lorraine said, staring at my face incredulously.

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"...Wait. There should be a mirror somewhere in here..." Lorraine said, beginning to fish through the scattered objects in the room.

For all her quirks and relatively relaxed personality, it would seem that Lorraine did, after all, own a mirror—as most women did. After some digging, Lorraine finally found what she was looking for.

"There we go. Look here... Well, maybe it isn't falling off, but at least it seems to have changed the way it sits on your face..."

I, too, was curious, and could not help but stare into the mirror Lorraine held. Reflected therein was my face and my mask, with the latter a little different than usual.

It wasn't just about the positioning, however. Upon closer inspection, the entire mask had changed its shape. Although it had originally covered most of my face, it now only covered the upper half, exposing the lower part of my face, mouth and all.

But that was not the most surprising thing in my reflection.

"...Skin."

Lorraine nodded at my stunned realization. "Ah, yes. I had forgotten to mention it, in light of everything else that had hap-

pened... But yes. Rentt—you look different now."

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With a quick series of checks, I discovered that my appearance had indeed dramatically changed. I did not merely refer to the matter of my mask changing shape—

Deciding to take off my robes just to be sure, I discovered that there were now patches of what appeared to be healthy skin amidst the usual, dried-out bits. Perhaps it was easier to describe my current state as that of an almost-rotten cadaver; bits of me looked like how I was in life, but the other parts were markedly scarred, dried, and otherwise unpleasant. With this, however, it might be possible to pass off said patches of dried skin as monster-inflicted scars.

With that being said, claiming that I had many large scars of this sort might be a little bit of a long stretch. Alternatively, I could simply tell them that I was a Ghoul, not that that was a good idea in any shape or form. My face did not seem to fare much better, with the bottom half of it, not covered by the mask, in a similar state as my body. In fact, it seemed a little more monstrous than my skin was.

While it did sport some healthy parts, the areas around my mouth were markedly corpse-like and Ghoulish. One could make out the distressed state of my gums—but perhaps that was a more skeletal state, to have one's teeth exposed in such a manner. I had to hide this somehow... Was there anything I could do?

I concentrated, searching for a solution.

"...H-hey!" Lorraine raised her voice.

For some reason or another, the mask had reduced itself into liquid-like material, creeping over my face before solidifying as a full facial mask once more. It was now back to its normal, skull-

shaped self.

What was going on...?

"...Rentt. I don't think that mask is 'just' cursed. Is there more to it?" Lorraine asked, her eyes now twinkling with a familiar look of curiosity.

But it was as Lorraine said. A mask capable of such behavior was not any normal cursed sheet of metal. Of course, the fact that it was cursed to begin with meant that it wasn't very normal in the first place.

Lorraine leaned in, closely inspecting the mask. "...When the shape of your mask changed, were you doing anything different?"

I described to Lorraine my thoughts at the time, namely how I felt that showing my mouth in public was a bad idea.

"Hmm. Did it change its appearance due to what you were thinking? A sentient tool of sorts, maybe? How very rare..."

A sentient tool...

Sentient tools were rare indeed. It was a term commonly associated with demonic swords and the like. These tools often had a will of their own, and they were said to be able to choose their owners. They were often found in the depths of a labyrinth, and were said to be impossible to reproduce by modern technologies available to man. One could say that they were rare and famous (or infamous) at the same time.

I raised the notion to Lorraine. Perhaps my mask was a similar artifact. However, there was also the fact that this mask was purchased by Rina for a few bronze coins. No matter how one spun it, it was a little too cheap for a sentient tool.

Lorraine offered a response after some thought. "Do take into account that it is cursed. The owner at the time might have sim-

ply set such a price to get rid of it quickly. We should also consider if the mask has the ability to control the wearer's thoughts to a certain extent…"

A more unsettling response than I was used to.

While I didn't have much say in taking it off due to its cursed nature, I couldn't exactly have it controlling my mind—I was already strange enough of an existence as things were. At the very least, I would like my free will to remain intact.

With that being said, it did not feel like I had been controlled at any point in time since my awakening as a Skeleton. While I was overcome with strange impulses at times, I did not know if those were the mask's doing. I had struck out at Lorraine, after all.

But Lorraine seemed more interested in the mask, and continued to observe it as I remained silently in thought.

"…You know… If it can change its shape by merely thinking about it, doesn't that mean you are already capable of taking it off?"

Lorraine's words did make sense. Convinced that it was at least worth a try, I began thinking about taking the mask off. Unfortunately, the mask remained unmoving, and was still very much stuck to my face.

"Can I try taking it off?"

"Go… Ahead…"

As expected, however, the mask was not very receptive to Lorraine's efforts, seemingly glued to my face. Lorraine wasn't exactly short on strength, either—although she was probably a little weaker than a soldier or a typical male adventurer, she was an adventurer like them, as well. Lorraine should have had more than

enough strength to take my mask off—at least, if it were a normal mask.

In other words, my mask still seemed resolutely stuck to my face, and it was not going anywhere anytime soon.

"No good. Could you maybe think of changing its shape again?"

I nodded, picturing a different shape for the mask in my mind's eye. As if on command, the mask changed, once again only covering the upper half of my face.

"Could you try any other shapes?"

While I went on to picture a variety of shapes per Lorraine's instructions, the mask seemed to only assume three general forms: It either covered my entire face, the top half, or the bottom half.

Though it could take other, more creative shapes, it would end up returning to one of the three prior-mentioned states in less than a minute. It also seemed capable of changing its design and ornamentation.

"…So, you can freely shape it, but you cannot take it off. How very strange… Well, it works in your favor, doesn't it? Your face is still somewhat close to that of an undead, you know," Lorraine said, apparently satisfied, nodding as she did so.

As she had stated, my humanity would be called into question if anyone got a good look at the lower half of my face—not that I was human in the first place. My body was unfortunately in a similar state. If I showed them how I looked, the average townsperson would surely question why I was even able to move, if only due to the fact that the blemishes on my skin were not just wounds—some bones were still visible underneath my dried flesh. There was also the question of blood—or lack thereof. My wounds

did not bleed.

Taking all that into consideration, however, I did prefer this form greatly—at least, more than my last one. I was human at a brief, cursory glance. I suppose that was where I currently stood on the scale.

That wasn't the only thing that changed, however.

"...Is. My voice strange?"

"Oh, yes. It seems a lot smoother now, to the point where I cannot help but see it as a little strange. Maybe I just have to get used to it?"

"I don't know... But it does feel easier to speak." I was very grateful for this.

The bigger question that filled my mind, however, was what brought about this change in the first place.

"Did I... Do it? Existential... Evolution?"

Lorraine nodded in response to my question while I continued to examine myself. "It would seem to be the case. Is it because you have been defeating monsters in the labyrinth?"

I did mention to Lorraine that I was headed to the Labyrinth of the Moon's Reflection, hence her assumption. But I shook my head.

"I don't... Know about that. It is true that I did... Fight some monsters. But when I... Had evolved into a Ghoul, I evolved immediately after I... Defeated them."

"...Comparatively, you only evolved this time after you got home. If we were to pinpoint the differences... Did you evolve after defeating me or...something else along those lines?"

“You jest. There was no defeating done by me.”

Although I had attacked Lorraine, she did send me flying into a wall with a well-placed fireball; that seemed to be a definite loss.

“I suppose. More accurately, it was *I* who defeated *you*... But more importantly—oh, yes... You ate my flesh and drank my blood. Perhaps that was the reason?”

Lorraine’s statement was shocking, to say the least. I widened my eyes in response, but Lorraine simply continued her explanation.

“Think about it. It’s not as outlandish as it seems. If I had to say... Judging by your current appearances, you seem more of a Vampire’s Thrall than a simple Ghoul to me. At the very least, you would be some sort of monster under the command of a Vampire... Consequently, that ranks you somewhat lower than a Lesser Vampire in the monster hierarchy.”

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“A Thrall, huh...”

While vampiric Thralls were somewhat powerful monsters, I had never seen one before in life. According to Lorraine’s explanation, Thralls were a sort of underling created by a Vampire, and as such could not exist without the latter creating them. It was known that Thralls did not seem to reappear in labyrinths. The Lesser Vampires that created them, however, did reappear again some time after being slain. Due to this, one could even say that Thralls were a somewhat rare type of monster.

With that being said, however, they were not exactly legendary creatures, as there have been enough confirmed sightings of them in areas where Vampires were known to live. But the Thralls in those cases were once human, having been turned when bitten by

a Vampire. As far as my knowledge went, one did not simply become a Thrall without the direct actions of a vampiric parent.

"Yes… The resemblance *is* there. I have taken a Thrall-slaying request before, you see. You look somewhat similar to the ones I saw then—well, you seem to have a little more holes in you than the average Thrall… But I'm content to classify that as an individual difference."

Lorraine was ultimately a scholar well-versed in the characteristics of monsters. If Lorraine said I was a Thrall of some sort, and had previously seen similar creatures in person, I had no reason to doubt her claims.

However, I had not been bitten by a Vampire at all, so it was difficult to understand the reasons for my evolution. For one, a Ghoul evolving into a Thrall was unheard of—

Thinking so, I raised my concerns to Lorraine.

"… Can one… Become a Thrall just by… Existential Evolution?"

Lorraine did not readily have an answer for me, slowly shaking her head instead.

"As I have mentioned before, few records exist on the topic of Existential Evolution. It is still being researched across the lands as we speak, so there is no adequate gauge for what is normal and what isn't. Yours is a special case—at least, I think it's a special case. There are no precedents available… I cannot give you an easy answer."

It was as Lorraine said—even a monster scholar like herself had no answer for me. It was probably impossible to so easily understand, and it was very much a troubling thing to think about, indeed.

I held my head, attempting in vain to make sense of the situation. Sensing my despair, Lorraine offered some words of consolation:

"Well... I wasn't exactly playing around while you went exploring in the labyrinth. I was thinking about quite a few things myself—if you would like my observations up until this point, I could give them to you. How about it?"

Such was Lorraine's casual offer—of course, I had no reason to refuse. I, of all people, understood that even a mere hypothesis from Lorraine could be a vastly useful piece of information.

I wasted no time in communicating my interest to Lorraine.

"All right, then, I'll tell you about it. Even if you had refused, I would have simply kept talking either way," Lorraine said, a smile creeping onto her features.

"Now... Where should I start? Perhaps it would be easier to understand if I went over all the events that have occurred, starting from the beginning of your evolution. While I was not present to witness it... Rentt—you were a Skeleton at first, yes?"

"Yes... I wanted to show you, but there was no way I could... Return in that form. But no matter... How you put it. I was a... Skeleton. It was... Quite surreal. Looking at my own... White bones."

Lorraine, momentarily stunned at my recollection of my time as a Skeleton, quickly regained her composure.

"And...from there, you evolved into a Ghoul?

"Yes. You have seen... Me. As a Ghoul... So you know."

"Yes, of course... It was quite a strange feeling, to see you like that. Very...interesting. Well, that's enough of that. More importantly... My observations on your evolution. Don't you think that

you evolving from a Skeleton to a Ghoul in and of itself is a strange thing?"

"Hmm...?" I could only cock my head at Lorraine's sudden question.

Understanding that I did not comprehend the deeper meaning of her question, Lorraine continued her explanation.

"That is to say... Existential Evolution is the process whereby a monster becomes a stronger version of itself. One could describe it that way—loosely, at least. Perhaps the truth is vastly different, but for now we shall work with this. Are you still with me?"

"Yes."

"Well, then... Think about it. Are Ghouls stronger versions of Skeletons?"

"Hmm..." I could not help but notice the discrepancy now that Lorraine had pointed it out.

The books I had read in Lorraine's abode all mentioned that Skeletons evolved into Ghouls, and I had accepted that as truth. Up until this point, I had not put much thought into it. Skeletons, however, had quite a few variations, many of them stronger than their basic, unarmed form. In fact, the Giant Skeleton that I had fought prior to this was a good example. Other notable models included Skeleton Knights, or the weaker Skeleton Soldiers.

It that was the case, if a Skeleton really were to undergo Existential Evolution, would it not evolve into a Soldier or Knight? That, at least, seemed to be the most natural path. But of course: one could not be sure if monster evolution was a natural thing in the first place, but I suppose that was a thought experiment for another day.

Once again, I offered my thoughts on the matter to Lorraine,

who promptly nodded.

"Yes, it is as you say. While it is true that many research tomes and the like speak of Skeletons evolving into Ghouls, that is not an absolute truth—in fact, someone has probably witnessed this happening at some point in time. However, one could not be sure if that was indeed a sort of Existential Evolution or not—much less if it was an exception of some kind."

"What… Do you mean?"

"…I mean to say that, in truth, we know very little—if anything—on the topic."

I felt that Lorraine's opinion was a little harsh, but Lorraine simply continued on.

"…However. Seeing how you did evolve into a Ghoul from your previously skeletal state, I suppose this proves my hypothesis correct."

"So… What does that… Mean?"

"Put simply: I propose that a monster's Existential Evolution propels it in the direction of what it wants to become."

Maybe there was some truth in Lorraine's words. To begin with, I had fixated myself upon evolving into a Ghoul the moment I realized I had been reborn as a Skeleton. The same was true when I was a Ghoul: I had wanted to evolve into a Vampire so as to achieve a more human-like form. Perhaps Lorraine's hypothesis was right.

Although, some questions did remain in my mind.

"…Why did I… Evolve into a Thrall… From a Ghoul? I could have… Become a Vampire instead."

That was my goal to begin with, after all. If what Lorraine said

was indeed true, I would have become a Vampire by now. But Lorraine seemed prepared for my question, and readily offered a response:

"Think of it as the Adventurer Ranks of the guild. Even if you are skilled as an adventurer, you don't suddenly advance to Gold-class from the bottom, do you? In addition, you would not even be able to advance if you did not have the capability to do so."

I understood the gist of Lorraine's words. "...So I have to evolve... Step by... Step?"

"That would be the most logical conclusion if we were to look at your current appearance. It is, again, just a hypothesis; the sample size is far too small. If I had to quote some sort of supporting evidence or material... My recent research on the evolutionary tendencies of Puchi Suri would suffice."

Puchi Suri were small, mouse-like monsters that could be found just about anywhere, and were just as easily captured. Elemental subspecies and evolutionary versions could be easily found as well, commonly corresponding to the location they lived in. It would seem like Lorraine had carried out some sort of research in this field.

Lorraine continued her explanation. "It is a simple experiment—one captures some Puchi Suris, then places a few of them in cages at various locales. A volcanic area, near the water, in a forest, a cave, and so on. The results are interesting, to say the least."

According to Lorraine's explanation, each of the Puchi Suris had taken on the element of their surroundings, with the one placed at the volcano becoming a fire-element subspecies—the same had occurred with each of the specimens at their locales. In addition, there was only one Puchi Suri left in each of the cages by the end of the experiment. I was, of course, familiar with the reason for this being the case—if I had to take a guess, it was probably due to the Puchi Suris fighting each other, with a final

winner absorbing all its compatriot's power.

The result of this was Existential Evolution.

"Of course, this alone does not prove my assumptions. One could claim that the Puchi Suri was simply responding to changes in its environment—but what if this was not a passive, but directed evolution? What if the monster itself wanted to evolve into a certain form? Perhaps I am getting ahead of myself… But I would not rule that out after observing a case such as yours. After all, claiming that you evolved into a Ghoul in response to environmental stimuli in the Labyrinth of the Moon's Reflection would be a bit of a stretch. There were plenty of other forms you could have taken.

"In your case…the latter explanation is more convincing: that you took this form because you wanted to. You yourself told me that you had consciously wished to evolve into Ghoul. So you see, there is some weight behind this hypothesis; though I would not call it a concrete theory just yet."

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"…So… Does it mean that for… Me to become a Vampire… I just have to keep… Thinking? Working hard…?" I posed my question to Lorraine.

If Lorraine's explanation did indeed hold true, that would mean that me thinking of becoming a Vampire while absorbing the life energies of other monsters would be enough to trigger the evolutionary process.

Lorraine, however, shook her head—not the reaction I was expecting.

"I did say earlier that it was not a concrete theory… In some aspects, your assumptions are sound; but I suspect that thought alone is insufficient."

"...What do you, mean...?"

"Here is the problematic point of this entire series of assumptions. If you could simply trigger Existential Evolution by slaying monsters, would you not have evolved in the Labyrinth?"

Lorraine had a point. If Existential Evolution was simply triggered by absorbing the life energies of fallen monsters, I would have been pushed over the evolutionary threshold the moment I had defeated the Giant Skeleton. Such was the amount of energy it had granted me. Though, I could not deny that perhaps I was still lacking in energy after that battle. In any case, I did return to Maalt without incident.

On the way back, however, I defeated several monsters—if I was lacking in energy alone, surely that would have taken care of things. In reality, nothing happened until my scuffle with Lorraine, where apparently I had evolved while unconscious. From these observations alone, even I could understand that simply defeating monsters was insufficient for me to evolve.

In other words, what Lorraine said earlier made a fair amount of sense.

"Maybe, then... Me eating your... Flesh and blood was... The reason."

"Indeed. I did come to that conclusion after some thought—there were no other variables in the equation. While the finer details of the process are lost to me, I can confidently say that certain instances of Existential Evolution are triggered by specific conditions. Empirical evidence in this case suggests that you cannot evolve by only defeating monsters—and this has been observed to be the case thus far."

Apparently this was the reason why I could not evolve into a Vampire—at least, not just by defeating monsters alone. The thought of me evolving due to the consumption of Lorraine's

flesh and blood, however…

I raised my doubts to Lorraine.

"That is the difficult part—difficult to verify, that is. Thralls are technically Vampires of sorts… Low-ranked Vampires, but still Vampires nonetheless. It is said that Vampires absorb their opponent's mana and spirit by drinking their blood. While a Vampire would not die if it does not drink, it would be significantly weakened. Thralls are similar in that aspect. Basically… They gain strength from drinking the blood of humans."

"What about… Flesh?"

"That would be more of a Ghoul's impulse. You had lost control of yourself by then—it was through the strength of that desire that you went and did as such. Did you not feel anything like that while you were a Ghoul? A primal desire of sorts, perhaps?"

I did recall casually thinking about eating human flesh several times during my Ghoulish tenure. But I would consciously remind myself that such a thing was forbidden, so the desire itself was easily suppressed at first. The desire did eventually grow, however, intensifying while I defeated numerous other monsters.

Now that I mention it, by the time I had encountered Loris the restauranteur, my Ghoulish desire was at its peak. Such was the strength of this desire that I had trouble suppressing it after my battle with the Giant Skeleton.

Lorraine nodded at my explanation. "Monsters do require some sort of sustenance—a means of absorbing energy, if you will. If a monster does not eat, its base desires probably become stronger in response to its hunger. This was why you bit off a piece of me when you got here: your desires had amplified and peaked to an irreversible point, and the resultant fulfillment of said desire triggered your evolution. It just so happened that eating human flesh coincidentally caused you to evolve. While I have

no way of knowing if all monsters have desires that fuel their evolution, I suppose I could make some broad strokes and assume that is the case.

"As such, you should not just be defeating monsters. Instead, you should be thinking hard about what possibly triggers your evolution, and then acting on it—at least, that is what I think."

Such was Lorraine's answer. But Lorraine's instructions were vague at best.

"...There isn't much we can do about things as they are, you know. There are things even I do not know; what we discussed just now is nothing more than a series of assumptions—and depending on who you ask, delirious ravings. Ah... If only I had more samples. If that were the case, we would have much a better means of gathering data..."

To wish for more beings such as myself—I did not have the heart to tell Lorraine that such a day would perhaps never come.

Even if they were mere ravings, Lorraine's observations had given me more than enough food for thought. I would not have reached such conclusions myself; or, more accurately, I had never thought about things that deeply to begin with. Without her advice, I would have simply continued defeating monsters. She was truly a friend worth having—a wise scholar who I had the privilege of knowing for a long time.

"Well, with all that said, perhaps the only choice you have is to trudge forward. You may very well be the first in the history of all humanity to be walking such a path. Of course, I will do what I can to support you."

Now, more than ever, I felt thankful for Lorraine's presence.

"...Thank you, Lorraine."

“Don’t worry about it… Well, then. Now is as a good time as ever—come over here so I can inspect you thoroughly.”

“Eh?”

I could not help but feel that Lorraine’s sudden comment was unfitting for the solemn atmosphere that was present mere moments ago. But Lorraine did not seem aware of this.

“Well? What are you doing? Take off your clothes, quickly now. I just happen to have a Recording Crystal here… We should take a picture of how you appear now for archival purposes. —Oh, right. Are you capable of eating now? Well, you did eat a bit of me as a Ghoul, so I suppose you do have a stomach of some sort. But you should try eating normal food, as well. Oh, and you would do well to give me a piece of your body. I will apply some anesthetic to numb the pain. Actually… Do numbing medicines work on you? I should remember to make some research notes on that. Also…”

Lorraine continued listing a series of possible experiments—she apparently intended to perform each and every one of them on me.

I, however, was not exactly listening to Lorraine’s ramblings. While Lorraine was normally calm and level-headed, she had a bad habit of diving into her research once she decided that something was of interest to her. As a result, she would commonly work late into the night, forgetting to eat or rest, and would eventually collapse at some point or another.

However, I was there to take care of her every time something like this happened. Even if I were to guide her to her bed and tell her to rest, Lorraine would only grudgingly agree, all the while being visibly irritated that her work had been disrupted. Her bad habits were responsible for her current behavior.

Upon listening to Lorraine’s suggestions, however, it would

seem like the experiments she described were all crucial to understanding my condition, hence my eventual cooperation. For instance, her experiments with medicine allowed me to understand if medicines even worked on me—handy when exploring a labyrinth. Similarly, Lorraine's request for me to eat normal food was not too outlandish either—if I could eat, I probably should. If I were to collapse suddenly due to hunger or not having sufficient nutrients, it would not benefit anyone—as such, I should eat and rest if able.

There was also the consideration that someone could attack me out of nowhere, so it was good to be prepared.

With that being said, I did enjoy eating in life. If possible, I would like to continue eating. While I did take a bite of Lorraine after evolving from a Skeleton to a Ghoul, I had not eaten anything else in the meantime. I had no idea if abstaining from meals would have any ill-effects. If anything, I was somewhat doubtful about my ability to digest food. I supposed it was at least worth a try.

"Well, then, Rentt. No point sitting around. Let us begin the experiment right away... At least, that is what I would have liked to say, but I suppose that is a bit too much for today. You should rest, and we can continue tomorrow... What is it? There's a strange look on your face."

I could not believe that Lorraine, with that level of eagerness, would allow for her experiments to be postponed to the next day.

"...No... I simply thought you would... Begin right away."

"What do you take me for? Even I occasionally have some modicum of sense."

It was something that I had never expected from Lorraine. Her being that concerned was occasional indeed—I thought about pointing it out, but ultimately decided against it for today.

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The next day—

Upon confirming that I had regained some degree of normalcy, Lorraine decided to continue her experiments. She began with an external inspection, during which she occasionally went into great detail. Some of Lorraine's experiments made no sense to me, but seemed important for one reason or another. I suppose most scholars were like this, being mostly restless until they could fully investigate something.

With that being said, I did not view all of Lorraine's experiments as frivolous. In fact, the results of some of these experiments cleared up various questions I had about myself up until this point, and for that, I was grateful.

The salient points of the investigative experiments were as follows: I could apparently eat normal food, and curative potions, for some reason, also worked on an undead like me. In addition, certain points were completely nullified by the unique nature of my body. The biggest takeaway from Lorraine's experiments, however, was the fact that I could eat normal food, as opposed to being restricted to human flesh and blood.

Honestly speaking, though, the desire to consume such things still haunted me even after I had evolved into a Thrall. I suppose the desire for flesh was a Ghoulish impulse after all. My desire for blood was now far stronger, and I found myself desiring it more than ever. More accurately speaking, I seemed to be able to smell blood in the veins of humans around me. From the smell alone, I could discern the general direction, age, gender, and state of health of human beings around me.

Perhaps this was to be expected, with the unexpected part being the fact that it smelled so delicious to me. In particular, I found myself lusting after the blood of healthy young women.

I couldn't help but think of the negative implications of this development. It would be problematic if I felt this lust all the time—as such, we ended up conducting experiments on how to reduce its intensity. The results were somewhat promising, as consuming regular food seemed to reduce its hold over me.

In addition to that, Lorraine was generous enough to provide small amounts of her blood—and that usually had a profound effect on my craving, dispelling it for some period of time. The contrast between the two sources was surprising, however—I had to eat at least three times as much as an average grown man to sate my hunger. A single drop of Lorraine's blood, in comparison, immediately made me feel full and revitalized. Although it would be more cost-efficient to drink Lorraine's blood in this scenario, I could not bring myself to ask her for a constant supply. Lorraine, however, interrupted my thoughts with a few statements of her own.

"...Looking at the results of the experiment, it would make more sense if you drank fixed amounts of my blood at regular intervals. For now, I will leave you with a bottle's worth of it. The bottle has preservation magic woven into it—in any case, if you run out, just let me know," Lorraine said, casually handing over the bottle to me.

I felt that a whole bottle's worth of blood was a bit much; but as Lorraine said, I only required a single drop at a time.

Thinking about it logically, this bottle would last me for at least a month if properly rationed. The problem, however, lay in the effectiveness of the preservation spell. According to Lorraine, it would only last a week, whereupon I would have to ask her to refresh it once more.

Taking into account that preservation magics were not absolute in what they did, Lorraine's provided supply could not exactly be kept fresh forever. It is perhaps serendipitous, then, that the average preservation period of foodstuffs and the like were

about a month in length—just the right amount in this case.

But with that said, there was another problem in regards to this arrangement: it was unhealthy for Lorraine to provide this amount of blood on a regular basis. I made a mental note to be cautious about rationing my blood supply.

On that note, however, it was undeniably strange for one to be thinking of drinking another's blood, let alone drinking it cautiously. At the very least, it was not something the average human being would do, and my head hurt as I thought about the implications of such an act for my already thinning sense of humanity. I suppose it was important to ensure that my fading sense of humanity did not deteriorate any further—eating regular meals helped in that regard, at least.

Lorraine's experiments also explored my resistances to poison, with her administering increasingly more venomous poisons into me. Interestingly, I did not seem affected by any of her concoctions. We progressed in a somewhat haphazard way, armed only with the knowledge of Lorraine's poison cleansing spells should something go wrong. As a last resort, I could even use my divinity to nullify any detrimental effects. Thankfully, however, we managed to finish our experiments without having to resort to either of those means.

With that, Lorraine declared I was probably immune to most types of poisons.

"...Perhaps poisons just don't work on dead bodies very well?"

Lorraine's guess was as good as mine; if she had no idea, I wouldn't know any better. But if that really were the case, curative potions of any kind shouldn't work either since my body was dead.

Regardless, I suppose it was fine to go along with Lorraine's deductions regarding my resistance to poisons. After all, reports

of certain humans being resistant to poisons were not exactly unheard of. In that regard, I, too, was not as abnormal as I seemed to be. Given the nature of the rest of my body, however, that declaration might be a bit of a stretch.

Lorraine turned to me, all her experiments finally finished. “Well, then. I’m going to take some time to process all the data we have retrieved from our experiments. As for you… Well. I guess I don’t have to tell you what to do.”

Indeed, it was as Lorraine said. I had already decided upon what I had to do next—namely, to somehow attempt an evolution into a form that looked vaguely human.

If possible, I would like to become human again. If Existential Evolution did indeed steer an individual towards its desired form, would this not be possible for my case?

I did not hold the answers I sought. Lorraine, for her part, did not have a concrete answer for me, either.

“There is no way I could know for certain, but of course that would be the case. I can not discount the possibility of it, however. Why not simply set that as a mental goal for now?”

A fine answer indeed—as expected of Lorraine. I supposed I should follow her advice and do exactly that.

I decided upon a new mental goal; it would be a good interim goal, at least. In order for me to fulfill that goal, more labyrinth exploration was necessary.

“…Do you think… This sword can still… Be used?” Saying so, I pulled the sword Clope had loaned to me from its sheath.

“That’s quite some wear you’ve got on the sword’s blade… You should know better than I do that it would not serve you well, if at all, in its current state. Repairs would definitely be required.”

“I… Thought as much…”

The sword’s condition had apparently deteriorated dramatically at some point in time during my previous adventure, despite having just been loaned to me. Clope would, without a doubt, be very upset.

Either way, I could not continue using it as was. It would be too dangerous to fight with a damaged weapon.

Steeling myself for a scolding of sorts, I made my way to the Three-Pronged Harpoon.

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“…Hey, now… What the hell is this?”

Clope, my trusted blacksmith, did not bother hiding the distaste on his face. His expression was now twisted into that of an uncomfortable grimace.

“…The… Sword. You loaned me.” I offered Clope my straight answer.

Clope’s response was equally simple, albeit accompanied by a sizable sigh. “I can see that by looking at it… You know that ain’t what I’m asking, right?”

I suppose it would be pointless to continue hiding the truth from Clope, and hence I decided to honestly tell him what had transpired.

“My apologies… I… Infused the blade… With divinity…”

“Huh? Now why would you go and do something like—well, I guess I can accept that. But you’ve only been to the Moon’s Reflection, right? There shouldn’t be any monsters there that require a divine blade to defeat!”

Clope had most likely made this statement due to his knowledge of me being able to use both spirit and magic. In other words, Clope knew full well that most, if not all, monsters in the Moon's Reflection could be defeated by either of those two abilities.

Of course, Clope was not wrong in his observations. Reality, however, was a little different.

"...I ran into a... Giant... Skeleton. That was why... I did so. I had... No choice."

Clope opened his eyes wide at my statement. "You pulling my leg? Giant Skeletons don't appear in the Moon's Reflection, no? But...you wouldn't lie to me, huh. Where did you even find something like that...?"

"I found... A previously uncharted... Part of the Labyrinth..."

"What?! You— Oi. You're...serious?"

Although visibly surprised, Clope made sure to lower the volume of his voice. It would seem like he understood the weight of the information he was just made privy to.

"...You really...saw something like that?"

I nodded silently.

"...Well. Makes a bit of sense as to why you came here dressed up all strange like that... So something like that happened, huh. I can buy that, I suppose. Explains why the sword's all messed up like this... Well, that's fine—I get it. Are you done with your exploration yet?"

Choosing not to respond to most of Clope's statement, I instead answered the question he had posed to me.

"No... Not yet. That is why... I was hoping. That my sword

would... Be ready soon."

"Yeah... I get that. But see here: there's no way I can get your sword done that quickly. It's an order-made piece, you know. Instead, I'll hand over another loaner—one that's a little better, this time."

I had made this trip hoping that Clope had somehow already finished my order, but I supposed he needed a little more time.

Nodding, I gratefully received the sword Luka, Clope's wife, had chosen and handed to me. It was apparently capable of handling fair amounts of spirit and magic, just like its unfortunate predecessor. Satisfied, I exited the store.

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Thump!

Upon leaving the shop's doors behind, I felt a blunt impact square on my head. More precisely, the impact was absorbed by my mask; regardless, it would seem like I had bumped into something.

But of course, something like this was not enough to dislodge or even damage my mask. It was sturdy to the point of annoyance, being impossible to take off to begin with. Taking a good look at the space before me, I realized that I had bumped into a man. Specifically, he was a man clad in silver-white armor; one would almost instinctively say that he was a knight of sorts.

While I did not hold any grudges against the knight in question, his appearances suggested a somewhat rigid, if not righteous, upbringing. If anything, he looked intimidating in his own way, so I decided to depart from the area as soon as possible. As such, I lowered my head, not saying a word as I continued on my way.

“Ah, my apologies. Are you injured?”

Now that the knight had spoken to me, I had no choice but to respond.

“...Ahh, no. I am fine. What about... You?”

“Oh, don’t worry, I’m quite all right. On another note...from your appearances, good sir, would you happen to be an adventurer of some sort?”

I once again had no choice but to answer the knight due to his sudden changing of subjects. I nodded as I offered my response.

Upon hearing that I was an adventurer, the knight looked at me with a serious expression.

“Well, then...I would like to ask—I am looking for an adventurer in this town: a young girl, with blonde hair and eyes of sapphire... She goes by the name of Rina. Have you perhaps heard of her?”

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Of course I remembered that name. Rina was none other than the adventurer who had originally helped me when I was stuck in the Moon’s Reflection.

I couldn’t help but wonder what Rina was up to now. Ever since then, I had taken great care to not stand out while I was walking around the streets of Maalt, and I had not run into Rina up to this point. As such, I had no information on her current whereabouts, either. Did she find other adventurers to party up with in the end? Or was she still going at it alone somewhere? With her level of skill, the guild would have no problems recommending her to one party or another... At least, that was what I thought.

That aside... There was the issue of this armored, knightly man

before me. His blond hair, blue eyes, and polished appearance all came together to form the ideal image of a knight from a fairy tale.



"...Well... To start. Who are you...?"

I had to ascertain the nature of this person before giving him any information, and the first thing I needed was a name. The knight, seeming surprised for a moment, quickly offered it politely.

"Oh, of course. I beg your pardon. My name is Idoles Rogue, a knight of the First Knightly Order of the Kingdom of Yaaran."

The First Knightly Order was said to be comprised of only the strongest and most elite of knights in the kingdom. The fact that he was from such an Order told me many things: members of the First either hailed from privileged families of power or were talented swordsmen. In any case, members of the First were all important personages in one way or another, as normal people would never be allowed into their ranks.

And yet, someone like this was searching for Rina? Why was this the case?

Summarily, I asked after his intent.

"Why would someone... As important as yourself... Be searching for a young girl...?"

The man answered my question swiftly and honestly—he did not seem to hide anything behind his words.

"Well... It is most embarrassing indeed, as Rina, the young girl in question, is my little sister. I shall skip the small and embarrassing details, but to summarize, she simply made off and disappeared one day, apparently desiring to become an adventurer for one reason or another. I have arrived in Maalt after receiving eyewitness reports of someone who somewhat resembles her—hence my question."

"Then... Does this Rina call herself... 'Rina Rogue'...?"

“I would suppose that to be the case. Would you happen to know of anyone by that name? I asked around prior to arriving here, but the guild cited laws on information privacy and wouldn’t tell me a thing. A knight asking around in a tavern would be a strange sight indeed, hence…”

It would seem like the knight in question, in search of Rina, had visited smithies and other locations that adventurers frequent—eventually even asking the customers in said establishments. Even the adventurer’s guild would not be able to deny a request from the kingdom itself. This man, however, apparently did not invoke such rights, and had simply nodded and left after being denied the relevant information.

If one were asking in a personal capacity, though, the adventurer’s guild would certainly not hand over private information so easily anyway. This was somewhat natural considering the fact that many members of the guild had one thing or another to hide. By extension, there was no shortage of adventurers who wanted to keep their pasts hidden—

Taking all those factors into consideration, I casually delivered my answer.

“I have not heard of… Anyone by the name of… ‘Rina Rogue.’”

“…Is that so. That is most regrettable. If, by any chance, you do come across her in the future, I would be much obliged if you could contact me. I will, due to some other arrangements, be staying in this town for a certain amount of time—I have even taken some time off from my duties at the First Knights. But with that being said, it is not a long period of absence. I hope I can meet and speak with her at least once before I return.”

With that, the knight gave me the address of the guesthouse he was currently checked into before walking through the doors of the Three-Pronged Harpoon. Perhaps he had similar questions for Clope as well.

Idoles gave off a somewhat sad aura, his being seemingly enveloped by a blanket of solitude and loneliness. Be that as it may, I could not simply give away Rina's personal information without her consent.

Taking everything into consideration, the Rina that I had run into was unmistakably the person Idoles was searching for. I could say this with confidence, having spent most of my life in Maalt. In all my time, I had not known another female adventurer by the name of Rina.

The description Idoles had provided was pretty much spot-on, as well; although the combination of blonde hair and blue eyes was somewhat rare to begin with. Folklore claims that only nobility, or at least those of high social stature and the like, are born with such a combination of traits. Needless to say, those specific traits were typically not observed in a town as rural as Maalt.

While a new adventurer by that exact name and appearance could have shown up during my period of absence from the guild, the possibility of that was, logically speaking, somewhat low.

Strictly speaking, though, the name Rina provided me was different than the one Idoles had used—but of course, Rina Rupaage was probably a false name. Due to the relative simplicity of the guild's registration process and the absence of background checks of any kind, Rina could have registered with any name she wished. The guild mostly operated on an honor system, after all.

Even if it was made clear that a registrant had used a false name, they wouldn't exactly be punished for it. All the guild cared about was the ability of the adventurer to complete the assignments and quests they had taken on—and that was that.

Exceptions to this rule did exist: for instance, if a fugitive or criminal were to register in hopes of escaping justice, they could be easily handed over to the authorities—assuming there was sufficient evidence present. With that being said, however, a fair

amount of criminals continued to hide from the authorities under the guise of adventurers—that was just how things were.

If the guild's staff could not identify an individual as a criminal at a glance, they would probably slip through the system. From the viewpoint of a criminal on the run, the adventurer's guild was quite a convenient thing. This was the reason for most townsfolk to view adventurers with a suspicious eye.

I was not exactly claiming that Rina was anything close to a criminal; however, the fact that she hid her real name suggested that she did not want to be found.

This was why I responded to Idoles in the way that I had—my statement, while not exactly being a lie, was not entirely true, either. For even if I had not heard of Rina Rogue, Rina Rupaage's appearance perfectly matched his provided description. My resulting assumptions were probably not too far off the mark—but that was all there was to it.

I had tasks that needed doing, as well. If Rina ever did get herself into a dangerous situation, all I had to do was lend her my aid then.

The existence of a knight in this town was enough to make him stand out like a sore thumb—Idoles, of course, did not seem to realize this.

Shelving my thoughts on the matter, I slowly began making my way back. For now, I supposed I should return to Lorraine's abode.

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Taking a look at the current situation, I could say that I now looked sufficiently human. If I were smart about it, I could easily purchase new armor and the like. Thanks to my newfound appearance, I could probably even show up to the guild in person,

as well—at the very least, the possibility of me being persecuted on the spot had significantly decreased.

It was worth noting that I would have to challenge stronger monsters from here on out for the sake of Existential Evolution. For me to do that, however, I had to start adventuring in the Labyrinth of the New Moon, as I could not remain only in the Moon's Reflection if I wished to advance.

But before I set off for the New Moon, there was something I needed to do.

"So... That's why you want to go to the guild? I do think it is still too soon..." said Lorraine, the owner of the house I currently stood in.

Having prepared a meal for Lorraine, we both sat at the dining table, her savoring my cooking as I licked up a miniscule amount of her blood. It was during this surreal scene that I had brought up my list of daily tasks.

To be specific, I was graduating from the Labyrinth of the Moon's Reflection, a minor labyrinth for beginners, to the Labyrinth of the New Moon, a major labyrinth that was popular amongst most adventurers—from fresh-faced beginners to Silver-class veterans. Due to this, I had decided to pick up a long-term request of sorts from the guild, lest my trip go completely to waste.

The part that Lorraine objected to was specifically the bit about me accepting a quest from the guild in person. Her reasoning was simple: although I was a little more human in appearance, I still looked extremely suspicious.

Unsatisfied, Lorraine continued her explanation: "They would most certainly ask for Rentt Faina's adventurer's permit. Your appearance would then lead to all sorts of questions—questions strange enough to pique the guild master's interest. There is also

the problem of other veteran adventurers. They may be gathered in the guild hall, as they usually are—"

"But then… They wouldn't… Kick up such a fuss. Not over a… Bronze-class adventurer."

Frankly speaking, I was never really much of an adventurer to begin with, so I personally did not think that me showing up after a period of absence, albeit in strange garb, would be a huge issue.

Lorraine, however, did not share my views.

"…Perhaps you would say that from a perspective of strength alone, since it is true that you were weak. That was why you remained Bronze-class for many years, so I agree with you on those points.

"But while I agree… To the guild, you are a most valued existence. Although the many little tasks and assignments you carried out for the guild were individually not too remarkable, no one else in Maalt could carry out said tasks with the degree of perfection and precision as you did. The guild has always held you in high praise, to the point where they have long been ready to hire you on as guild staff should you ever stop adventuring."

"…Eh? Is… That so? You must be… Joking."

I was, honestly speaking, surprised at Lorraine's words. While it was true that I had run many errands and such for the guild, I did not think my actions to be significant enough that the guild would want to hire me as a staff member. I could not, after all, simply live so complacently, thinking that my future was secure.

Before I would even think of such things, however, I once again stated that I had no intentions of giving up my life as an adventurer—it was unthinkable.

"I tell the truth, you know? Hmph. That's fine, then… Either

way, as long as you remain who you are as of now, going to the guild would be most—" Lorraine paused halfway through her sentence, shaking her head this way and that, before starting to mumble to herself. "As long as I... Remained? Who I was? If Rentt was Rentt... If Rentt was not Rentt. Then maybe... Maybe there is a way through this..."

Such was the nature of Lorraine's mumblings.

She looked up, finally done with her monologue. What she said next, however, was not what I expected—and was incredibly surprising, to say the least.

"...Rentt. If you absolutely must accept assignments and quests from the adventurer's guild, against all odds, then... Register again. With the guild, I mean.

"Change your name. Register not as 'Rentt Faina'... Well, it isn't easy to tell people apart by their first names. You just have to change your family name to something else, and register under that new name."

Unable to understand Lorraine's sudden proclamation, I sat as Lorraine began offering a slower, more detailed explanation, listening patiently as she did so.

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"...Oh..."

How nostalgic it was to once again walk the halls of the adventurer's guild—and yet, little had changed since the last time I was here. Realistically speaking, not much time had passed since my last visit. I had, however, thought that I would never see Maalt, let alone the guild, ever again. Hence, I somehow felt moved to a certain extent as I set foot in the familiar building—to the point where I could start shedding tears.

Whether Thralls had functional tear glands was another question entirely; one that I did not currently have the answer to. To find out, I stood still, opening my eyes for a solid thirty seconds without blinking. My eyes, however, did not feel any different, or any more moist. They were, after all, dry from the beginning—perhaps it was to be expected that no tears fell from my eyes.

"...?"

Passing adventurers glanced at me; they must have thought it strange that someone would stand still at the guild's entrance for an entire minute. Panicking, I quickly moved out of the way, making a beeline for the receptionist's counter as I mentally reminded myself to accomplish the task I came to do.

"Excuse... Me."

"Yes? How may I help you today?"

I came face-to-face with yet another sight for sore eyes as the receptionist looked up from her counter. Her face provoked a deep sense of nostalgia in my being.

Sheila Ibarss—she had worked at the adventurer's guild for about half a decade now, and was a seasoned member of staff who had become familiar with all the inner workings of the guild. To think that she was only a new trainee when I first met her—

I thought back to how she had been assigned to me as my supervisor back in the day by the guild master. Nostalgic, indeed. Although it felt like I would start crying once more, this dried-up body of mine simply did not have any tears to offer. Reminding myself once more of my current condition, I stated my business to Sheila.

"I would like... To register as... An adventurer."

"Oh, yes. Registration. ...Please fill out these forms right here.

You may leave certain parts blank if you cannot fill them in for any reason."

With that, Sheila handed me a sheaf of rough-looking papers. These papers hailed from a certain country specializing in the export of magical scrolls and the like. The guild could apparently obtain said paper at a cheaper rate. Smoother, more high-quality paper was used for important documents issued by governmental organizations. As a result, the higher cost of higher-quality paper made it a rare sight. I did, however, recall seeing some pieces of it scattered carelessly around Lorraine's abode...

As instructed, I began filling out the form in question. It had been ten years since I had filled out a form like this. Back then, I didn't really have anything significant to write, and all I ended up writing was my name, age, and that I had some skill with the sword.

Now that I think about it, I could certainly have written down more of my skills. Maybe I just didn't know that they were useful skills worth writing down at the time. For example, I had some knowledge about herbology and the like, as well as experience in dissection and simple surgery.

Although I was a beginner in either discipline, those were rare skills for an individual to possess. I had learned said skills from a herbologist and hunter back in my home village, and eventually picked up enough field knowledge myself.

If one were to question why I went out of the way to learn such skills, the answer was simple: I wanted to become an adventurer, and was convinced that these skills would be of use.

My goal from then still remained unchanged: that I would one day become a Mithril-class adventurer. That was all there was to it.

To that end, I would gladly give up my Bronze-class achieve-

ment, even if I had to start from the ground up all over again. It did not matter to me if "Rentt Faina" became a Mithril-class adventurer—as long as I, in whatever name or form, became one, that was enough.

With that being said, however...becoming a Bronze-class adventurer wasn't exactly a huge task or feat. Perhaps it would seem that way to a normal person, but Bronze was somewhat low amongst the sea of adventurers present in the world. As such, starting over anew wasn't exactly difficult to do.

In addition, if I ever did end up evolving into a state where I looked like my old self again, all I had to do was work my way up once more.

Although the adventurer's guild rules stated that a single adventurer could not register under two identities, I had little choice in the matter. Even if I were somehow found out, there were no rules stating that I would be punished for it.

The reason for this was simple, as there just wasn't much point in an individual registering twice. It would, after all, be somewhat meaningless for one to split their efforts in two, effectively halving their progression rate.

While I did still have my previous permit on me, simply holding it did not exactly grant me immunity from the rules, or from being questioned about my appearance. As such, Lorraine's suggestion was a way around this problem—a somewhat unorthodox, but in my case, effective method.

Basically, if "Rentt Faina" were to show up in such a state, dressed in such a strange manner, I was sure to be questioned. However, if I showed up as someone else, the chances of my appearance being inquired after became extremely low.

Frankly speaking, though, there was no denying that I looked strange. But this strangeness was somewhat native to adventurers

in general—and while a robed and masked adventurer would be thought of as weird, most people would end up staring at me for only a few seconds more before returning to their own affairs.

Those were the thoughts in my mind as I continued flipping through the registration papers, finally reaching the last page. The last, and yet the first—a beginning, if you will.

The last page was where one wrote their name. I supposed I could still use my first name, but what would I use for my family name?

...Nothing came to mind.

No matter; I could fill it in with anything I wanted. It would merely be a false name, after all.

With that thought in mind, I wrote my name on the paper in question, finally handing the documents back to Sheila.

"...Ah, thank you very much. Let's see... Rentt Vivie, yes...?"

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A somewhat sorrowful expression crossed Sheila's features as she read my name out loud. Thinking it strange, I inquired after her.

"...Is something... Wrong?"

"No... It's just... A few days ago, another adventurer named Rentt went missing..."

That would have been none other than me. I, however, answered as if I knew nothing of the matter.

"...I have heard... That adventurers must be prepared... For occasions like that."

It was a well-known risk of adventuring, as it wasn't exactly rare for an adventurer to suddenly disappear.

Death, of course, was only one of the many possibilities—the adventurer in question might have simply moved on to another area or town. Other reasons included the adventurer in question no longer wishing to brave the labyrinths, instead taking on some other occupation, or they might have been a fugitive on the run all along.

While there were countless possibilities responsible for an adventurer's sudden disappearance, Sheila seemed to be fully convinced that I had lost my life in the labyrinth's depths. I couldn't blame her, as there were no other logical reasons for my disappearance.

Sheila continued: "But yes, it is as you say. When it actually happens in reality, though… It's a saddening thing. He was the first adventurer I supervised… So I was just a little surprised that your first names were…the same."

"I see… Well, if I may ask… Is that adventurer… Rentt Faina?" I phrased my question in a way that would not rouse Sheila's suspicion.

It was strange to be asking about myself, and Sheila herself seemed somewhat surprised.

"Well, yes…it is. You know of him?"

I had purposely wanted to draw this question out of Sheila; it would seem like I was successful in my endeavor.

I offered Sheila a simple response: "Yes… I have heard of him… From Lorraine."

Sheila's eyes widened at my mention of Lorraine's name, as if finally realizing something.

“Ahh… So that was it! Vivie… Are you a relative of Lorraine’s?” Sheila asked, not suspecting a thing.

If I had introduced myself as a relative of Lorraine’s, it would only be natural that we shared the same family name. After all, it would only be a matter of time before the guild caught wind of the fact that I was living at Lorraine’s abode, so it was best to erase any potential causes for concern as early as possible.

While it did not really affect me much, Lorraine was an unmarried woman. It would be unbecoming of me to cause Lorraine any further trouble—and as such, I had already prepared all the relevant excuses and explanations to go along with my proposed scenario: if I presented myself as a relative who had traveled to Maalt from a faraway land, there would be fewer questions to deal with; not a bad excuse indeed.

It was also perhaps worth noting that “Rentt” was the name of a saint of sorts from ages long past. It was by no means an uncommon name across the lands. No matter the country, a sizable amount of its denizens were sure to have identical rare names, so another Rentt showing up in Maalt was no cause for alarm.

“Yes, I am… I will be living at her abode… When I am in town.”

“I see. I have heard rumors of a strange person entering and leaving Lorraine’s residence as of late… Although I suppose Lorraine herself isn’t exactly normal.”

As expected, rumors of me had already spread.

I responded to Sheila’s statement with a simple nod.

“I suppose that… Would be me. Well… I would not call myself strange. I am merely a relative that… Has been living with that girl… Since I entered the country…”

While I had no idea how the situation would unfold, I decided

to go with what I thought to be a reasonable lie. More specifically, I had written the scenario with myself starring as Lorraine's grandfather, who was known for suddenly visiting his grandchildren on a whim.

Sheila, for her part, seemed convinced.

"I see... That must be hard, traveling so much! So, the one seen at Lorraine's residence was you... The thought had crossed my mind, that there were rumors about some strange man becoming involved with Lorraine; but I suppose that wasn't the case after all... Right, here is your adventurer's permit. It's all done. Here you go."

Ending the conversation with the casual dismissal of what seemed to be a crass rumor, Sheila arranged the sheaf of papers in her hands. It seemed that she was done with my registration process.

In her hands now was a dull-colored metal card. The symbol of an absolute beginner of an adventurer: the dull metallic gleam of an Iron-class adventurer's permit. Every individual who signed up as an adventurer started their journey with this in hand. Even I was no exception, although it had been ages since I had held a card of this color.

It was a nostalgic feeling. I held it up against the light for one reason or another, staring at it with mixed feelings. Sheila, apparently familiar with the sight before her, smiled gently.

"Should I explain the rules of the Adventurer's Guild, and other details...?"

While I was appreciative of Sheila's offer, I was already a veteran adventurer.

Although I was not all that strong in life, I did have many years of service under my belt. It probably goes without saying that I

was—and still am—excessively familiar with the rules in question. In life, I had even used those very rules to gain the upper hand against adventurers of ill intent. I did not have much in the way of combat strength, after all. Back then, that was all I could do to stay ahead of the pack.

This was why I responded to Sheila as such:

"No… That will not be necessary. The rules and… Details. Are written in that… Right?" I said, pointing to a small leather-bound book on the receptionist's counter.

"Oh! You know of this?" Sheila asked, visibly surprised.

I couldn't blame her; few budding adventurers would be interested in that booklet, let alone know what was in it. The booklet in question contained various regulations and details regarding those rules, and guild staff would often recommend adventurers to read through it should they have questions.

As for me, I had long memorized the contents of the booklet itself, having read through it many times in my lengthy career.

By pointing the booklet out to Sheila, I had merely communicated the fact that I would use that very same time-tested method to answer any questions I might have about adventuring.

"I heard about it… From Lorraine. About the basics… Of adventuring, too."

"I see. You do live together after all. Then I suppose that's all fine and good! Well, then, Mister Rentt—please work hard as an adventurer. Do value your life above all else, though!"

I nodded in response to Sheila's words, and stepped away from the receptionist's counter as my registration drew to a close.

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Lining the walls of the adventurer's guild were a myriad of notice boards, each with written quests and assignments of all sorts pinned to them. The assignments in question, by and large, were sorted by color, and were coded as such for adventurers to quickly identify the type of task listed.

Of course, there were many different jobs available, from odd errands anyone could run to jobs requiring a certain degree of strength and combat ability. The most dominant color, however, was that of "general help"—running errands, assisting with mundane tasks, and the like. As such, even adventurers who had little in the way of combat skill could easily make a living—but at the same time, this was also the reason why runaway criminals could easily blend into the sea of readily-available adventurers.

Thinking back on it, while I had slain weaker monsters and collected labyrinth materials in life, I had also performed quite a few odd jobs. Due to my history, I was more than used to odd jobs of any kind, but while I could easily accept those very same requests now, my current appearance did not exactly lend itself to such tasks. If anything, those odd errands I used to do were now significantly more difficult for me to take on.

I was by no means intimidating or awe-inspiring in life; I was known for my seemingly harmless and childlike face. As such, I was able to blend in at various locations with ease, as I was by no means disliked or discriminated against. But with my current appearance, I would surely be viewed as a stranger in a robe and a skull-faced mask—hardly the kind of person one would want running their odd jobs and errands.

While the clients in question probably couldn't afford to be too picky about who did their jobs for them, slaying monsters and trading in their materials was now much more efficient means of earning gold for me. In addition, it also did not have much in the way of social interaction—either way, it worked out well for me.

Perhaps it was silly to think I could not endure the judgment

of others while running errands. Though I could definitely tolerate it, to take on such requests while being able to slay monsters for greater rewards was equally foolish.

Weighing the two options, I found myself quickly settling for the dark hallways of the labyrinth instead.

With all those thoughts in mind, I stepped up to the request board, retrieving a written task that seemed well within my current capabilities. Giving it a quick read, I nodded, then walked toward Sheila's counter with the request in hand.

"Ah, Mister Rentt.

"Have you already decided on a request to work on?"

I handed the sheet of paper over to Sheila in response, but Sheila was quick to voice her disapproval after a fleeting glance.

"...A request to slay and collect materials from Orcs, all of a sudden? With all due respect, Mister Rentt...perhaps you might consider looking at collecting the magic crystals of Goblins, instead? You have only just started adventuring, after all..."

Orcs were, no doubt, somewhat strong monsters. Roughly put, they would be an even match for upper, or at least average, Bronze-class adventurers. While Sheila's concerns were valid, I could easily defeat Orcs and their ilk with my current degree of power.

But with that said, however, becoming surrounded would still prove to be a problem. All I had to do, then, was simply avoid such a scenario in the first place.

"...I have slain... Orcs, where I used to live... Before. While I am indeed... A new adventurer... I have quite some confidence... In my abilities."

Swordsmen and the like hailing from foreign lands becoming

adventurers were not exactly rare, so my reasoning was perfectly believable.

My words did little to reassure Sheila, though, who was still evidently worried.

However, she did not attempt to stop me, instead simply continuing on with the appropriate procedures, as if she had given up on convincing me to do otherwise.

"...Just don't do anything risky. We all only live one life, after all. If it looks bad, please retreat to a safe location, all right?"

More than anyone else, I understood the importance of Sheila's advice—after all, I had already died once before. If anything, I had always been the type to hastily retreat if I sensed the slightest bit of danger, so Sheila's worries, while good-natured, were misplaced.

But offering words of caution to adventurers was just part of her job.

I responded with a simple acknowledgment of "I understand," and that was all I had to say.

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With my adventurer's registration out of the way, I had no intention to suddenly head toward the Labyrinth of the New Moon. Of course, there was the issue of me having accepted the Orc materials request, but there was plenty of time left for me to fulfill that at a later date.

I had to head to somewhere else first—more precisely, to the uncharted sector of the Moon's Reflection. Simply put, I was headed to the location where I had last fought the Giant Skeleton.

The Labyrinth of the Moon's Reflection was, as usual, quite quiet. While I did pass by the occasional Iron-class adventurer,

they did not seem to notice me as I walked by, being too engrossed in their own battles with some monster or another.

In addition to giving them a wide berth, I did what I could to suppress my magic and spiritual presence, stealthily walking through the Labyrinth's halls. In the past, all I had to do to sneak past human and monster alike was to be a little more silent; but so weak were my powers that neither would have noticed me anyway.

I wasn't sure if I should be so happy that I had to do something like this now to advance unnoticed, since it was a little troublesome; even so, I supposed issues like these were worries that only the strong faced. I decided to shelve those thoughts for now, given that they were not significant problems to begin with. If anything, I viewed it as practice; hiding my mana and spirit at will would surely improve my control over said abilities as time went by.

Arriving at a familiar entrance, I stepped into the hidden pathway, eventually reaching and confidently stepping into the magic circle on the ground.

Having used it once, the circle no longer felt as intimidating or dangerous. Although I had heard stories of magic circles that transport users to different locations each time, I had difficulties believing that such an ill-intentioned mechanism was present in this labyrinth. Perhaps it would be a given to encounter those circles in labyrinths of a higher difficulty, but the Moon's Reflection did not seem like such a location.

With that being said, however, there was no other way to verify my suspicions. Thankfully, the magic circle proved to be benign, transporting me to the very same chamber where I had first fought the Giant Skeleton. Readying my sword, I slowly stepped out of the circle—

While I had defeated it before, the Giant Skeleton could have

simply reappeared during my absence. This was, for all intents and purposes, a boss chamber, so the Skeleton in question might endlessly reappear in a cycle, or it might have been a one-off. Not knowing which of the two this chamber was, I advanced carefully, mentally prepared for the possibility of combat. This was the least I could do, as it paid well to be cautious in the labyrinth.

However, no matter how long I waited after exiting the circle, the Giant Skeleton did not reappear—in fact, I could not feel its presence at all. Maybe it needed more time, or was a monster that only appeared once; either way, I lowered my sword, somewhat more relieved than I previously was. With that, though, I had no intentions of sheathing my blade.

Looking around, I once again found myself in a large, empty chamber. One would question why I ended up at such a location after accepting a request that was to be fulfilled in another labyrinth—but of course, I had my reasons.

This very magic circle that I had just stepped out of only appeared after I had defeated the Giant Skeleton—it had been invisible prior to that. I had discovered this newly-formed circle during a search of the chamber while Loris, the owner of the Red Wyvern Pavilion, was unconscious.

However, that was not all I had found. In reality, there was one more circle, positioned on the ground not far from the one I had stepped into to enter the Giant Skeleton's chamber. If I had to guess, that circle was probably connected to another location. The Labyrinth of the Moon's Reflection seemed to continue on past this magic circle.

Slowly, I stepped into the circle on the ground. While I did not understand the language used to inscribe it, nor the principles behind the strange magics used to power it, I could at least see that this circle was drawn a little differently from the one that led to the boss chamber. Surely, it would bring me to a different location.

Perhaps this was all a trap of sorts—two circles in a room, with the more unfortunate intruders ending up in a sealed room with a Giant Skeleton. I supposed such things happened from time to time.

Well, then...what would it be this time? Snakes? Demons? A Dragon, perhaps?

Of course, there was no other way of finding out. As the magic circle began giving off a bright light, I readied my sword once again, waiting for the eventual change in my surroundings.

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As the light slowly began to fade, I quickly turned to look at my surroundings, prepared for an attack from any direction. I could not discount the possibility that this circle, too, was a trap of some kind, with monsters or the like lying in wait. However...

As far as I could see, there were no monsters here, let alone any sort of traps. Instead, I found myself in a messy, cluttered room. All sorts of objects lay about, some rotting on the ground. All signs pointed to this place having been inhabited at some point in time—if anything, it did not look like it belonged in the labyrinth at all.

Several shelves lined the wall—even a table and bed were present. What appeared to be a soft toy lay on the ground near me. As I reached out to touch it, however, the toy crumbled into dust, leaving no trace of its previous form. I could only assume that this place had been untouched for years, perhaps even centuries.

The thing that caught my attention, however, was the bed at the end of the room—or, to be precise, what was sleeping on that bed. Someone had slept their last night here many, many years ago, and even now continued their eternal slumber.

A set of white bones lay, somewhat serenely, on the bed. There

was no light in the skull's sunken sockets; what remained of its eyes looked straight up at the ceiling, and its skeletal hands clasped on its chest. At a glance, the individual in question seemed to have died peacefully in their sleep.

A bouquet of dried flowers was placed by their pillow. I reached out to touch them, only to be greeted by the sight of said flowers turning into dust before my very eyes.

What...is this place?

Someone once lived here—I could see that much—but I'd never heard of a human being living so deep in a labyrinth of any kind.

For starters, was something like that even possible...?

I had no idea. However, the very existence of this room proved one thing: if this room existed, its owner must have also existed and lived here at some point in time.

Even so... I had not seen anything resembling treasure around me. What deeper meaning did this place hold?

With that in mind, I searched the room, looking through the debris and ruins like any good adventurer would. But nothing noteworthy was to be found. After I had come all this way, too... I supposed there were some old books on those shelves?

Glancing at the shelves, many of the books in question seemed to be reference tomes that were most likely undecipherable, except by the most skilled specialists. Strangely, amidst these volumes were what seemed to be thin picture books. Did a child live here?

These were, of course, all very old books. If I took some of them with me, I am sure they would fetch a fair amount of coin.

Nodding, I reached out for the ancient books—

"...You there. What exactly do you think you're doing?" a voice rang out from behind me.

Behind me...? This was abnormal; impossible, even. I had constantly been on guard after all, not knowing what lay in the depths of this room.

I had little choice but to turn around. The owner of the voice could have suddenly attacked me—but instead, they called out to me, as if they had expected and were waiting for me to turn around.

Slowly, I turned to face the direction of the voice. It was a woman: at a glance, she didn't look too special. Soft, white hair; blue eyes; and a gentle, soothing smile—such was the woman that stood before me in this small room. She was wearing a black robe; a magician of sorts, perhaps.

The woman spoke to me once more:

"I will ask you again: What exactly are you doing in this place?"

It was a calm voice, gentle and soothing, almost like the voice of an adult questioning a child for a slight of some kind.

I, however, stopped breathing. For a moment, I was gripped by an intense feeling of nervousness, of tension...

If I had to put it simply: this woman was bad news.

I trusted the gut feeling that I had relied on for most of my life, so I could easily say that much without any hesitation. But the woman stood in front of the magic circle, effectively sealing off my only means of escape.

I had no idea what I should do. I suppose the only choice I had

was to answer her question; this was the conclusion I had arrived at after much frantic thought.

I offered the woman my answer:

"...I was just... Looking around for... Anything of value... I am an adventurer, so..."

"Haha. Value, value... Anything of value... I see. So, you are a thief? Well, then, I do hope you are prepared to die here?"

"What...?"

"You seem troubled. But yes, of course. I understand. I understand but...there are some things I simply cannot forgive. I do not wish to defile this place... But to that end, I suppose I would just have to erase you—there is no other way."

With that, the woman lightly raised her hand, pointing it my way. I had no idea what she was doing when just then, almost instantaneously, I noticed the fearsome amount of magic condensing into the palm of her hand. Instinctively, I put all of my abilities into defensive magics and skills. With a Shield of magic, the strengthening of my body with spirit, and the infusion of my blade with divinity, surely I would be able to ward off any attack.

Of course, I had fully intended to dodge the whole attack, if possible. The woman's assault, however, was much faster, much more accurate.

Intense flames shot forth from her palm, smashing into my being. It was like the breath of a Dragon, as the force sunk into me like a cannonball—such was the force of its impact. It was much more heavy, more powerful, than the blow of a mere Giant Skeleton.

I was sent flying, smashing clean into a nearby wall. I felt a spike of pain flash up my back. While I was glad that I had

blocked a single attack, the battle was far from over. I could immediately feel the same type of magic being gathered into the woman's palm once more—death itself was being condensed into a fireball a short distance before me.

As I struggled to get up, the woman slowly approached, her palm raised with murderous intent. There was no way I could defend against the next blow.

Even so, I couldn't give up, and I started the preparations for another layer of magic shielding. I probably wouldn't make it in time... But then I noticed the gaze of the woman, leveled squarely on me. What happened next was unexpected, as the woman's movements stopped where she stood.

"...You... Your...body...?" It would seem like she had a question for me.

My body? What of it?

While it was protected by a wave of magic and spirit, my robes had been set aflame by the previous fireball. Most of my garments were now burnt to a crisp, revealing the rotten, corpse-like bits of my Thrall body. No matter how one looked at it, I hardly seemed human with bits of rotting, and occasional dried, pieces of flesh on my body. The woman seemed surprised at this.

But of course she would be; only monsters would look like this.

"...What... Of it. Even I... Did not choose to... Become like this. Do you think... I like... Looking like this?"

I had no illusions regarding the situation. There was just no way I could escape from this woman. I was doomed to die in this room, so I might as well say what I wanted to say. This might very well be the last time I would get to say it.

The woman, however, did not seem angered at my words. Instead, she lowered her hand, the traces of magic fading from her palm.

"...But yes. Of course... I see. It would seem that I was mistaken—a misunderstanding. I do apologize."

Was the woman...apologizing to me?

"Oh... I see that your robes have unfortunately caught fire. I do not have any replacements on hand... Perhaps I could offer you this instead. It is well-made, and I do believe it would be of service to you."

Saying so, the woman took off her black robes, folding them up and handing them to me.

"Ah, one more thing to note: This is a room of great importance to me. I suppose even you would understand that this place is special. Could I please request that you not make mention of this room to anyone else?" the woman said, looking at me with a serene expression.

The woman surely knew that I would agree; after all, she had let me live in exchange for keeping this room's location a secret. What I did not understand was how the woman knew of this room, and why I was not allowed to report it to anyone. To begin with, even if one was not an adventurer, discovering an uncharted sector in a labyrinth was a big find—one could end up with enough wealth to last a lifetime, so it was a given that the average person would report this information to the guild.

"You... Don't want me to... Tell the guild...?"

"Yes, I suppose that would be for the best. More accurately, if you were not present, there would be no means of entering this room. You arrived here via that magic circle, yes? That circle would only activate if you stepped into it."

That was what the woman had to say, in addition to the many other things she went on to mention that I had no way of understanding. Such was the gap in power between us; even Lorraine, who was a Silver-class mage, would not be able to compare to her strength. If I had given her an answer she did not appreciate, death would surely be her response—I could see that much.

However, advancing in adventurer rank was also my dream. Originally, I had intended for Loris to report the uncharted sector, in turn returning the gold I had loaned him via the Giant Skeleton's magic crystal. Now, with my somewhat human-like appearance, I had thought it possible to report this information to the guild at a time when it was less crowded. This would surely increase my rank and influence with the guild, bringing me a step closer to the goal of becoming a Mithril-class adventurer.

At least, that was what I thought. This woman, however, did not want me to do anything of the sort…

As if understanding how I felt about the situation, the woman had started speaking once more:

"…With that being said, I suppose you would not like to return empty-handed. I understand. Adventurers are always seeking some form of tangible result or achievement, you see. Perhaps this would not amount to much of a replacement, but it will still surely be of use to you. What do you think?"

"This is…"

The object offered to me appeared to be some sort of ancient parchment—it was also remarkably blank. At a glance, I could deduce that it was probably an ancient literary artifact of some kind. Unfortunately, it did not look like it was worth much of a fortune at all.

But the woman continued her explanation:

“This is an artifact that automatically maps labyrinth sectors that its owner has set foot into—a magic tool known as the Map of Akasha. As of now, nothing is written on it, but that is only due to the fact that the previous owner had erased the archived maps on it. It would surely be useful to an adventurer such as yourself… What do you think?”

If what the woman said was true, this was a useful tool indeed. In fact, it was surprising that such an item could exist—if I were to consider selling it, setting a fair price for it alone would pose quite a bit of a challenge.

But of course, this was assuming what the woman had said was true. Could such a fantastical tool even exist in our world?



“Would you at least consider my request if I were to prove to you the validity of my claims?”

I nodded at the woman’s question. If the map worked as the woman claimed it did, owning it would definitely make my labyrinth exploration much easier. I suppose there was some worth in listening to her requests, even if I remained skeptical of the entire affair.

“Well, then, please channel your magic through the parchment…”

I did as I was told, and—

“…Amazing…”

I could only hold my figurative breath as lines dashed across the surface of the previously blank parchment, eventually forming a detailed map of the Moon’s Reflection. Even the little details and notes that I had written on my own battered map had appeared, neatly surfacing themselves on the parchment.

“I suppose we have an agreement?”

“…Yes. I suppose we do.”

While I still felt an intense urge to report this uncharted sector to the guild, there was a high possibility that this woman would come for my life if I did so. She had, after all, been unmistakably attempting to kill me mere minutes ago—I could not go against her words even if I wanted to.

“I see. That is most pleasing. Well, then, I should see you off—to the entrance, at least.”

“Eh?”

Before I could say anything else, the woman activated some

sort of translocation magic. Immediately, I found my vision distorting before me. Smiling gently as she waved, her expression seemed markedly different from the murderous face she had worn earlier in our encounter.

"...Well, then. Do take care... Perhaps it is a little silly to say that to one such as yourself, though."

With those parting words, she was gone, and I soon found myself standing at the entrance of the Moon's Reflection.

Was this just a dream?

I looked down: my robes were indeed different, and I held an ancient-looking piece of parchment in my hand.

...What was that all about?

I could not stop thinking about the events that had just transpired. I no longer had any intentions of exploring today, and with apprehensive thoughts of these recent affairs filling my mind, I slowly made my way back to the town of Maalt.

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"...It is almost as if you have been cursed, Rentt. Why do these strange things keep happening to you as of late?"

That was apparently what Lorraine had to say as I described the details of my latest adventure to her. She looked at me with an expression of mild disbelief and exasperation.

It is not like... I would like to have... Strange things happen to me all... The time.

Although I would have wanted to deliver such a rebuke to Lorraine, I was the one who had returned to the place where I met the Dragon, merrily advancing deep into the unknown of the

labyrinth. Even if I could not feel the Dragon's presence anymore, sticking my head into such a place was not exactly smart—as such, I swallowed my words. For all intents and purposes, Lorraine was right.

"Well… Adventurers are known to get into all sorts of strange situations—occupational hazards and all that. A little too late to complain, I would say… Right, well, this magic tool of yours. Seems like it works relatively well," Lorraine said, staring at the Map of Akasha that I had obtained from the white-haired woman.



While the automatic mapping of a labyrinth was convenient indeed, I had come across one too many cursed objects. As such, I felt like there could never be too much caution when it came to appraising items gifted to me, and decided to have Lorraine perform an inspection to reveal any potential traps or misgivings.

While I did have my fair share of divinity and could detect curses easily, special items that were beyond my reach did exist—my mask, for example, was one such case. The most I could do with my divinity was get a rough feeling if there was anything unsavory lying in wait for me within the object, as detailed examinations were beyond my ability.

Lorraine, however, had her share of scholarly knowledge, in addition to her skills at magic and alchemy. With her experience, she would possibly be able to gain some insight on the map—hence my decision. Apparently she also possessed the qualifications to officially appraise items for the guild, so she would have no trouble finding jobs with the qualifications she held. In addition, Lorraine only performed item appraisal on an odd-job basis—I could not help but be envious of her capabilities.

"...Have you found out... Anything about how to use... This map in detail?"

While the woman had simply handed the map over to me and told me to infuse my magic into it, I knew little else about how this map worked, or if it could be used in any other way.

"I did try investigating it, yes, but it seems like I cannot use this map on my own. You were told that running magic through this map causes it to draw itself, correct? But it seems like your magic is specifically required as mine alone does not work. Here, you try."

With that, Lorraine casually handed the map to me—sure enough, familiar lines detailing the passageways and floors of the

Moon's Reflection started appearing on its surface.

"Hmm… Quite something else indeed. This… What is this dot here?"

Upon closer inspection, a black dot was visible on the map's surface, perpetually in motion. Overcome by curiosity, I touched the dot with a finger, and upon doing so caused what appeared to be a name to materialize beneath the dot.

"This is…"

"It would seem so, yes. This is the name of an individual who is currently exploring the labyrinth. To think that the map is capable of even this—truly terrifying indeed. What capability! This is undoubtedly an item on par with a kingdom's national treasures," Lorraine said, seemingly moved by the map's abilities.

In truth, I knew that I had struck a good deal even without knowing about this map's additional functions—but in exchange, I had almost lost my life to that woman's magic. Taking these factors into account, I suppose the trade was somewhat even.

Lorraine and I continued conducting various tests and experiments on the map, eventually discovering that the area illustrated by said map could change as long as I willed it to do so—so long as I was channeling magic into it. For example, I could easily instruct the map to illustrate another area, changing its display from the halls of the Moon's Reflection to another location of my choice.

In addition, the ability of the map to show the names of other adventurers only worked if the wielder had fully explored the labyrinth in question. Although I had completed the mapping of the Moon's Reflection over my long career, I had hardly explored the Labyrinth of the New Moon.

Upon attempting to have the map switch its focus to the latter

labyrinth, I realized that only the areas I had been to previously were mapped. In addition, the adventurer-tracking function was inactive. This was proven to be the case as Lorraine and I stared at the map together for a considerable amount of time—yet nary a dot appeared on its surface. If I had to guess, I had simply not mapped this labyrinth enough for said function to activate.

Strictly speaking, it was more than a guess, as the tracking function had worked on the first floor of the New Moon, which I had finished mapping some time ago. Taking this fact into account, it was plain to see that the other floors needed a similar amount of work before the tracking function in question would start working.

While the Map of Akasha was certainly a convenient tool, it still had its own limitations.

There was one more thing I had to ask Lorraine, however:

"What about… Curses and the like…?"

"It seems safe from what I see so far. You will probably be able to use it without much cause for worry. This is quite the artifact you have found…"

"Is… That so?"

Lorraine's appraisal of the map's worth seemed somewhat sudden.

"But of course. It is highly resistant against magic of all sorts, and cannot easily be cut with sharp objects. Though I have no idea how well it would hold up against a skilled swordsman or a well-crafted sword, it seems to have more defensive capabilities than normal armor; yes, that would be a good analogy for it."

Lorraine's analogy was somewhat astounding, for if it were true, this map would be quite the artifact indeed. Although I had

found myself utterly disappointed that I could no longer report the discovery of a previously uncharted sector to the adventurer's guild, the fact that I had obtained such a convenient magical tool and makeshift defense item impressed me. Perhaps I actually gained much more from this trade than I had initially assumed.

Besides, even if I reported said uncharted sector, the Labyrinth of the Moon's Reflection was only a beginner-level labyrinth frequented by adventurers up to the Bronze-class level. While I could have expected a reasonably-sized award, the recognition I would have gained from such a discovery would not be that significant in the greater scheme of things.

With that in mind, I suppose I could call this trade a definite plus. After all, the magic crystals I had harvested from monsters in the sector (with the exception of the Giant Skeleton's crystal) were sold for a tidy sum by Lorraine, so I was now financially stable, if not comfortable.

Although I had handed Clope half my fortune as a deposit for my order-made weapon, I was now no longer in danger of going into the red.

"...Well. Lastly, there is the issue of the woman that you met in that place... I have no information on her, unfortunately. Personally, I am more interested in the ability and techniques required to create some sort of abode in a labyrinth, of all places..."

It would seem like Lorraine and I were in agreement on that point. The woman had suddenly appeared and quickly sent me on my way without providing much of an explanation. Due to our relatively short interaction, I had no way of observing her in detail, and as a result, no way of deducing who she could have been.

Although I was certain of her strength, the fact that she could reprimand and intimidate me in such a fashion meant that she was a rarity in and of herself.

In my current state, I could probably take on a lower Silver-class adventurer. Even if I could not win, I would at least be able to escape. If faced with a Gold-class or above adventurer, however, I would surely be defeated in an instant. That would be a fair assessment of my current strength.

But of course, I had no intentions of stagnating here—I wanted to climb to greater heights. To achieve that, I needed a body that could grow, and this was something I now possessed.

With that said, however, there was still the possibility that no matter how much I evolved, I would still remain a monster of sorts.

"Actually... I was about to head off... To that uncharted sector again..."

"Even though you were chased out the last time? How very brave of you."

"The woman told me... To not 'report' that place... To the guild. She said nothing... About 'not going back' there."

"...I suppose that much is true, at least from what you've told me. It is, however, a technicality, as she obviously does not wish for you to step foot in that place again."

Lorraine's words rang true, but many things about that encounter still bothered me. I would at least like to speak with her one more time, and ask her certain questions—such were my hopes.

If it could not be done, then so be it, but I had to at least try. From how our last interaction ended, I could somewhat assume that she would no longer immediately make an attempt on my life.

Lorraine, in turn, had a few words of caution for me:

"...You would do well to be careful. That woman is by no means normal—I can say that much just by listening to your account. There is no telling what would draw forth her ire."

"I know."

Lorraine nodded. Perhaps it was obvious, but having faced her in person and nearly dying from the experience, I understood that point better than anyone else.

Lorraine was right: I had to be careful above all else, lest I find myself staring death in the face without warning once more.

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It would unfortunately turn out that all my effort was wasted, as I would find out the very next day.

The reason for this was simple: what was previously the entrance to the uncharted sector of the Moon's Reflection had apparently disappeared without a trace. No matter how I looked at it, the dead end in question was now a perfect wall—and that was all that currently stood there.

Unconvinced, I walked up to the wall, touching it here and there with my hands. All that greeted my fingers, however, was a cold, smooth surface—and that was that. With this, all means of retrieving clues, or any kind of answers from the woman, were gone.

Just who was she...?

I stood still, thinking about the question for a period of time. The answers, however, eluded me; no one would simply walk up to me with all the answers to my questions, after all.

Would I perhaps meet her again someday?

I had no idea. But one thing did remain clear in my mind: I

would continue climbing the ranks toward my goal, eventually becoming a Mithril-class adventurer. I would definitely meet her again, someday. At the very least, I felt that way.

In life, I had trained hard, day after day for an entire decade, without the slightest thing to show for it.

But things were now very different. A meeting with a Dragon, discovering an uncharted area of a labyrinth... And of course, I was now an undead.

Perhaps a normal person would say that I was unfortunate. I, however, did not feel that way.

I would fight many monsters, encounter many mysteries, and above all, become stronger. All this, too, would contribute to my goal of eventually becoming a Mithril-class adventurer.

That is the sort of adventure that I am currently undertaking—come to think of it, the various misfortunes that have visited me recently could also be seen as invaluable, precious experiences. I would definitely grasp that Mithril dream with my hands.

With those thoughts in mind, I steeled my resolve. My dream was difficult, and to fulfill it, I would surely have to meet with the Dragon and that woman again. I would have to be at least able to stand toe-to-toe with them when that time inevitably came.

If there is a will, there is a way... I would not have it by any other means.

SIDE STORY

The Day When Rentt Snapped ~Adventurer Lorraine's Sixth Year~

"...Oh, if it isn't Lorraine. How rare. Are you alone?"

It was during my sixth year of adventuring that such a voice called out to me, just as I sat down in the tavern of Maalt, barely having the opportunity to work on my drink. The one who had called out to me was none other than Zarid, a veteran swordsman of the adventurer's guild.

Although he was a veteran of sorts, he was only an adventurer of upper-Bronze-class rank. On a whole, one could not say Zarid was exceedingly capable, but his long years of service and efforts in defending Maalt against monster hordes meant that he was an adventurer worth his salt.

Due to the fact that most adventurers lost their lives, or commonly a limb or two, Zarid only sported facial scars—the fact that his limbs were still intact was a clear indicator of his capabilities.

To some, however, Zarid's caution came across as cowardice, and they mocked his lack of "adventures" and the like. But such individuals were not exactly wise in their assessment. Courage, after all, was not a blind rampage and a series of unplanned gambles. The only ones who thought of it as such were surely bigger fools than Zarid ever could be.

Zarid, of course, was no fool to begin with; he was merely frank, that much was true. Compared to Rentt, who was often

said to have no talent, and my own reputation of being unmotivated, Zarid was a relatively good, if not honest and outspoken, adventurer. This was why I did not mind teaming up with him in a party at times, for I knew him well enough.

"Even I am not coupled with Rentt every single time. To begin with, we probably spend more time apart from each other than together."

A somewhat annoying smile flitted across Zarid's face as he heard my answer.

"Is that right? You know, that bet between me and my mates is still going... That one about if you'll ever get married to Rentt."

Zarid, however, did not seem to be exclusively making fun of me; to be precise, he seemed at least half-concerned, with the other half being his idea of a joke. I was, after all, 20 years old now. Perhaps it was because of this that Zarid said as much, with the notions of a woman being of age to "put down roots" or the like.

Now that I thought about it, communications between my colleagues and myself since moving away from the capital all seemed to include offers to introduce me to someone. With that being said, it was not like I had never thought of marriage...but I was not exactly hoping to be taken care of by someone, nor did I wish for it.

My views on marriage were plain: if the time was right and the person in question was suitable, then that would be it. My married female friends, however, did not think much of my views. All they had to say was, "If you keep saying that, you're never going to get married, you know!" But this was just a matter of policy; on that alone I was not willing to cede to their demands and complaints.

To clarify, I would not simply settle for any random individual

on the streets of Maalt, or anywhere else, for that matter. At the very least, all those letters and correspondence offering to introduce me to said individuals would never see their purpose fulfilled.

"Do you people not tire of your bets? I personally would have gotten bored with it years ago. Could you just not watch over us? Surely you can do that much for an old friend."

"Ha! If watching alone made things happen, even I'd get married!"

Zarid's swift rebuttal reminded me of the fact that he was still single. This was perhaps a given, as such a lifestyle would be difficult to support, given his current adventurer rank. For an upper-Bronze-class adventurer, adventuring itself definitely brought in more coin than the average job in Maalt. If anything, they did not exactly need to work themselves to death to stay alive. The bigger question was if they could still live to see tomorrow.

Dating, perhaps, would not be too much of an issue, but marriage was another matter altogether. If the adventurer's partner in question was not an adventurer, as well, said partner would have to steel themselves for the fact that the person they love may not come home every time they set foot outside Maalt's gates.

"I suppose I said something unnecessary. I apologize."

"Oh, no. I don't mind. I say plenty of unnecessary things myself... That aside, though. If you're here on your own, care to have a drink with me?"

"What, now you're turning your charms on me?"

"Don't be daft, Lorraine. I'm not the sort of individual who would be interested in a kid a few decades younger than myself," Zarid said, an exasperated expression on his face. As if taking my words for an affirmation, he pulled up a chair from a nearby

table, docking it against mine.

In a well-trained motion, he flagged down a nearby waiter, placing an order for a large mug of ale, albeit on his tab. The establishment, being older than Zarid himself, was probably used to our antics at this point.

If memory served, the current master of the tavern was the previous guildmaster of the adventurer's guild. According to the rumors, he was a fearsome individual when he had served, with a single glance capable of silencing even the loudest crying child. It was a far cry from the jolly old man he had now become.

If the gossip amongst my fellow adventurers was to be believed, he had recently become a grandfather, his grandson having been born a while ago. As such, the developments in question were probably not that strange if one took that into account.

"Are you not starved for love then? You were, after all, just complaining about being unable to get married a short while ago," I said, posing the question to Zarid as I placed my own order.

"I wouldn't really want to say this to you, you being a woman and all, but certain establishments exist for that sort of thing, you know? Also… Getting married, especially for an adventurer, comes with all sorts of potential problems. For now, just someone to play around with is good enough. While Bronze-class adventurers earn enough to keep themselves afloat, many of them end up broke after their payday, anyway."

"So, I suppose you are of the latter? Have you gotten all your fortunes wrung out of you by one woman or another?"

"Yeah, right down to the hairs on my behind. But then again… Ugh. The conversation has gotten kinda sad, hasn't it?"

"I don't know about that. From the way you describe it, it al-

most seems like a personal tale of heroic achievement."

"That right? Heroic achievement, huh... Hmm?"

Zarid's commentary was unceremoniously interrupted by a commotion. A group of three adventurers had apparently made quite the loud entry into the tavern.

From the looks of it, they did not seem older than twenty. They were built impressively, and looked like the epitome of adventuring, but that only extended as far as their appearances. To my eye, their capabilities left much to be desired.

"Hmph. Looks like we've got a few show-offs here. Sure they look strong, but that's about it, isn't it?" Zarid said in a relatively subdued voice, snorting with amusement.

While one would think it was unbecoming of Zarid to be judgmental about the strength of others, such was not the case here. He was merely displeased with the way those adventurers had entered the establishment, perhaps rightfully so.

After all, it was not difficult for me to understand how he felt about the matter—everything from the way they had opened the tavern's doors, to how they presented themselves, seemed to be for the sole purpose of intimidating other customers.

In addition, they had presented themselves in this fashion while knowing full well that this tavern was mainly frequented by other adventurers. It was not difficult to understand why Zarid had taken issue with their behavior.

"Verily so. I would say that you are at least ten times as strong, Zarid."

"Come now, wouldn't that be at least a hundred times?"

"But alas, lying would be unbecoming of me, Zarid. Even if we are dealing with ruffians who know nothing of manners... Hmm?"

As those words left my lips, the trio that had just barged into the tavern looked in our direction, rapidly approaching me as they did so. Before long, they stood before me, with the one who seemed to be their leader addressing me in a markedly uncouth manner.

"…Hey there, little lady. Aren't you quite a pretty thing? Why don't you come have some fun with us over there?"

They were basically soliciting me for sexual services, perhaps implying that I was a prostitute of sorts. I had been in many situations similar to this before. Rentt had instructed me on how to escape from such situations, most likely out of concern for my safety.

Still, I understood what they meant, and had more than enough means at my disposal to handle such an event.

"Unfortunately, I am already occupied. As you can see, I am busy drinking with this gentleman here—perhaps you should try someone else."

The ruffian adventurer in question, however, pounded the table with his fist in response.

"Just who the hell do you think we are, woman? You a fool? You should be tending to us, not this worthless sack of a man!" he said, evidently roused by my commentary.

In this situation, the common woman being harassed would have cried out in fear, calling for help from one good Samaritan or another. Unfortunately, I was by no means common, or normal.

While thoughts of becoming normal did cross my mind on occasion, the fonts of mana churning within me had other ideas about my future.

Taking care to hide my intent, I began condensing the mana in me, weaving it slowly into a spell. While the delinquents did not suspect a thing, Zarid had already noticed, panicking as he raised a hand.

"H-hey... You three..." I suppose Zarid was merciful. A warning was more than these individuals deserved.

At that moment, however, a new guest entered the tavern. At the sight of them—

"...Oh?"

The mana within me welled up...and then stopped. I shelved the thought of launching a spell at the men—for now.

Had I forgiven them? Of course not; that was beyond consideration. The reason for doing so was that I simply thought I no longer had a part in this show, mainly owing to the fact that a deadly aura was permeating from the guest who had just entered this tavern.

I, too, was curious as to whom this aura belonged to. Craning my neck, I was surprised to see that the person in question was all too familiar.

"...Rentt?"

Yes, in the flesh—standing in the doorway of the tavern was my good friend, Rentt Faina. But Rentt was different from his usual jovial self; it almost seemed like he could kill someone. The contrast itself was stark enough for me to know how dangerous the current situation was.

What exactly had happened...?

As if to answer my question, Zarid spoke, a tinge of fear evident in his voice.

"...This is bad. That guy... He's completely snapped."

"Rentt... Snap...? Him? Really?"

Zarid's response to my question was slow and elaborate.

"...Yeah. I suppose you wouldn't know. Right... This was before your time. The last time was...when you were out on an errand, and the time before that was before you arrived in Maalt. Yes... That's right."

"...What happened, then?"

"Well..."

"What exactly—huh? The men just now... Where did they go?"

Before I knew it, the men who had been harassing me were gone, as if they were never here in the first place. This was strange, considering how much they were boasting about having fun with me. Now, they were gone, like smoke.

"Oh... Those fellows? They ran out the back door after seeing Rentt. Like spooked rabbits, you know. They run pretty fast, don't they?"

"...Hmm. How very strange. I thought they would have some measure of courage..."

Although the men in question had clearly mixed up the definition of courage and being boorish, I did not think that they were the type to simply up and run with their tails between their legs.

"Well, Rentt probably did something to them before they got here, no?"

"Hmm... I would not know. Is that true?"

"An assumption, Lorraine. That's all. You could certainly ask

the man himself. Now, Rentt—what's all this about?" Zarid said, gesturing pointedly. Turning my head in response, I came face to face with Rentt, who had apparently walked over to our table at some point. With a sour expression on his face, Rentt placed an order for an ale before sitting down at the table with us.

The aura that had radiated from him was now gone; not a single trace of it remained.

"What's this all about? Ugh, where do I even begin...? Those three are really hopeless. I suppose I'll have to beat their bad behavior out of them. Seems like anything short of that wouldn't work," Rentt said, downing the ale he had just ordered in a single gulp.

Seeing him this riled up was rare. With Rentt himself not providing much of an explanation, I turned to Zarid for answers. He, with an equally evident expression of displeasure on his face, answered my inquiry.

"...Those fools were purposefully pulling monsters to new adventurers in the labyrinth." Zarid, who was usually unshaken by most things, furrowed his brow.

"...I see. So, they are scum. Were they doing it on purpose?"

"Pulling" was a common adventurer slang term—it referred to the action of leading monsters to other adventurers, then immediately escaping as the monster's attention shifted. Although many adventurers did this without malice when they were running from monsters they couldn't handle, certain unsavory types often did so with ill intent.

This was why I had asked Zarid if they were doing it on purpose since they were not exactly strong.

Rentt, however, immediately shook his head.

“No, that wasn’t the case. As you two have seen, that trio don’t have much in the way of actual skill. Although they were hunting monsters in the Labyrinth of the New Moon, they ended up drawing the attention of about a dozen Goblins, eventually pulling them to adventurers who were slowly hunting in the relatively safer parts of the New Moon.”

“And what of those adventurers?”

“They’re safe. They followed my instructions and were all led to safety—somehow.”

While I had thought of defeating them, I suppose a dozen Goblins was indeed too much for Rentt. In addition, there were new adventurers he had to protect—in that regard, he made the right choice.

New adventurers were not very good at escaping, after all. The lack of such a skill would only serve to herald one’s death in the labyrinths. Rentt, however, was particularly good at escaping from monsters and the like.

“Was that all they did? Why are you so angry, then? Would you normally not have them reflect on their actions?”

“...The thing is, this isn’t the first time it’s happened. I did some investigating and found out that this was the fifth time... Given the chance, they would definitely do it again to some unwitting new adventurer—but of course, a veteran would immediately escape when a band of fools like that comes near them.”

“...I suppose there really is no saving people like that.”

“That’s exactly right. Also, the ones I had saved were Yuris and his group...”

If memory served, Yuris was of the new adventurers that had attended one of Rentt’s educational sessions at the guild. In fact, I

had even spoken with him once as he passed us by on the street after I had finished having a meal with Rentt. In this case, I suppose Rentt was referring to Yuris's party.

Rentt continued his explanation:

"Yuris noticed the group enter the labyrinth before his group today, and had thought that they would do the same thing again. So he told me about it. This was why I went with them, just to be sure. While it did all work out in the end, this cannot be allowed to continue. They did, after all, pull a dozen Goblins to Yuris's party today, and who knows, they might do it again tomorrow, to some other adventurers I don't know. Eventually, someone will lose their life. I have to stop them before something like that happens."

Zarid nodded at Rentt's words.

"All right. I get it. All we have to do is bring the hammer down on 'em, right? Shake 'em so hard they wouldn't ever think of doing something like this again? Guess the three of us can give 'em a piece of our minds—beat it into 'em, even!"

Zarid's proposal was easy to understand. If a show of power was all that was needed, I could even do it by myself—in this case, with both Rentt and Zarid present, it would be all too easy.

Rentt, however, shook his head.

"...No. Could you two leave this to me?"

"Hmm?"

"While we could literally beat it out of them, it would leave a bad taste in their mouths. They might even think of revenge, or something worse. We'll leave that option for last—but of course, if my plan fails, we can go with that."

From his words, it would seem like Rentt's plan was already in

motion; a plan that apparently did not involve violence.

Zarid, however, immediately nodded.

"Aye. I don't mind. But Rentt... Do go easy on 'em, all right?"

"Go easy? What do you mean? I'm not exactly strong, for one thing, so there's no need for that. Well, I really should get going. I still have to look for them and all that, yes?"

With that, Rentt reached into his pocket, pulling out some coin with the intent of paying for his drink; Zarid stopped him.

"No need for that, Rentt. My treat."

"Really? All right then, I'll take you up on that. See you around, Zarid."

And with that, Rentt was gone. Once again, I found myself alone with Zarid.

"What exactly would 'going easy' entail?"

I could not help but notice this fact since Rentt was, as he himself had said, not very strong. While those three didn't exactly stand much of a chance against Rentt, he could very well be in danger if he tried to show them any mercy.

Zarid, too, should know this, which was why his words confused me. But Zarid glanced at me momentarily, before taking yet another big swig from his tankard.

"...You'll see. Actually, you'll understand better when you hear of the results. Oh, and Lorraine... Today's my treat, too."

"Why so?"

"If I had chased those goons away the moment they approached you, you wouldn't have had to do all that. Consider it an

apology for not being enough of a gentleman."

"I don't really mind... Well. I suppose I shall accept, on account of having had to swallow my pride on this occasion."

"My bad. Then I should get going for today. This whole thing has left a bad taste in my mouth. I don't really feel like drinking anymore. Oh, and...do ask after Rentt about the outcome for me. Don't forget, now!"

"Of course."

And with that, we parted ways for the day.

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A few days later—

"...What exactly is that?"

Zarid's voice rang out from behind me: "The three idiots who tried to pick you up for some 'fun,' no?"

I turned around, and as expected, there stood Zarid.

"I can see that, but what is it exactly they are doing...?"

With that, I turned to look at the three fools once more. This was, after all, the entrance to the Labyrinth of the New Moon. The three of them, however, were on their knees at the entrance, apologizing to every adventurer who entered.

According to Zarid's explanation, they were apologizing for their behavior of pulling monsters toward other adventurers—and yet, something seemed off.

"I must say, though, I have never seen anyone repent with such vigor and enthusiasm."

“What, you haven’t heard about it from Rentt?” Zarid asked, cocking his head to one side.

I had, of course, little choice but to ask for clarification.

“So… After that incident at the tavern last time, Rentt apparently found them without too much trouble. He confirmed where they were staying and all that, and asked the owner of the boarding house there to give him their personal information: name, birthplace, all ’o that. Then he left.”

“…So in the end, Rentt didn’t meet with them in person right away?”

“Seems like it. Everything else happened after that, though… The very next day, those fools were chased out of their rooms.”

“…All thanks to Rentt, I suppose. He must have informed the landlord of their behavior.”

“More or less. But wait, there’s more! Apparently, they tried to stop by other boarding houses, but they all got turned down.

“But it gets better: the fools try to buy food, but none of the shops will serve ’em. Even the smithies rejected servicing their weapons; and of course, everyone on the street has been giving them cold stares. That’s what they were dealing with these past three days.”

“Rentt sure seems to have many…connections.”

“And when they finally thought they could buy food, the establishment in question demanded a whole gold coin for it! The townsfolk would pour water on ’em, and for some reason even birds saw fit to crap on ’em. Bad things would just happen to them over and over again as they walked the streets of Maalt—well, you get the picture.”

“Was it not obvious that they were being intentionally ha-

rassed...?"

"I suppose it was—it did go on for a while, after all. So, they go to the guards to complain... Only to be told by those very same city guards that they were guilty of doing the same thing. In fact, everyone they spoke to took issue with their bad deeds—and this went on for the last few days. They're pretty close to breaking, I'd reckon.

"Of course, they aren't literally that dumb—it was evident to them from the start who was pulling the strings. To be precise, Rentt purposely let them know he was the one responsible—and this was how they ended up going to Rentt, apologizing for their misdeeds and all that."

"And...this, is the result? Their repentance, I suppose?"

"Well, everyone they had caused trouble for did forgive them in the end—pretty nice ending to the story, huh?"

"Verily so. To be honest, I think it strange there were no fatalities from this incident. But with this, the issue was settled without anyone pining for revenge or some such—I suppose it is indeed a clean end to things."

"Exactly. Rentt isn't a person to be messed with, and I pity the fools who don't know this..." Zarid said, his voice almost subdued as he did so.

To clarify, I was not referring to adventurers who could have ended up dead from the trio's bad behavior. I referred to the seemingly fatal end that awaited those three individuals—after all, the ire of an adventurer was quite a nasty thing. If they had taken one wrong step or turn, it would not have been strange for the three of them to have been brutally murdered under the cover of night.

This, among other reasons, was why adventurers were encour-

aged to observe basic labyrinth manners during their explorations. These three clowns in question lacked that understanding, and by ending up on the wrong side of Rentt, incurred his wrath. Perhaps it would be more accurate to call this a life lesson.

In the end, however, the trio sincerely apologized for their actions, and no one was hurt, all thanks to Rent's efforts.

Although this was by no means a situation that one could laugh at, everyone had ended up laughing at the somewhat uneventful outcome. I, of all people, knew that it was not exactly easy to orchestrate an outcome like this—and that was why I said as such:

"Rentt Faina... Truly a man to fear."

I subdued my voice as an homage to Zarid's lengthy explanation. Maybe I would treat him to an ale or something of the sort today—after all, we could both use a good drink.

AFTERWORD

For those of you who are first-time readers, it is nice to meet you. For the long-time readers, it's been a while, hasn't it? Thank you for everything thus far.

I'm the author, Yu Okano. I often find myself troubled as to what goes into the afterword, but each one mostly ends up being similar, though. As always, thank you very much for purchasing my books.

I extend my humble thanks to readers who are new to my work, and loyal readers who are familiar with my other works. Thank you very much for your patronage. If possible, I would love to continue receiving all your support. I'll work hard for as long as I live—that's how I feel about it, anyway.

In other news, I've recently been receiving quite a bit of spam mail on my phone. While it has only been a little under a year since I changed my phone, I've been getting tons of spam as of late—why this is the case, I have no idea at all.

Personally, I don't remember writing my phone mail address down anywhere, nor did I give away my address to that many new friends. Either way, the issue is resolved by simply blocking the sender; even so, come to think of it, I haven't seen so many spam mails before, not even from back when I was a student. It's quite a lot of effort to block them all.

In the past, spam mails were predictable—they were just some dangerous URLs that you shouldn't click on. Nowadays, however, they look like legitimate messages sent by anyone from anywhere, with their addresses disguised and all that. There's usually some

long-winded story, concluding with a clickbait link at the end of the message. Looking at them, I couldn't help but feel that competition is intense in any industry—even that of spam mail scammers.

Publishing books is quite the competition, too—I am really grateful for the fact that I can continue publishing books at this relatively consistent pace. I feel that if I am to keep writing, I'm going to have to keep improving in a variety of places and points—just like how those spam mails keep evolving. If one has talent, that is another story; that said, I of all people know that I'm not one of those individuals. I've found niche after niche, opportunity after opportunity, and here I am today.

As such, I conclude the afterword of my first book—quite the dark afterword, wasn't it? Do forgive me for the relatively dark contents of the first book, as well. In closing, I hope that you will continue enjoying my work *The Unwanted Undead Adventurer* with me. Thank you very much for your patronage.

Well then, dear readers, if possible, let us meet again in the next book.