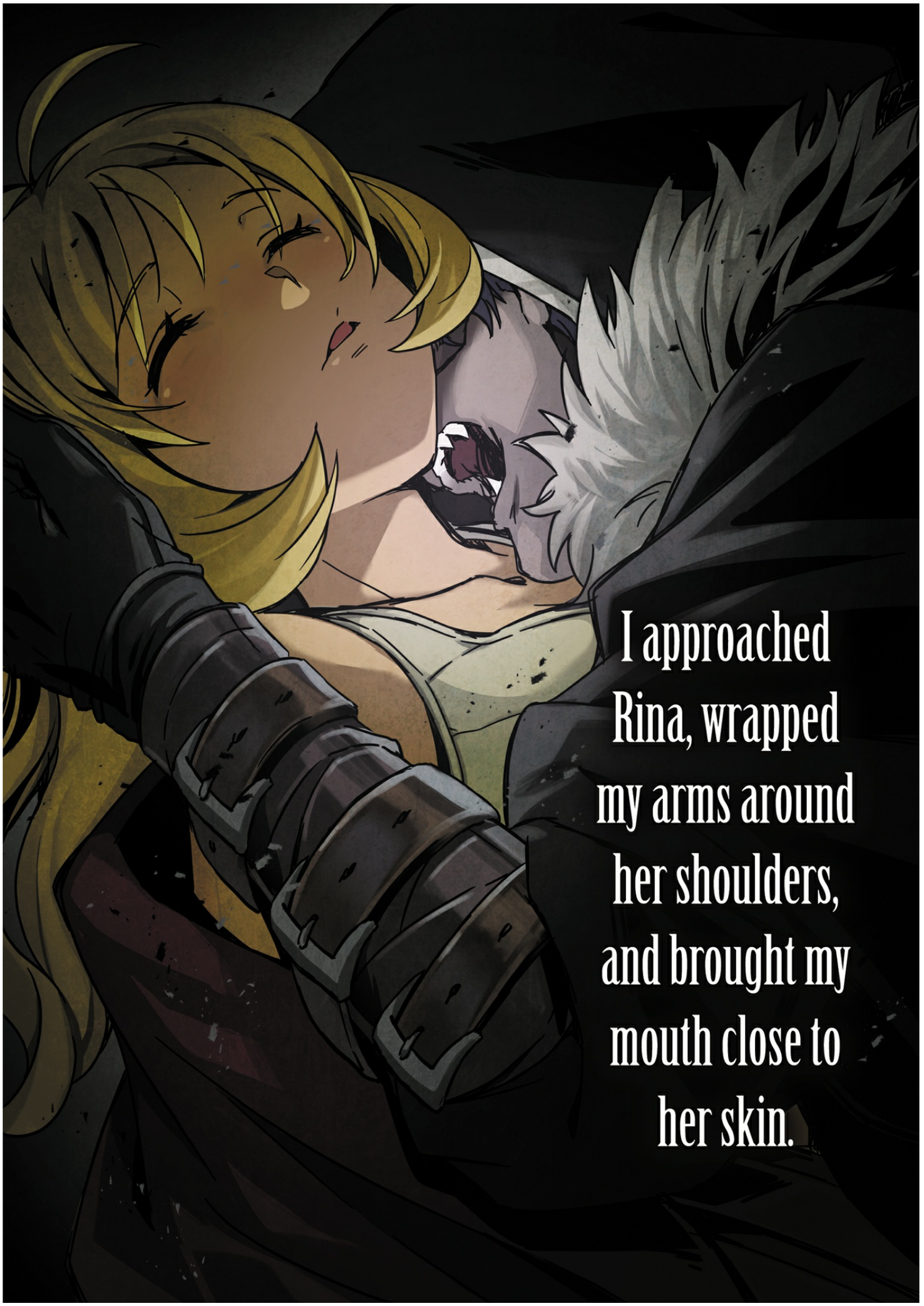

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Author
Yu Okano
Illustration
Jaian
The Unwanted Undead Adventurer


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The Unwanted Undead Adventurer
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Yu Okano / Jaian


A fight for the dungeon core.


I approached Rina, wrapped my arms around her shoulders, and brought my mouth close to her skin.

eighth

8 The Unwanted Undead Adventurer

Author Yu Okano

Illustrator Jaian



Characters



Sheila Ibarss

A receptionist at the guild. Knows Rentt's secret.



Lorraine Vivie

A scholar and Silver-class adventurer. Assists Rentt after he became undead.



Rentt Faina

An adventurer seeking to reach Mithril-class. Turned undead after being eaten by a dragon in a dungeon.



Edel

A monster called a puchi suri who lived under an orphanage. He sucked Rentt's blood and became his vampiric servant.



Alize

A girl who lives at an orphanage. Her dream is to be an adventurer. She became Rentt and Lorraine's disciple.



Rina Rupaage

A novice adventurer who helped Rentt and dragged him to town after he became a ghoul.



Wolf Hermann

Maalt's guildmaster. He invited Rentt to become a staff member at the guild.



Isaac Hart

A man who serves the Latuule family. He's powerful enough to survive in the Tarasque Swamp.



Laura Latuule

The head of the Latuule family. She collects magic items as a hobby. She requested that Rentt periodically deliver dragon blood blossoms to her.



Nive Maris

A Gold-class adventurer and vampire hunter. She's currently considered the person closest to reaching Platinum-class.



Gharb Faina

Rentt's great aunt, a teacher of medicine, and a magician.



Capitan

Hathara's top hunter and an advanced spirit user.



Wilfried Rucker

A greatsword-wielding Mithril-class adventurer. After an encounter with a young Rentt, he promised that they would meet again.



Jinlin

Rentt's childhood friend who dreamed of becoming an adventurer. She was killed by a wolf.



Myullias Raiza

A Lobelian saint who has been blessed by a divine spirit. She has the power to control divinity and specializes in healing and purifying.

Summary

Rentt, the eternal Bronze-class adventurer, became undead after he was eaten by a dragon. He used the unique monster trait called Existential Evolution to become a ghoul. After Rina, a new adventurer, helped him leave the dungeon, he ended up living with Lorraine in the city of Maalt. Going by an alias, he once again began to work toward becoming a Mithril-class adventurer. Rentt went to his hometown of Hathara to train, but while there he and Lorraine sensed that something was wrong with Edel back in Maalt. They rode a lindblum to quickly return to check on him. Once there, they saw the city engulfed in flames and thralls sprawling about.

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Chapter 1: The State of Maalt

Wolf asked me to help search for thralls and vampires.

“I don’t mind, but are you sure?” I replied.

“Sure about what?” he asked and cocked his head.

“You know I’m a vampire. Not that I had anything to do with this chaos, but don’t you worry I might join their side?”

That seemed like a normal concern to have, and Wolf said, “Well, maybe it’s not impossible.”

“In that case—”

“But from what I can see, it’s not happening.”

Now I was the one who was confused.

“Did you already forget why I wanted you to join the guild staff?” he said with a sigh. “Simply put, I value all the work you do for this city and its adventurers. I know how much good you’ve done. These guys are just trying to destroy the place, so I don’t see why you’d work with them, fellow vampire or not. It’s obvious. Am I right?”

I was a little surprised. I did get the feeling that he thought a lot of me, but I didn’t think it went that far. Maybe I just had a low opinion of myself. It seemed unusual for a guildmaster to pay such attention to each individual adventurer, though. Wolf was just special.

And he was right. All I felt when I saw Maalt like this was anger. It wasn’t the biggest or best city, but the peaceful lives of its people were being ruined for probably selfish reasons. I loved this town, its adventurers, and its citizens. Seeing it like this was nothing but enraging.

“You’re absolutely right,” I said to Wolf. “Got it. I’ll join the search. Can I decide where to go, though?”

Those decisions were usually made by the guild for the sake of efficiency.

They didn't always operate that way, but Wolf was a competent and rational guildmaster. I presumed he would prioritize productivity.

"Fine with me. Got any place in mind?" he responded promptly, contrary to expectations.

"Yeah, sort of. Besides that, there's the fact I'm a vampire to worry about. If I work with other adventurers, they might get suspicious of me."

"Right, makes sense. Well, I'm sure you can handle yourself, but be careful out there. Now get going!"

I dashed from the office and out onto the city streets.

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I ran through the town with my destination already decided. The city was in a dire state, so I took a look around to get a grasp of the situation first, but I had come back to Maalt for Edel, so he was my priority. I'd only waited as long as I did because I had confirmed he was alive and in a place where he would likely be safe for a bit.

Unlike other monsters, the undead could survive and recover from any amount of damage so long as their head remained intact, so I knew Edel would be okay. I was a bit afraid to test that by blowing my own head off to see if I could revive, but maybe even that was possible after enough time. I had no desire to try it out, though.

As for where I was going, it was Maalt's Second Orphanage. That was the home of Alize, Lillian, and the other orphans, as well as Edel's base of operations. I got a reading from Edel, and it was coming from there. He still seemed to be unconscious, but he was alive, so he was at least fine in some sense. I also wanted to know if Alize, Lillian, and the orphans were safe.

I rushed through town until I arrived at the orphanage. I saw people scrambling around on the way there, and I helped some who were stuck under debris, but I didn't see any vampires or thralls. Helping people didn't take too much time. This body made it pretty easy to move heavy objects and avoid harm. It was like nothing I could have imagined in the past.

I thought the changes to my senses might help locate vampires and thralls,

but that proved difficult. They seemed to be concealing themselves with magic like Wolf mentioned, including their scent. I was personally so dry that I didn't have much of a smell, but some thralls were supposed to be more damp than others. I'd heard they could smell pretty nasty if they didn't get enough nutrition, but I'd never tested to see if that was true myself.

In any case, I didn't take the time to use the knocker. I threw the orphanage door open and stepped inside.

"Rentt?!" Alize cried.

She was standing right at the entrance with her wand in hand, pointing it straight at me. I guess she was trying to protect the orphanage as best she could. Lillian stood next to her with a spear at the ready. She was a plump middle-aged woman, but her stance had the mark of combat expertise. Maybe she actually knew how to fight. I never got that sense from her when she was sick and lying in bed, but looking at her now, it seemed likely. It was as if she had lived through her fair share of battles.



“Alize, Lillian, you’re safe?” I asked.

Alize ran up to me and clung to my hips. “I was scared,” she said. I stroked her head.

Lillian approached me next. “We heard about the thralls, so we’ve been defending ourselves here. I can use divinity, so perhaps I should be going out to hunt them, but I do have orphans to look after.”

I didn’t know exactly how powerful Lillian was, but I knew she had a fair amount of divinity in addition to the signs of combat experience I could identify. Maybe she would be more than a match for the thralls, but this situation was a little unique.

“Even if the children would be safe without you, I don’t think you should go out there,” I said.

“Why not?”

“I don’t know how much you’ve heard, but the thralls seem to be disguising themselves as humans. You won’t be able to find them easily.”

If not for that, each of the churches could have sent out their divinity users to make quick work of the monsters. But since their locations were unknown, having adventurers meticulously search the city to root them out was more efficient.

Besides, divinity users could vary. Lillian could use a weapon and defend herself, but most weren’t like that. The majority just went from town to town to provide blessings and had guards do the fighting for them. With the city in such chaos, sending them out didn’t sound like such a good idea. If this city lost some saints, it would probably be a nightmare down the road.

“They’re in disguise?” Lillian asked. “Can they not be detected with divine arts?”

“I don’t know precisely how much divine arts can do, but would you be able to detect a thrall from within a crowd?” If she could, it’d be nice if she would. Either that or she could teach me how to do it. If it was easy enough, I could try it myself.

“It would be hard to do on such a large scale. I could do it, but it would severely exhaust me. If there are a lot of them to find, I don’t think there is much I can do.”

In the end, it sounded like the adventurers’ search would be more efficient. The certainty she could have provided might’ve helped, but this was such an emergency that the searchers could get by with just tearing suspects’ clothes off. There was no need to make her go out there. Besides, Lillian had a responsibility to protect this orphanage.

“So it seems,” I said. “Are all the orphans safe?”

“Yes. Alize volunteered to help defend the orphanage with the magic she learned, but there have been no invaders as of yet.”

“That’s good. Do you know what it’s like under the orphanage?”

I asked because that was where Edel was. Alize and Lillian both knew he lived there too.

“You want to know about Edel?” Alize asked, still clinging to me but looking up at my face. “Oh right, I haven’t seen him. At a time like this, you’d think he’d be crawling out to talk with the other mice.”

I knew that Edel’s mouse communication network was vast and that the mice frequently spoke to each other. This seemed like the perfect time to take advantage of that, so it was strange he hadn’t been seen anywhere.

“I’ll go check the basement. I think you two would be better off hiding further inside. If something happens, shout for me. I’ll run up here right away,” I said and then headed to the basement.

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“Hey, Edel!” I yelled as I entered the basement.

Five mice scurried up to me. They were the henchmice who’d attended Edel on our first encounter. Maybe it was because they served Edel, or maybe my power had an influence on them, but they were somewhat smarter than the average puchi suri. They understood human words and emotions to some extent. When they gathered around me, I knew something had happened.

“Where’s Edel?” I asked. One of the mice walked off to the side, wanting me to follow. The basement wasn’t that big, but it was packed with things and a bit hard to navigate. I stepped around the junk in my path as I followed the mouse to a black puchi suri lying near the wall. It was Edel.

“Hey!”

I hurried over and laid a hand on him. He looked dead, but he clearly wasn’t. Still, I didn’t know exactly what kind of state he was in. I could feel him breathing and didn’t see any noteworthy injuries. Although, it was questionable as to how much breathing meant to the undead. I breathed, but mostly just to blend in. I sometimes noticed I would stop breathing in tough situations, so I knew this couldn’t be too rough for Edel. He just seemed to be unconscious.

I thought it might be safe to force him awake, so I sent mana and spirit flowing into him. It looked like he was lacking in both. The great distance I’d traveled might have weakened the supply of energy I sent him. I didn’t know for sure, but I could ask once he was awake.

“Sqreak!” Edel cried as he abruptly opened his eyes and got up. He looked around warily until he saw me and relaxed. Something strange must have happened if he was so on edge, but I didn’t know what.

Edel read my thoughts and communicated his own through images. In my mind I could vividly see what he had seen. The number of things Edel could do kept increasing. I didn’t remember him being able to do this before, but I appreciated having such an exemplary familiar.

“Is this a dungeon? The Water Moon Dungeon? No, the New Moon Dungeon?” I wondered aloud.

This image was probably from the perspective of one of Edel’s henchmice. It was less agile than he was. It didn’t act much smarter than a typical mouse either. It zigzagged around needlessly, but it was certainly heading somewhere.

Then I saw someone. That would have been fine, except that this person was biting an adventurer’s neck, blood dripping from his mouth. When he spotted the mouse, he said it wasn’t nice to watch. Then he unleashed flames and the image went dark. The mouse probably died, sadly. I could feel Edel’s rage at the death of his ally.

I wondered who this person was. I knew he was a vampire, considering he was sucking blood. This wasn't anyone I knew, though. There were a few people whom I suspected of being vampires, but he wasn't one of them. Despite that, I felt like I had seen him somewhere before, or heard his voice.

That's when I recalled a singular, brief memory. It was from one of the times I explored the New Moon Dungeon. I was hunting orcs, and as I left the dungeon, I passed by someone. His voice had been exactly like this vampire's. I was surprised to remember him in Maalt so long ago, but I also recalled that this was around the time new adventurers began to disappear. Suddenly, it all started to make sense. I met him not far from where the novice adventurers Raiz and Lola were fighting when I first saw them. I thought maybe our encounter was a coincidence, but considering his true nature, maybe he was targeting those two. But my presence there made him fear exposure, so he didn't do anything...or something like that. If so, Raiz and Lola lucked out. At any rate, now I knew the identity of the vampire and likely the culprit behind the missing adventurers as well.

I had to report this to the guild, but I didn't know where that vampire was, with my only guess being the New Moon Dungeon. I asked Edel, but he said he didn't know. From the images he showed, he couldn't catch the exact location in the end. Considering that the shock of watching through that mouse's eyes as it died made him pass out, it was to be expected.

I didn't know exactly how to handle this. If I just went and told people there was a vampire in the New Moon Dungeon, it would sound sketchy. Besides, I had no way of knowing if he was still there. I needed something more convincing.

"What's that? You have a good idea where the thralls are, you say?" I asked Edel. He responded affirmatively.

According to him, mice were informing him of bizarre acts being committed all around town, everything from loitering to arson. They were probably seeing thralls. Most of Edel's henchmice weren't especially strong the way Edel was, so they couldn't defeat monsters, but they could at least keep an eye on them.

In that case, maybe it would be best to first clear out all the thralls from the

city. Vampires had the ability to produce more thralls, but they couldn't do it easily. It wasn't like baking a cake. Even that could take a while, but making a monster took even longer. First they needed humans to use as a base, then they had to suck the blood out of them and replace it with some of their own. But even then, they had to wait a while before the person became a thrall. They had to ferment first, to put it in a not-so-funny way.

It took a long time for humans to become monsters, which is why people would say to burn any suspicious corpses on sight. Even if they were in the middle of turning into a thrall, burning them to ash before the process finished would destroy them. There were exceptions to this, though. Vampires could instantly create thralls too, but it cost them a lot of energy. I didn't know whether it was their mana or blood that was the problem, but it didn't matter so much.

If Wolf was right and there were close to a hundred thralls around, then they couldn't have been made just now. They had to have been produced over a long time and hidden away. This wasn't possible in a matter of hours, but if he had weeks, he could have made a hundred thralls.

"All right, guess I'll start with the thralls. But that vampire might have left the New Moon Dungeon and returned to town too. If I find him, let's make him our priority," I told Edel, who agreed. He was always dependable, not to mention extremely convenient to have around. "Can I have you watch over the orphanage too? If any thralls come, warn Lillian and Alize as soon as possible."

He told me he would, so that was one concern taken care of. Now I could go thrall hunting with no regrets. Well, first I needed to tell Lillian and Alize that Edel's henchmice would be standing watch around the orphanage.

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"I see, that's greatly appreciated. Thank you," Lillian said when I told her. "But is this a safe way to use familiars? I'm not an expert, but I've heard you can't control so many monsters at once." She wasn't concerned about whether they would do the job but about whether they would obstruct the thrall hunt somehow.

"I only really control Edel, and he controls the others. He seems to have a ton

of henchmice, so they can do multiple jobs at once," I said.

"I see, so you indirectly have power over all these monsters, in a way."

I guess Lillian thought I was a monster tamer. She looked impressed. I didn't know anything about them myself, so this could have been perfectly normal for monster tamers as far as I knew. Maybe there were monster tamers doing the same thing as me, and if so, then they must have had insane information-gathering skills. But I preferred to think that this ability was unique to Edel. Still, I figured it would be a good idea to learn something about monster taming eventually. I could have asked my dad about it, but he wasn't exactly normal either. I wanted to find some ordinary monster tamer to acquaint myself with.

"This is one of my secrets, so please don't tell anyone."

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I left the orphanage and ran through the city. Edel was sitting on my shoulder and directing me toward any suspected thralls. He received that information by viewing images through the eyes of his henchmice stationed throughout Maalt. Or so I assumed, but I wasn't receiving the same information and couldn't say for sure. Trying to look at all that myself sounded pretty brutal. He showed it to me for just a bit as a test and it took a lot out of me, so I didn't feel like trying it myself.

On the other hand, Edel had an easy time with it. It felt kind of weird that he had some abilities greater than his master's, but that could happen with familiars. My dad had a familiar who could fly, but he couldn't fly on his own. As far as I knew, at least. I couldn't rule it out, but I'd be pretty shocked to see wings sprout from my middle-aged dad's back. I guess I could do something similar, though. Anyway, from that perspective, Edel's range of skills wasn't that strange. I was the stronger fighter, so we complemented each other in that way.

I was surprised by just how many puchi suri there were all over the city. I'd never thought much about it, but now I was seeing them on every street corner and in every nook and cranny. Edel was probably seeing through their eyes. Having so many eyes everywhere certainly made it easier to find thralls.

Edel squeaked at me when we neared a crowd. The first thrall seemed to be

here, but as I got closer, I realized that this would be pretty difficult. This was the town square, but it looked like the townspeople were using it as a gathering place for those fleeing from the fires. There were a lot of people around, and I couldn't tell who was a thrall at a glance. They were presumably using magic to disguise themselves, so there was no way for me to recognize them. But Edel seemed to know. He telepathically told me who the thrall was.

It was a man sitting on the fountain in the middle of the town square. He had a beard but otherwise didn't stand out much from the crowd. He was wary of his surroundings, but so was everyone else who had just fled from the fires. I doubted anyone would believe he was a thrall, but Edel guaranteed me that he was. If so, there was something I had to do.

"Excuse me," I said to the man.

"What is it, pal? You ran to this town square too?" he responded, sounding like anyone would.

That kind of made me mad. It wasn't that this thrall was pretending to be human, but that he sounded so natural. When I was a thrall, it killed me every time I had to talk. There was no justice in the world. But I kept that to myself.

"No, I'm an adventurer. I'm trying to find whoever started the fires," I said.

The man kind of twitched but otherwise didn't react. "Huh, is that right? Then go find them already. Make them pay for what they did to this city. Please."

Nothing was strange about what he said. That was what made him scary. These monsters could lurk among humans undetected. That was what led to this commotion. I wanted to expose his true identity and exterminate him already. But before that, I thought maybe I could capture him alive and get some information out of him about the other thralls and the vampire.

"Yeah, I'll do that. By the way, the culprits seem to be thralls. Sorry, but would you mind taking off your clothes?"

"Why? Look, you can see that I'm human."

"I hope you are, but maybe you're not. Thralls have rotting bodies, so I'll know for sure after you take your clothes off. Go on now."

The man stood up and started to back away. “Why should I have to? I’m human. Human, I tell you.”

It didn’t sound like he was lying, but I knew this man was a thrall. I pressed him further, but he suddenly ran off and reached a hand toward someone else in the crowd.

It didn’t look like there was much use in talking. I drew my sword and prepared to slash at the man, but then I heard what sounded like a cannon. A moment later, the man was on fire. The fire wasn’t red, but light blue. Wondering what happened, I turned to see where the flame came from and saw a woman.

“Oh, what do we have here? If it isn’t Rentt! How long has it been?”

The woman had dark gray hair and fiery red eyes. She was menacing yet beautiful. That beauty was undeniable, but I could never describe her as dainty. She was like a bird of prey or a carnivorous beast. Strangely, despite all that, she had a sort of purity about her. In my twenty-five years of life, I had never met another woman like her.

“Hello, Miss Nive,” I said.

“Just Nive is fine, thank you. We’re both adventurers, you know. You can treat me like one.”

That was true, but I kind of wanted to put some distance between her and me. It was hard to object to her, though. “All right, Nive. Why are you here?”

“A simple enough reason. This is my time to shine. The perfect opportunity to burn these creatures to ash,” she said as she kicked the blazing man away. I thought that would’ve been hot, but this probably wasn’t ordinary fire. I was nearby and couldn’t feel any heat either. It must have been produced with divine arts.

The others in the town square were aghast at us. From their perspective, she was a magician who just set a middle-aged man on fire and I was a suspicious man in a mask and robe having a friendly conversation with her. That was about what I expected. Judging by the reactions, the light blue fire was visible to the average person as well. Maybe this wasn’t the Holy Fire, just fire ignited by

divine arts, so it didn't matter if it was visible. Plus, if the man just started writhing without any visible cause, he might have looked threatening to the crowd. Maybe Nive had that in mind. Not that she seemed like she'd care.

But the visible flame presented another danger. If it looked like she set a random citizen on fire, knights might arrest us. I was going through the trouble of questioning him beforehand so I could avoid that. Now I had no idea how to get this situation under control.

"Oh? Doesn't look like that was enough to kill him. The servants of those blood-sucking insects can always take a beating," Nive said as she turned her clear, round eyes toward the burning man. Even as the fire blazed, he kept glaring at us. I don't know why he had to look at me like that; it's not like I was the one who set him on fire. But to be fair, I was going to attack him once I was sure he was a thrall.

I prepared for a fight as Nive looked around. "I'm sure that startled everyone!" she shouted. "But as it turns out, this man was a monster hiding among you! He's a thrall! Look at how he burns alive yet still stands and glowers at us! There's your proof! Get away from here, everyone! I'm Gold-class adventurer Nive Maris, and this is my assistant, Rentt Vivie! We'll slay the monster!"

Apparently she'd thought of a way to get the situation under control already. I thought she just hadn't considered it, but I guess she also kept the flame somewhat weak for that reason. A thrall could take far more damage than a human, and a little burning wouldn't kill it. But Nive hit it with divine fire that purified the body. The thrall's regenerative capabilities conflicted with the divine purging, causing his body to decay, restore, and decay again repeatedly. Nobody could see this and think he was human.

The crowd seemed to recognize that the man was a monster and scurried away from the center of the town square. They didn't leave entirely because they wanted to see how this fight concluded. Most civilians never got the chance to see adventurers fight a monster, and a thrall no less. They may have heard news about vampires and thralls killing townspeople in great numbers in other towns, but few would have seen these monsters themselves. They probably wanted to see the thrall slain so they'd have a story to tell later. I

thought it was kind of needlessly bold considering the emergency at hand, but it was typical of people in small cities. They could be brave, bordering on careless. Well, they could always run away if they had to, so there wasn't too much to worry about.

"Now, Rentt, let's do it," Nive said with a grin.

"I never agreed to be your assistant, Nive," I complained, but I still faced the thrall.

"What's the problem? I'll even pay you!"

Nive closed in on the burning thrall. She didn't appear to have a weapon, but once she was close enough, she swung her arm. The man jumped out of the way, and I heard a clanging sound and saw sparks fly from the ground.

"Claws?" I asked.

"Yes. I use an ordinary sword too, but when it comes to killing vampires, I just love the feeling of tearing apart their flesh with my fingers," she explained. It was pretty messed up, but not surprising coming from her. "But it's tougher than I expected. This one seems to be of a relatively high rank. Rentt, let's attack it together."

I nodded. A Gold-class could probably handle this solo, but she must have had some ideas. Maybe she wanted to observe this thrall's physical abilities to gauge the strength of the vampire in charge.

I readied my sword and drew near the thrall. He looked surprised, but he swung his arm at me. His nails were unnaturally long and probably his weapon. I avoided the attack and chopped his arm off with little trouble.

Next up was Nive. She aimed her claw at the man's neck and swiped faster than the eye could see. A moment later, a horizontal red line appeared on his neck. His head fell off and dark blood flowed from the gash. But the man's head was still alive and glaring at Nive. His body was on its knees, but it had yet to fall. His life force was something to be feared. Or since he was dead, maybe I should have called it something else. I couldn't think of anything, though. In any case, he could take more punishment than the average monster, as the undead could. I could probably take about as much, but the thought of it made me ill.

But of course, there was a way to destroy even these creatures. If there weren’t, vampires would be unstoppable.



Nive walked over and picked up the thrall's head. She then recited some incantation. The head began to burn bright. These flames were more powerful than the last. The head fell to bits without regenerating, ultimately turning to ash. Around the same time the head disintegrated, the body turned to sand. No such phenomenon would have happened if the man were human.

All that remained of the thrall was a magic crystal. Nive tossed it to me and said, "There's your pay. It'll sell for a pretty high price."

A thrall crystal certainly wasn't bad as payment. Vampiric monsters could live among humans, so their magic crystals were hard to acquire and sold for a lot. This was even true of thralls, a lesser form of vampire. On top of that, the guild had put out an urgent request to slay thralls, so it would sell for even higher. At the current moment, this magic crystal was about as valuable as a decent jewel.

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"Yes, I don't hunt vampires for money. Defeating them is enough for me," she answered.

That sounded a little sadistic. It would've been more of a relief if she'd said she did it for money. Then I could at least see her humanity. This just made it sound like she had an insane urge to hunt vampires, which I suppose she did.

"You're not thinking anything rude, are you?"

"No, not really."

Nive looked at me dubiously. She had a pretty face, but something about that light in her eyes made me want to avoid her gaze. They were like the bloodshot eyes of a starving monster. Her stare felt like it could kill. It was extremely uncomfortable.

Nive's eyes relaxed. "Well never mind, then. Anyway, Rentt, considering all that's going on and how we happened to run into each other, what if we worked together?" she suggested, but she was soon interrupted.

"Nive!" someone called out from behind her. It was a woman dressed as a cleric with silver hair and amethyst eyes. She was Myullias Raiza, a Lobelian saint. Nive furrowed her brow when she heard the voice, but only for a moment

before she smiled and looked over her shoulder.

It felt like I saw something I shouldn't have. I wondered if they were on bad terms, but I was utterly incapable of guessing how Nive felt. Maybe there was no deeper meaning to the expression I saw, or maybe she was deliberately trying to mislead me. It felt dangerous to think too hard about it.

"Oh, if it isn't Saint Myullias? Don't run like that; it makes you look half as holy. You hardly look the part of a saint as it is," Nive said scathingly. The Church of Lobelia was by far one of the biggest religious organizations on the continent, so she had some guts to say that.

Myullias looked momentarily irked, but she quickly settled down. "I wouldn't have had to if you didn't abruptly run off," she said before noticing the ashes on the ground. "What's this?" It seemed like she already knew the answer to that. Given the state of the city, a Lobelian saint would be able to guess at what happened.

"The remains of a lowly blood-sucking insect, of course," Nive answered. "Rentt and I took care of it."

The way she treated them like insects was awful, but it was how people had been speaking derogatorily about vampires for a long time. The sorts of people who hated vampires talked like this.

"I see, so that's why you ran off."

"Yes, he was disguising himself as a human. He was extremely difficult to tell from the real thing, but Rentt forced him to give up the act by questioning him. And when he was about to attack someone, I tried purging him with divine arts. It turned out that he was a thrall after all. That was a close one, wasn't it, Rentt?"

Apparently she had been listening in on our conversation, but I couldn't guess when she started. If she decided to use divine arts because he was about to attack someone, I suppose that was acceptable.

"Nive, when did you figure out he was a thrall?" I asked.

"I was only certain of it when he was close to attacking the crowd. I did pick up the scent of thralls from this town square, though. I have a good nose."

I didn't know if she meant that figuratively or literally, but either would have made sense coming from her. I'd believe it if she could find thralls by instinct, but I would just as well believe she was a vampire connoisseur the way I was a blood sommelier. I imagined her sniffing a three-hundred-year-old vampire, commenting on how it was well-fermented and ripe for killing. The thought of it grossed me out.

Myullias seemed to be similarly taken aback. "Is that right?" she said with a sigh.

At any rate, Nive and Myullias appeared to be working together still. Nive didn't sound too excited about that, but it wasn't any of my business. The thrall was dead now anyway, so I just wanted to get away from Nive.

"I'd like to go see if there are other thralls around, so I'll get going now," I said. "May there be light in your futures." I hastily recited a Lobelian prayer and rushed away from the town square.

"Wait, Rentt! Rentt!!!" Nive shouted, but I ignored her.

Thankfully, I wasn't just running away. I had my job as an excuse. I still had no idea what relationship Nive had with the Church of Lobelia, but I hoped she wouldn't be able to ditch a saint and come after me. I ran for a while before looking over my shoulder, but Nive wasn't there and didn't seem to be giving chase. Glad that I was safe, I ran through town in search of the next thrall.

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I chopped the head off a third thrall and purged it with divinity. It shrieked in agony as it died. It was just a monster I was killing, but to the onlookers, it looked like I murdered someone for no reason. The townspeople were somewhat unsettled, but unlike when Nive did this, I made it clear that this was a thrall before killing it. I didn't have to fear arrest that way either.

But while Wolf did tell me there could be a lot of thralls, I was shocked by just how many there were. I was surprised they could all talk like normal humans too, a big difference from when I was a thrall. I had to wonder what made them different. Maybe they got used to talking that way. Maybe my vocal cords just happened to be rotten. Different thralls could be rotten in different areas, so I was probably just unlucky. Well, these thralls were probably living humans in

the past, so I guess we were all unlucky.

These thralls could talk pretty well, but that didn't mean they still possessed the same mind they did in life. They might have acted like it, but only to trick humans, or so it was said. I didn't know how true that was. They started to contradict themselves after being questioned for long enough, so it was presumably correct, but the fact that they acted so human made them painful to kill. Regardless, if left alone, they would attack humans and eat their flesh, eventually turning into vampires and becoming a threat to humanity.

Wondering if it had been long enough yet, I looked at the thralls as if checking to see if dinner was finished cooking. They had mostly turned to ash and likely couldn't revive.

As for the other adventurers helping out, they were splashing the thralls with holy water to deal with them. It was a fairly expensive item, but the guild was providing it for this occasion. Even if they didn't do that, some adventurers could just shout for Nive when they found one. She'd definitely come running over. But there was only one Nive, as far as I was aware. She couldn't respond to calls from all around the city.

I also saw other saints searching for thralls around town. Their divine arts were especially effective against them. But few saints had proper combat abilities, so they mostly just served to finish them off. Saints whose main job was purification could purify entire towns at once. If a saint like that were here right now, they'd probably have a lot to do. Unfortunately, there weren't exactly a lot of them. There was maybe one per country, and hiring them could cost a fortune. You'd think that they'd give discounts during disasters like these, but then they'd never get to work at full price, I guess. When you have that much power, it's hard to find the right time to use it.

Anyway, I wondered what the vampire could stand to gain from setting the town ablaze and causing chaos. If he made this many thralls already, I felt like just slowly corrupting all of Maalt would have been the smarter plan. But maybe that would have been tough in itself. Thralls didn't need that much blood, but if they became lesser vampires, they would need tons. If people started discovering signs of vampire attacks, vampire hunters could come after them in great numbers. Maybe he wanted to start something before that

happened. It kind of made sense, but it kind of didn't.

There wasn't much use thinking about this, though. I got back to hunting for thralls. If I hunted them all down, the boss would have to show himself. Or leave Maalt, but that would be fine too. I didn't know how many were left, but thanks to Edel, I could always find more.

"Let's move on," I told the mouse on my shoulder, then ran off.

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"After all this, I still haven't drawn my target out?" somebody said somewhere in the New Moon Dungeon.

The low, hateful voice was directed at the many other people present. Young boys and girls were sweating and meditating. They were breathing hard and looked extraordinarily exhausted.

The children sat in a circle around a man who stared at them apathetically. He looked frustrated, as if a tool wasn't working right, but expressed no more concern than that.

"Ugh!" one of the boys groaned. Then he coughed up blood and collapsed.

The man looked at the boy and held his head like he had a headache. "Where was it this time?" he asked.

"A thrall in the second commerce district was slain," the boy answered.

"Hm, not that it matters if they're killed, but they're being found a little too quickly. At this rate, I might run out of thralls before my target shows up."

"Are you sure this person is in this city?"

"Yes, certainly. Narrowing it down to this city took ages, but there's no question. However, I don't know exactly where to look, and I suppose I can't expect them to come out of hiding, unfortunately."

"But if we could get their help..."

"Yes, we'll get much closer to our goal. That's what we're here to do. I'm putting a great burden on you, but it's all for the sake of our futures. You understand that, don't you?" the man asked and looked at all the children. They

were still focusing, but they nodded.

The man was without a doubt their greatest hope. He showed them light they'd never seen in their lives. That was why they controlled the thralls for him. He granted them this power too.

The man watched the children and smirked.

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Not only thralls, but most undead were tragic creatures. They gained immortality in a way, but at the same time, they lost their humanity. Once they died and became undead, their corpse was inhabited by a new personality. Nobody knew why this happened, or where the old personality went, despite endless debates on the subject.

Regardless, it was accepted as fact that they became different people after death. There were many reasons for that, but the biggest reason came from religious authorities. They declared the undead to be impure beings and prioritized the purification of them above all else, so they couldn't accept the undead as having humanity. They may have looked like they did in life, but they couldn't be seen as the same person.

I didn't particularly criticize that idea. I could see why religious authorities couldn't accept the undead as the people they were in life, considering the positions they held. But the important thing about their assertions was that they were half proven. That was why I questioned all the thralls I came across. When you questioned the undead for long enough about their past lives, their answers would start to contradict each other. If they were the same people they always were, this presumably wouldn't happen. Considering their bodies were falling apart, though, you could also explain that away as memory loss. It was hard to say anything for sure.

But even if that explanation were true, it didn't change the fact that the undead attacked humans. There were some, such as greater vampires, who could control themselves, but even they tended to attack humans. Nobody wanted to accept such people as their family, friends, or significant others, so the undead were historically understood to have become different people after death. That was why they were exterminated.

However, humans aren't so simple. Think about your family or loved ones. What if, after they died one day, they came back to life before you could process it? What if they sounded and acted exactly the same, so you couldn't deny it was them? I don't know if many people could reject them right away. Call it kindness, or naivety, or even weakness. I don't know what it is. But what Lorraine and my other friends showed me was kindness.

"Why? Why?!" someone screamed.

But as for what was happening in front of me, I didn't know what to call it.

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Adventurers had gathered. Not all of the adventurers in town, but around ten of them. One of them was Guildmaster Wolf, who should have been at the guild delivering orders, so something special was going on. But I suppose the situation wasn't incredibly unique. I got lucky, but it wouldn't be strange if similar incidents were taking place all around Maalt.

The adventurers were surrounding a lone boy. More than just a boy, he was a thrall. His eyes were bloodshot, and his torn clothes revealed dry, rotting flesh underneath. The disguise magic was no longer hiding him, because his face was covered in scars and holes. It was all part of the thrall hunt, but this thrall was posing as an adventurer. His equipment and age made him look like a newbie.

"What's your name?" Wolf asked the thrall.

"Tita Well. I'm an Iron-class adventurer. I'm only just starting out, but I'm trying to get to Bronze-class. I want to make some money to send to my parents back in my hometown. I'd also like to be able to get a nice wedding dress for my sister."

"When did you become a thrall?"

"A thrall? I'm Tita Well, an Iron-class adventurer."

I had only just gotten there, but it seemed the others had asked these questions multiple times. Wolf shook his head and looked behind him, toward some adventurers who were holding a girl by her shoulders. "This true?" he asked.

“Yes,” the girl answered through tears. “Why can’t you let him go? Look, he’s talking to you. He’s saying the same things he said before.”

“I get how you feel, but you saw what happened. He was going berserk just a minute ago. We can only talk to him like this now because we’re holding him down. If we let go, no question he’ll attack someone again. Can you really say he’s the same person he always was?”

“But, but...!”

Wolf was harsh, but he was right. Tita’s eyes wavered between sanity and madness. Turning him back to normal didn’t look impossible, but no such thing had ever been accomplished before.

“Sorry,” Wolf said. “If I’d done my job better, he probably wouldn’t have been a victim. But what’s done is done, and I’ll do what I have to. If you don’t want to watch, close your eyes. If you hate anyone for this, hate me.”

Wolf drew the broadsword slung over his back and raised it over his head. The girl, presumably an ally of Tita, tried to reach out her hand, but in the end she shuddered and withdrew it. She must have thought it was hopeless, and she was right.

Wolf chopped Tita’s head clean off. Then he splashed holy water on both the head and body, turning them to ash. All that remained was Tita’s cheap armor. The girl embraced the armor, scooped up the ashes, and wept.

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Wolf watched the girl, his expression conflicted. I approached him from behind. “Rentt?” he said without turning around to look at me. He must have noticed me watching these events play out.

“Sorry you had to do that,” I said, though the words felt kind of trite.

“He was an adventurer with my guild. I was the best man for the job.” I could sense the dignity and responsibility that he felt as guildmaster. We were lucky to have him in charge of our guild.

“So that boy was from Maalt’s guild?” I asked. I only started to watch in the middle of it and didn’t have all the details, but I figured he was, and now Wolf

confirmed it.

“Yeah, he was one of the newbie adventurers that went missing. That crying girl went on adventures with him. He up and vanished one day, and that was that, until...”

“He came back as a thrall?”

“Right. It’s tragic. If they’d gone after someone like me who’s got less of a future to look forward to, that’d be one thing, but they had to target someone with aspirations. It makes me sick.”

If I were that vampire, I probably wouldn’t have wanted to pick a fight with Wolf either, but I could see where he was coming from. Targeting the weak was the logical move for any hunter, but when those targets were human, it was unconscionable. Newbie adventurers tended to be children who didn’t know their way around the world yet. Only a coward would attack them.

“Let me ask you something just to be sure,” Wolf whispered to me so nobody else would hear. “You don’t know a way to turn thralls back into people, do you?” Wolf had talked to the girl like there was no way, but he apparently wondered if it was possible somehow. After all, he had me as an example of sorts.

“Unfortunately, I don’t know if there’s a way. And when I was a thrall, I never lost my mind like that. My voice was kind of hoarse, but I could talk like an ordinary person, and I was perfectly sane. Maybe there’s something fundamentally unique about me compared to them, judging by what I’ve been seeing here.”

The boy couldn’t clearly answer Wolf’s question. It was questionable whether he was even aware he was a thrall. But I was different. I was fully conscious of what I was. I couldn’t say I didn’t have any monster-like impulses, but aside from when I attacked Lorraine, I was able to control them. I was also still drinking human blood every day, but I never even thought of attacking another person. That boy, on the other hand, was going berserk before he was captured. There must have been something that made him different from me on a fundamental level.

Wolf looked both disappointed and relieved at my response—disappointed

that he couldn't save the adventurers that had been his allies and relieved that his decision to purify said adventurers was the right choice. If he had killed them when they could have been saved, it'd probably be pretty hard to apologize for. Either way, it was his only choice in this situation. If he revealed that I was undead and claimed to know a way to cure the thralls on top of that, it would put him in a precarious position. But he was willing to cross that bridge if it would help them.

"I see, got it," Wolf said. "That's good to know. Oh, also, we've gathered some info. Listen to this."

Wolf told me about the current state of the city. I knew some of it thanks to what I saw through Edel's vision sharing, but I wasn't as analytical as the guild. Edel and I could try to figure it out on our own, but we would be lacking in some areas. The guild knew how to handle situations like these, and they had plenty of staff members to sort through the information, so listening to them was beneficial.

First, he told me that they found and defeated thralls all around Maalt and that there seemed to be somewhere from fifty to a hundred of them in total. Some, like the boy from a moment ago, were new adventurers who had disappeared. This all but confirmed that a vampire was behind the disappearances.

They were trying to locate and capture the vampire at the same time they exterminated the thralls, but they were unable to find him. They also tried to guess the vampire's location based on how the thralls were distributed throughout Maalt, but the vampire seemed to have taken that into account by stationing them evenly throughout town. He knew better than to set them all up around his hideout, apparently. If he was repeatedly creating thralls and sending them out from his location, presumably they wouldn't have been so evenly distributed. We could assume from this that he'd thought about positioning before starting the attack.

"Well, the thrall hunt's still coming along just fine," Wolf continued. "I think we'll take them all out eventually, but there's been some considerable damage. Wish we could beat the boss already. Speaking of which, I want to ask you something."

“What?”

“Do you know how close a vampire has to be to control a thrall? They all showed up and started attacking people and setting things on fire at the same time, so they all probably received the same orders. I’d think the vampire’s at least close enough to give instructions to them.”

“I wouldn’t know about that,” I answered.

“Why? Aren’t you, you know?” Wolf asked and cocked his head. He avoided saying I was a vampire directly. I appreciated his thoughtfulness.

“Well, think about it. I don’t attack people, and I’ve never created or controlled any thralls. I wouldn’t know exactly how close you’d have to be to control one, or how many could be made.”

“Right, I get it. Now that you mention it, how would a vampire who doesn’t attack people make thralls? But man, will we just have to search every nook and cranny for this vampire?” Wolf said and crossed his arms.

“Hold on a second there. I may have never made a thrall before, but I have made a familiar. Here,” I said, pointing to the mouse on my shoulder. Edel stood on his hind legs and crossed his front legs. For a mouse, he was remarkably dexterous.

“I thought that was just a pet,” Wolf muttered as he looked wide-eyed at Edel. I couldn’t imagine this would be many people’s first choice for a pet, but I guess he thought I was weird. Maybe everyone did, and that’s why nobody commented on the animal sitting on my shoulder this entire time.

“If he actually were just a pet, it would’ve been kind of insane for me to have him ride on my shoulder through a city under siege, you know.”

“Well, I figured that’s the kind of thing you’d do. You’ve got a reputation for abruptly doing things that don’t make sense. You’ve always been like that. But now that I think back on it, there was some sense to all those things. Well, enough about the past. So that’s a familiar. What about it?”

“Thralls are made from humans, so maybe it’s not quite the same, but the way I made my familiar is mostly identical. Maybe the range from which they can be controlled is the same too.”

“I see, so how close do you have to be for that? Hey, are you actually controlling this thing?” Edel started erratically dancing around atop my shoulder. Wolf gave him a suspicious look. I didn’t know if Edel was just bored or something, but whatever.

“Well, I usually let him do what he wants. But if I give him orders, he’ll follow them. So, as far as the maximum range of that, I at least know we can contact each other from anywhere in Maalt. And even from outside of Maalt, I can give him some simple instructions.”

“Dang, that far? How far is it specifically?”

“I don’t know. I think it’d extend up to about the New Moon Dungeon.”

I hadn’t actually tried that before, but it felt like it would work. I wouldn’t be able to give detailed instructions, and it would probably take some time for the messages to reach him, but general commands would work up to that distance. Besides that, there was also what I had seen at the New Moon Dungeon. I decided now was a good time to bring that up.

“By the way, he can share his senses with me to some extent, and he has his own followers of the same species who can share their vision with him. Through those abilities, I learned something a bit curious.”

“Back up a bit there. Share their vision? All right, the size and color of your familiar is pretty unusual, but isn’t it a puchi suri? So it can see what other puchi suri see? Pretty much any adult with a knife could kill a puchi suri if they felt like it, so nobody really bothers with them and they’re left to roam all over the place. If you could sense what every puchi suri around is sensing, that means...” Wolf murmured under his breath, putting the pieces together. “Sounds like I was right to put you in my guild. You know everything that’s going on in this city, don’t you?”

“I wouldn’t go that far, but they can sneak into all kinds of places to get information.”

“Better not be doing that at the guild. But whatever, that’s not important right now. Anyway, what’d you find out?”

“I saw a vampire biting someone at the New Moon Dungeon. It’s been a while

since then, but I think that might be the vampire's base."

"I see. The disappearances mostly happened in dungeons. They happened in town too, but not as frequently. Didn't think it was possible to control thralls from so far away, though. I haven't started a search all the way out there, but sounds like I should."

With the city on fire and thralls attacking people, there wasn't anyone available to send to the dungeon when the chance of finding something there was incredibly unlikely. Capturing the vampire was important, but not as important as protecting the townspeople. However, from what I said, there was a fair chance the vampire was there.

"Well, still don't have too many adventurers with their hands free," Wolf said after a bit of thought. "We're slowly getting things under control here, but this is far from over. I'll have to pick out a few people to send down there. Rentt, will you go?"

I nodded. The enemy was a vampire, and while I didn't know its rank, I would know the most about it in some sense.

"And it'll probably be good if Lorraine goes too, right?" Wolf suggested. Lorraine would help make sure I didn't screw things up, and she was also one of Maalt's few Silver-class adventurers. "Who else?"

"You'll take me along too, won't you?" someone asked, sneaking up from behind Wolf.

"Whoa!" Wolf yelped.

The person behind him was, of course, Nive Maris the vampire hunter. I just wished she would go away.

"How much did you hear?" Wolf asked Nive with a puzzled look. He was probably worried that she'd heard something about me. But I'd seen when Nive waltzed up behind Wolf like a cat, and nothing problematic had been discussed since she appeared.

"Oh, I just heard you say you were picking people out. Nothing before that," Nive answered. "It sounds to me like you found the boss's base or something. How you found it faster than me, though, I have no clue."

It sounded like she hadn't heard anything that would cause issues, but I couldn't be sure she wasn't lying. Maybe she was playing dumb, but I had no way to guess. She certainly looked like she was trying to act cute, like a child who saw a toy and couldn't wait to play with it. A child's intent might have been written all over their face, but I couldn't imagine what Nive was thinking.

"Well, guilds have their ways. Mostly we just throw adventurers at something until it works, though," Wolf said, relieved he hadn't given my secret away. And it wasn't entirely a lie in this case either, if you just replaced adventurers with mice.

"I see, and you just happened to find it that way, did you?" Nive replied. "Not even I can compete with the power of coincidence. So anyway, can I come with?"

I was kind of hoping she'd forgotten what we were doing, but my hope was in vain. Nothing could distract Nive from her vampire obsession.

"Sure," Wolf said. "You're Gold-class, not to mention a vampire hunter. It'd be good to have you around. Right, Rentt?"

He asked me not so much to get my approval but to say there was no choice in the matter and I would have to deal with it. Considering Nive's strength and abilities, turning her down would be absurd. We had to send the best of the best, and nobody in Maalt fit the bill better than her. My feelings about her being untrustworthy and dangerously spontaneous had to be set aside.

"Right, it'll help to have an expert around," I answered, but only because I had to.

"Excellent," Nive said with a giggle. "Let's not waste any time. Where are we going, by the way? I haven't heard that part yet."

"Oh, the New Moon Dungeon," Wolf explained. "Can't guarantee that the vampire's there, but there's a good chance."

"Really? I see, that certainly may be true. The average vampire would find it difficult to control thralls from so great a range, but a powerful vampire could do it. Even lesser vampires can sometimes do it if several work together. The maximum distance from which someone could control the thralls in Maalt

would be somewhere around the New Moon Dungeon."

"So you think we're right?" Wolf asked.

"Yes, but I thought I was hunting a lesser vampire that was acting alone. I thought there was a high chance they were hiding in Maalt itself. But considering the quality and quantity of the thralls, it might be best to toss those expectations aside. If there are multiple vampires, though, I would have expected more casualties."

"I think a pretty large number of adventurers and civilians disappeared, though."

"Not that many, relatively speaking. A lesser vampire needs to feed on a couple humans per month. They wouldn't necessarily have to kill anyone if they had humans willing to provide them with blood on their own, but they'd have to be highly organized for that to work. There was no organization like that in Maalt, at least. Maybe I just haven't investigated thoroughly enough, but I would guess they're using blood medicine. That's a surprise."

Wolf cocked his head. "What's blood medicine?"

"A special drug that can suppress a vampire's blood-sucking urges. But it's not easy to produce. A handful of vampires wouldn't be able to make it on their own, I can tell you that. Hm, now I'm really itching to capture this vampire."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because they have to be getting the blood medicine from somewhere. If we capture and question them, it should lead to a huge gang of vampires. It'll be a vampire hunting jamboree! What's more exciting than that?"

Nive's sincere enthusiasm was terrifying. I almost felt bad for the vampires she was pursuing. Wolf probably thought the same thing but kept it to himself.

"Well, glad you're passionate about your job," he said. "If you can capture the boss for us, Maalt will go back to the nice little town it always was. I'm counting on you."

"Of course. I'll capture the vampire, I assure you."

I looked at Nive's grin, reminded of how much I hated having to work with

her, but there was no way around it now. Thankfully, there would be someone else around to keep an eye on her. I looked behind Wolf and saw Myullias running toward us.

“How many times do I have to tell you; stop randomly running off!” she shouted between heavy breaths. It wasn’t very saintly of her.

Side Story: Isaac Hart

“What are you fighting for?” she asked, and I answered with the utmost honesty. From where does the sun rise, and where does it set? What happens to a bottle that’s dropped on the floor? What happens to water after it gets hot enough? The answer to those questions was obvious, as was the answer to this.

I responded without hesitation, and she smirked. “You haven’t learned a thing, have you?” she said peacefully. “Or maybe you just couldn’t give up. But even so, it will be impossible for you.”

Naturally, this made me deeply angry. Why must this person reject our noble goals? How would she know it’s impossible until we tried? I posed these questions to her.

“Then let’s make a bet. If you can kill me, you win. If you can’t, I win. And when I win, you must give up on your goals. Now, how much time shall I give you? You have until you die, I suppose.”

I felt insulted. Did this little girl sincerely think a rebellious knight such as myself couldn’t kill her? But in the end, the results were clearer than fire. I couldn’t kill her. The bet was still ongoing.

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Standing in the room I was provided, I took out my old and beloved sword for the first time in a while. Its thin, silver blade was full of mana, and an image of a unicorn impaling a dragon was etched into the hilt. When I first obtained this, I was overjoyed. But now it had been sitting in my drawer for ages. I no longer needed it.

I was currently working as a servant in this house. I sometimes fought monsters as well, but ordinary equipment was enough for them. This weapon was only to be wielded against specific foes, so I never expected to use it again. But I still felt some of the pride I had back then, and I couldn’t forget what this sword meant to me, so I couldn’t bring myself to dispose of it. I didn’t think my

mistress would appreciate that, but then again, she likely knew I still had it anyway.

Everything I did was but a trifle to her. That wasn't limited to me alone, though. Perhaps she thought our actions to be trivial and meaningless as a whole. That was presumably why she rejected us, and the point of her bet with me. Maybe my future efforts also meant nothing to her. In her view, maybe the past was behind us and there was no need to dredge up old conflicts.

But I couldn't forget the past like that. I came to realize I was still a fool after all these years. I thought I had changed, but maybe this was reality. I tried to accomplish something great, but reality forced me to my knees and broke me down until I clung to the helping hand that was extended to me. That was it. I was nobody.

I recalled something I'd heard the other day. It was after a boy came to visit the house, and I was taking him to someone from his village.

"By the way, the Ally who invited me asked if I'd ever heard of somebody named Isaac Hart. Is that you?" the boy asked me.

I had already heard that an Ally, someone from a group distinct from the village, invited the boy to this town. Then he mentioned that their goal was to make their existence public; they wanted to be treated with the same rights as humans. That was what convinced the boy to come to Maalt. However, he was unable to meet up with this Ally in the city. When he ran out of medicine to suppress his urges, he was left with no choice but to come to this house he'd heard about from the village elder. It didn't sound like he knew much, but when the Ally had invited him, my name came up.

"Why would this person ask you about that name?" I asked the boy.

"How should I know? He kind of just asked it randomly, but it sounded like a pretty important question."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because he acted a bit different when he asked it. I was always causing trouble in the village and made a lot of people mad, so I got pretty good at reading people's expressions. When he asked that question, he reminded me of

how the villagers would look.”

The boy was rebellious and motivated enough to leave the village and come to this town when he wasn’t allowed to. That he developed a skill like this came as no surprise. I couldn’t guess how accurate his assessment was, but it sounded almost certain that the question wasn’t just asked to make small talk. Somebody was looking for me, and I had a decent guess as to who.

I hung the sword from my hip and headed to the estate’s exit. I ran around the side of the hedge maze and opened the front gate.

“Isaac, are you going?” someone asked from behind me just before I walked out to town. I turned around and saw a girl leaning against the gate. It was my mistress, Laura Latuule. Her eyes betrayed her youthful appearance, so deep in color that I could see into the depths of her soul.

“My apologies, but our bet may be settled now,” I answered and looked away from her.

“You’re awfully stubborn, you know. Do as you will, but stop hoping that someone else will settle the bet for you. If and when the time comes, bring an end to it yourself.”

In essence, she was telling me to return alive no matter what. I felt the corners of my eyes get warmer.

“Yes, understood,” I said curtly, then turned around and headed to town. Our relationship had been smoldering for ages, and this was the end of it. At that moment, I wholeheartedly thought this to be true.

Chapter 2: Where the Vampire Was

“Oh, hello. I’m Nive Maris.”

“I’m Lorraine. I guess we’re working together.”

Nive held out a hand, and Lorraine shook it. Lorraine looked bitter, transparently confused as to why this person was here. She didn’t particularly hate Nive, but being that I was a vampire and she was a vampire hunter, our proximity to each other probably looked like something to worry about. I wouldn’t have associated with her either if I could get away with it, but it was Nive who latched onto me.

Lorraine didn’t provide her last name because it was the same as the one I was using and she wanted to avoid too many questions. But some adventurers simply preferred to work under their first name alone, while others provided their full names, depending on their preference. Adventurers were generally rowdy, and some could be troublemakers, to put it lightly, so there was always some portion who preferred to keep their last names private. It was a known custom among adventurers and not especially unusual. Most of those who did provide their last names wanted their family background and status to be known or wanted to establish trust. It was like bowing when greeting someone rather than simply saying hello. Similarly, only stating your first name was the normal thing to do.

“I’m Myullias Raiza.”

“A saint as well? I’m Lorraine. I’m delighted to make your acquaintance.”

Lorraine was more polite with Myullias than with Nive because Myullias was a saint and Nive was an adventurer. Adventurers didn’t bother with formalities even when speaking to others of a higher rank. Most found such language to be tedious. As long as you weren’t exceedingly rude to an adventurer, you could get away with anything.

But saints were another story. They had religious followers and powerful

organizations backing them. Some saints would be absolutely livid if treated like an adventurer. That didn't apply to saints from the Church of the Eastern Sky, but from what Lorraine told me, many saints from the Church of Lobelia and other religions with origins in the western nations tended to be that way. As such, Lorraine had learned to be polite around all saints. She wasn't especially religious, but she wanted to stay out of trouble.

I wanted to visit the western nations at some point, but I was the kind of adventurer who found formalities annoying. I needed to ask Lorraine about what to watch out for before visiting, or else it sounded like things could get ugly. I wasn't a fan of getting in trouble either, so I had to make sure I didn't draw attention. Of course, now I had to accompany Nive to a dungeon, so I was doing a lousy job of not getting in trouble already.

"You don't have to be so polite with me. Treat me like you would anyone else," Myullias said with a smile. She was the sort of saint who didn't care, apparently. She was unquestionably a beautiful saint when she was like this, but she had been acting like a hannya with Nive not long ago.

A hannya, by the way, was a female monster from an island nation to the far east. The term was used in Yaaran to refer to a furious woman, but it had foreign origins. Those monsters were collectively called oni, which were similar to ogres, but smaller and smarter. They also had their own culture, and some coexisted with humans. I hoped to meet one someday. From what I'd heard, they excelled at metallurgy and handiwork much like dwarves.

"Are you sure?" Lorraine asked Myullias hesitantly. Lorraine was more easygoing than the average woman, but she was still reserved at times like these. Maybe saints were just that difficult to deal with for people from the empire. I could only imagine what kinds of abuses religious folk committed there. It was scary to think about.

"You're certainly on edge about this. Are you from the empire, Lorraine?" Myullias asked.

"You could tell?"

"Yes, I know citizens of the empire talk to saints like you do. I understand how you feel. You can talk to me however is most comfortable for you, but I want

you to know that you can speak freely and I won't mind it. Honestly, the way they treat saints may make sense for the more accomplished of us, but I'm not terribly impressive as far as saints go, and I hardly think I deserve it."

Lorraine raised an eyebrow at Myullias's gloomy attitude. She must have noticed that Myullias acted more like a commoner than the average saint. Also, what Myullias said was perfectly fine in Yaaran, but it might have been taken as criticism of the church in the empire. Lorraine always told me that saints were to be given the utmost respect as a rule. Commoners had to do that, or there was no telling what would be done to them, according to her. What Myullias said could also provoke a loss of trust in the church and put her in a difficult position, but she said it anyway. Maybe Nive rubbed off on her somehow. Nive would say even brasher things, so Myullias could have lost any sense of propriety after spending so much time with her.

"If you say so, then," Lorraine said. "But next time I go to the empire, I had better not find myself persecuted for insulting Myullias Raiza."

"I know how the inquisitors can be," Myullias replied with a smile. "That won't happen, of course. I decided to treat my time here like a vacation anyway, so I'd like to enjoy myself."

That didn't sound like the kind of thing a saint would say, but Lorraine seemed to believe it. She reached out a hand to ask Myullias for a handshake.



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“All right, this way!” Wolf shouted to us from Maalt’s main gate.

We headed over and saw a carriage coming toward us at a considerable speed. It was going to take us to the New Moon Dungeon. Most carriages were currently fleeing Maalt, and the ones that went to the dungeons had shut down their services, so this must have been hard to find. Or maybe he forced someone to cooperate.

“This’ll take you straight there,” Wolf said. “Now get on. I’ll be staying in Maalt to deliver orders.” Then he jumped off the carriage and disappeared into town.

As soon as we entered the carriage, the coachman promptly whipped the horse. This horse had six legs, a species said to be descended from Sleipnir, and it was especially fast.

There was a fair distance between Maalt and the New Moon Dungeon, too far to run there, but this carriage would get us there in no time. Nive might have been able to run faster than a carriage, I guess, but I sure couldn’t. Or maybe I could manage it somehow, but it would be tough to maintain that speed, so I preferred to just ride. Also, there was no way Lorraine and Myullias could run that fast. If we were leaving them behind, I suppose Nive and I could dash to the dungeon on our own, but that’d expose some secrets I’d rather keep hidden.

A couple more carriages came, and some other adventurers boarded them. Wolf had said he was picking the best of the best, but it didn’t look like he was expecting us to handle the job all on our own. Including us, there were three parties exploring the New Moon Dungeon. Wolf probably trusted Lorraine, but I was a monster, Myullias served a church, and Nive was Nive. It was self-evident why he didn’t want us going by ourselves. Strictly in terms of combat skill, I thought we were about the best you could find in Maalt, but there were too many other reasons to doubt us. However, Wolf did seem to depend on me anyway, and sending other adventurers along wasn’t necessarily a matter of trust. He probably had certain obligations as the guildmaster.

“We have a pretty disconcerting team here,” Lorraine muttered. Myullias and

I nodded, but Nive just whistled to herself. It was a melody I'd never heard before. Maybe she could compose songs too. If so, she had a ridiculously extensive set of skills.

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"Now, let the thrall hunt begin, everyone!" Nive declared at the entrance to the New Moon Dungeon before charging inside. Myullias followed after her, followed by me and Lorraine.

"Myullias, you don't seem to be an adventurer, but it looks like you've had a fair bit of physical training," Lorraine said as she ran through the dark dungeon.

"Yes, well, saints with more divine power don't have to do that, but my saintly abilities are rather minor," Myullias answered. "I thought I'd be a bit more useful if I learned to fight. Compared to professional adventurers, though, I don't measure up."

"I wouldn't put yourself down like that. You seem to have the foundations pretty well in hand, and you're able to mostly keep up with Nive's speed. But she's a Gold-class, and Rentt and I are both Silver-class, or at least of comparable strength. You may find this challenging, so would you mind if I physically enhance you?"

Lorraine's offer was both to be considerate and to get more use out of Myullias in the event Nive went on a rampage again.

"I wouldn't mind, but are you sure?" Myullias asked. "We don't know exactly how many thralls and vampires we'll encounter. You should save your mana."

"You're not wrong, but I have mana to spare. Besides, Nive's taking the lead for us anyway. We just need to keep up with her."

Lorraine looked at Nive up ahead. Skeletons, slimes, and other ordinary monsters had been appearing, but Nive had sliced them all to pieces with her claws. Seeing her crush the skeletons' skulls and blast them to bits felt like watching my brethren die before my eyes. It was a little depressing. I wasn't a skeleton anymore, but it was the first body I had after becoming a monster, so maybe I kind of took a liking to them. My later evolutions were creatures like ghouls and thralls, so I looked back fondly on when I didn't have rotting flesh.

“So it seems,” Myullias said, a stunned look on her face as she watched Nive from behind. Nive had just shredded another skeleton, smiling the whole time. If I were a skeleton, I sure wouldn’t want to go near her. “Then please do.”

Lorraine enchanted Myullias with a physical enhancement spell. It was more effective on oneself than on others, but the fact it could be cast on others at all was highly advantageous. You could give non-combatants a decent amount of stamina. The spell was surprisingly complicated because it had to take the target’s mana into account as well as the caster’s, but it seemed to be a breeze for Lorraine.

“How does it feel?” Lorraine asked.

Myullias ran around a little to check. “I feel much lighter,” she replied. “Thank you.”

“That’s good. Then shall we go after Nive? I don’t know if I’m imagining it, but she only seems to be getting faster.”

It definitely wasn’t her imagination. Nive probably smelled vampires or something. I didn’t smell anything, but as a fellow vampire, I felt like I could sense their presence. A vampire was near.

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“Oh, stop right here, everyone,” Nive said when she reached the corner of a hallway. She put a finger to her mouth to tell us to be quiet. I wanted to point out that she was the loudest of all of us, but I suppressed that urge because this wasn’t the time for it. I really wanted to say it, though.

“Is something wrong?” Myullias asked for all of us. Nive nodded and pointed around the corner. Myullias peered in that direction. “I see, yes,” she said somberly and prompted me and Lorraine to look as well.

“The missing adventurers?” Lorraine said when she looked.

“Yes, looks like it,” I answered. “I know some of these people.”

It was a large room where about ten people were standing as still as dolls. Off to the side, there were also some sickly people who were tied up and sitting on the floor. Two of them were adventurers I worked with during the Bronze-class

Ascension Exam.

“Raiz, Lola, why?”

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“These are the two you told me about?” Lorraine asked. “But I thought they had formed a party with Rina too.”

“I’m pretty sure they did, but I don’t see Rina anywhere,” I answered. “Maybe they were by themselves when they were captured.”

I didn’t know the details, but they were childhood friends and clearly liked each other. Perhaps Rina had given them some space to be courteous. If they were captured at such a time, it would explain why Rina wasn’t present.

“Were they turned into thralls?” I wondered aloud.

This was my biggest concern at the moment. If they were thralls, then there was no way to turn them back as far as I knew. Nive probably didn’t know a way either, or she would have publicized it. Exterminating vampires was her whole ethos, after all. This meant if they had become thralls, even if they were people I knew, we would have to kill them.

“Those people over there still seem to be human,” Nive said, noticing my concern. Maybe I just imagined it, but when she looked over at them, she seemed relieved. I wanted to believe she had some humanity in her, so maybe I was just seeing what I hoped to see. “But it looks like the ones standing lifelessly on the other side are beyond salvation. They’re probably still in the middle of transforming, but there’s no helping them now. Let’s send them to their graves.”

A cold, somehow maniacal light shone in her eyes. Her hands moved restlessly, like she couldn’t wait to dig her claws into them. Never mind what I thought about her a moment ago; this was the real Nive.

“Now then, everyone, let’s save the ones that are still human and exterminate the thralls. Sound good?” Nive asked, turning to look at each of us. The force of will in her eyes made it difficult to defy her. Her gaze was a threat in itself.

She wasn’t wrong, but seeing as how they were still between human and

thrall, it was only natural to hope they could still be saved. But Nive didn't appear to care about that distinction. And seeing no other choice, I agreed with her. The prevailing theory was that thralls could never turn back into humans anyway. Nive could have just been cruel, but maybe she was only doing what she had to as an adventurer.

"Now let's go," Nive said with a satisfied smile after we gave our approval. "Wait, one second."

I was about to get moving, but I came to a stop and wondered what the problem was. Nive pointed to the corner of the room.

"I'm just saying, don't think too hard about it," somebody said. Two people were walking from the depths of the dungeon toward the large room. One looked to be a boy around the age of seventeen or eighteen, while the other was a girl who looked around fourteen or fifteen.

"But should we really be doing this?" the girl asked. "This makes us no better than the humans."

"Do you realize how much they've made us suffer?" the boy said. "There are tons of them anyway. What difference does it make if something happens to a few of them?"

"But—"

"I get it, but you need to stop thinking about it. We have to do this. Besides, Mr. Shumini says this is necessary. He hasn't said why yet, but he did awaken our power, right? So, y'know."

I didn't quite know what they were talking about, but I kind of understood some parts. Shumini had to be their boss or something. They also seemed ambivalent to turning people into thralls, and they didn't know the reason for it.

"Looks like we've got vampires," Nive said with amusement. "That's what my nose tells me. Let's kill them."

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"Here goes!" Nive said as she rushed into the large room. We followed.

Myullias wasn't a fighter, so she stayed back, but she had her duty as a saint to do. She had to purge the vampires and the air in this room. But it wasn't time for that yet.

"What?!"

"Who's there?!"

The young vampires opened their eyes wide and shouted, but Nive just raised her claw.

"What's it to you?" she said before swinging her claw down.

Her refusal to listen was the correct approach to humanoid monsters. Not necessarily in all cases, but their ability to speak human languages made most of them excellent at manipulating feelings. Listening to their excuses or circumstances would inevitably cause empathy, and countless humans had been slain for letting their guard down after hearing such pleas. Of course, monsters didn't lie or deceive all the time, but we already knew about many victims, and there were people in the process of becoming thralls here to prove it. There was no reason to hold back and ask questions. Personally, I would have wanted to hear more about what these two were discussing a moment ago, but I didn't know if Nive would reconsider killing vampires that were right in front of her. We had a job to do anyway.

First, we had to save the novice adventurers. There were only six in total, Raiz and Lola included. Nive seemed confident that she could handle these vampires on her own, so she probably didn't need help. Besides, she was Gold-class, and closer to Platinum-class than anyone else, no less. It was questionable as to how much Lorraine and I would even be helping.

We could have let her just do this job on her own, then, but there were potential problems with that. Nive gave us a lot of information, and she was a competent adventurer, but she seemed secretive in some ways. She'd come across that way ever since I first met her. It was easy to feel like she might do something heinous, so Wolf wouldn't have sent her on her own either.

Or maybe I was looking at her through my own biases. Objectively speaking, she was fighting off monsters for us all by herself, and we got a lot of money from her too. Thinking about it again, she did a lot for us. I almost felt like I

should at least buy her dinner or something. I also felt like that would just lead to trouble for me, though.

“Hey, Raiz, Lola! You alive?!” I asked and shook Raiz by the shoulders. Their eyes were vacant, and it was hard to tell if they were conscious.

“Ugh, where am I? Who are you?” Raiz responded. The life returned to his eyes.

“Thank goodness. It’s me, Rentt. We took an exam together. Remember that?”

“Rentt? Rentt?! Why are you here? Wait, never mind that, where’s Lola?”

“Right here. Looks like she’s unconscious, but she’s fine. She’s alive,” I said as I healed her with some divinity.

“Uh, huh? Where am I?” she asked as her eyes opened.

“Lola?!” Raiz exclaimed and tried to stand up. “Ouch!” He fell over.

From the look of it, his leg was wounded, maybe from when they were first attacked. On top of that, he had been enfeebled through some means and robbed of his faculties so he couldn’t even move. I couldn’t see the structure of the spell that was used, but it could have been a binding spell. They’d tried to be thorough, but the wound on his leg wasn’t serious. I could easily heal it. I wanted to conserve as much divinity as possible, but helping the adventurers was a top priority.

“Thanks, Rentt,” Raiz said.

“Don’t mention it. We’re party members, right? We help each other out,” I replied as I recalled what they’d told me after we took the exam.

“Of course,” said Raiz.

“You remembered?” asked Lola.

They looked pleased, but of course I remembered. I wouldn’t say I was never invited to join a party over the last decade, but it didn’t happen often. And of the invitations I did get, it wasn’t that they liked me so much as they wanted a jack-of-all-trades. A far smaller number sincerely wanted me as a partner. I could only remember Lorraine, Augurey, and maybe a handful of others.

“Well, put that aside for now,” I said. “Prepare to get out of here. Can you stand?” They were both gradually regaining their clarity.

“Yeah, I can stand,” Raiz said. “I felt like a sack of bricks a second ago, but now I’m fine. What’s up with that?”

I didn’t do anything but heal him with divinity, but maybe he had some sort of spell on him after all. Binding spells could feel like everlasting paralysis, but many of them would disappear upon contact with divinity. That must have been why they felt lighter.

I wondered if the same applied to the other four. I looked to the side and saw Lorraine wake them up with a curse-lifting spell, so it seemed it was something like what I expected. I couldn’t see spells in detail, so I didn’t know precisely, but they were freed in the end, and that was what mattered.

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I just stood back and protected the newbie adventurers as I watched. The fight went surprisingly well, but that surprise came from the vampires, not Nive. It was two on one, so you’d think they’d have the advantage, but Nive was a Gold-class adventurer bordering on Platinum-class. She was a step or two above the average adventurer, and most lesser vampires would pose no threat to her. That said, they fought better than expected. Maybe Nive was holding back, though.

Nive’s claw attacked the vampire boy from above, but he dodged to the side inhumanly fast and swiped at Nive’s neck with a red dagger. Nive saw this, laughed, and tilted her neck out of the way at the last second.

As if she were waiting for this, the vampire girl swung a red scythe down at Nive’s neck. I thought that even Nive would have trouble getting out of this one, but the scythe stopped right in front of her face. She had caught the blade with her teeth. Nive shook her head and tossed the vampire girl away, then she followed her as she hurtled through the air. The girl crashed into the wall, and as she tried to recover, Nive sliced at her neck. The claw severed the girl’s head, and I thought even a vampire would have to die after that.

But the moment the head hit the floor, both it and her body dissolved into a black mass that took the shape of bats. The bats flew far from Nive and merged

together, becoming the girl once again. She was panting, but her body was intact. Nive didn't look especially surprised.

"Division, huh?" Nive said. "You must be some renowned vampires. You looked wimpy to me, but I guess you have more skills than I thought. You even seem to have San Arms. This is fun."

Division was a special ability generally associated with middle or greater vampires. It made it possible to split the body into shadowy bats or other animals. The amazing thing about it was that the vampire could recover from wounds completely unharmed. It was said that this made them impervious to physical attacks. This was one reason that slaying middle vampires could be difficult. This could have meant that these two were middle vampires, but I didn't know for sure.

I honestly didn't know what San Arms were, but from what it sounded like, it was some other special ability vampires had. I didn't have either of these, as far as I knew, but I never tried to use them. I knew Division was inaccessible to lesser vampires, so I never considered it before. Now I thought it might be worth attempting later.

"I'm not having fun. Who the heck are you?!" the vampire girl shouted.

"Can't you tell?" Nive replied. "I'm an adventurer, and I'm here to slay you. You might as well surrender. If you tell me everything you know, I think they'll at least let you stand outside the gates of Heaven."

She didn't forget the part about gathering information, thankfully. She was a high-ranking adventurer, so it stood to reason that she'd be much more meticulous than me. She had also analyzed the behavior of vampires, and while she was typically hard to read, she did make logical decisions often enough.

She stopped short of saying they could actually go to Heaven, though. She didn't offer to let them live, either, but I guess that was obvious. They would still need human blood to survive.

"Jiziu, don't listen to her. Humans don't know anything," the vampire boy said to the girl.

"Wugong, but I—"

“Worry about it later!”

The vampire boy leaped at Nive. The number of daggers increased to seven, and all but the one in his hand floated in the air. These must have been the San Arms. Their blades were red and seemed different from ordinary weapons. They flew at Nive, but she danced out of the way of them all. She must have been going easy before after all.

“Is this all?” she said, looking unperturbed. “You’re not quite comparable to middle vampires, but you can use Division and San Arms. Very interesting. However, your skills are fatally unpolished.”

Nive began to move more nimbly. She shattered all the daggers with one swipe of her claws, closed in on the vampire boy in an instant, and sliced off his head. She cleaved the vampire girl down the middle at about the same time. Of course, this went the same way as before. They both turned into bats and then returned to their original states, as if they were never harmed at all.

“Don’t waste your time; we won’t die,” the vampire boy said, his voice echoing throughout the dungeon.

“You won’t?” Nive asked.

“Nope, we were granted power. Normally we would have to be middle vampires to use Division, or greater vampires to wield San Arms. You saw, didn’t you? No matter how much you cut or stab us, we’ll come back in one piece.”

“I see, oh really?!”

Nive jumped at the vampire boy and diced him to bits, only for the same thing to happen again. The same for the vampire girl.

“Enough! It’s hopeless!” said the boy.

“Give up already!” said the girl.

They kept attacking Nive, but she remained completely composed. In fact, she even grinned.

“Give up?” she asked. “Ridiculous. There are only two reasons I would stop hunting vampires: if I die, or if every last one of you dies!”

I didn’t know if that was insanity or conviction. I had no idea why she was so obsessed with vampires, but it was a maddening fixation. The look in her eyes said she would always pursue vampires, to the ends of the world even.

Nive fought the vampires for a while until they suddenly went wide-eyed and looked at themselves. It was after several dozen rounds of Nive slicing them and forcing them to revive.

“Knew it,” Nive said with a chuckle. I looked where she was looking and saw what she was talking about. The vampires’ fingers were disintegrating.

“What the hell?!” said the boy.

“Why? Heal, heal!” said the girl.

They repeatedly used Division to restore their arms, but their fingers kept crumbling into sand.

“You’re too ignorant,” Nive said. “Division makes it possible to shapeshift as well as restore to your original state, but you can’t keep using it forever.”

“What are you talking about?” the vampire boy asked shakily.

“Everything has its limitations, you know, no matter what you are. Surprisingly, not even monsters can escape their limits. The gods made it so, but even their power only goes so far. That means Division has its drawbacks too. This is what happens when you overuse it. Every middle vampire knows that, but I guess you didn’t.”

“But Mr. Shumini didn’t say anything about that,” the vampire girl said.

“Is that your leader? Well, I’ll be destroying him later. I’m sure he didn’t tell you on purpose. If you knew the drawbacks, you would’ve been more hesitant to use it. You were unwilling to risk your lives and he needed a way to make you fight, I take it. You were to be used and disposed of. How sad.”

“That’s not true! He’s not like that!” the boy cried, unwilling to accept the harsh truth.

“He said we’d be able to make a country for ourselves one day! He said we’d get to live happy lives there!” the girl moaned.

“Sounds like a nice dream,” Nive said. “Like a fairy tale a mother would tell

her young child. Sweet, kind, loving, and all a lie. Now let me send you to your deaths. At least you'll get to rest in peace."

Nive took one step toward them, then another. Her words and their own decaying bodies left them in a confused state. Unable to move or speak, they just watched her come closer.

"Sweet dreams. I'm sure the darkness will welcome you with open arms," Nive said and severed the immobilized boy's head. He didn't turn into bats this time. His head and body turned to sand until that was all that remained. Then she walked up to the girl a short distance away.

"Oh, oh, I—" the girl stammered and stared at Nive's claw.

"Did you listen to the pleas of the humans you killed? I doubt it," Nive said. Then she cut the girl in half. She disintegrated too, and the particles of what had been her body dispersed through the air.

Now that the two vampires were gone, Nive walked up to the half-formed thralls and stared at them pensively. "Myullias, it's your turn," she said. "Come over here. Rentt, could you help too?"

It was time for Myullias and I to purify them with our divinity. Nive could use divinity too, but she wasn't good at purification. Nobody's good at everything, I guess.

"Are you sure?" I asked her. "They're not fully formed yet, but they're still thralls. Don't you want to do it yourself?" I saw Nive as someone who would never turn down the chance to kill a vampire, so I didn't think she'd be willing to pass that duty onto others.

Nive shook her head, an uncharacteristically vague expression on her face. "No, I'd rather not precisely because they're not fully thralls. Their bodies and souls still differ from those monsters. Yet there's no way to save them now. They have to be destroyed. It's sad that they were forced to become monsters against their will, and I do pity them. They at least deserve a painless, peaceful death. Am I strange for feeling that way?"

It was surprisingly compassionate coming from her. Nothing was strange about it, of course. If anything, it was incredibly kind.

“No, I’m just a little shocked to hear you say that,” I replied. “I think it’s a good idea.”

“Well, I’m the pinnacle of compassion, after all,” Nive said with a chuckle and a shrug. “I’m kind to all people.” She was acting the same as usual, but the words coming out of her mouth were absurd.

“Rentt, do you know how to do this?” Myullias asked.

“Yeah, just purify them with divinity like you would anything else, right?”

“Yes. I recommend that you do it one at a time, though. Trying to purify them all at once will cost more divinity. I’ll start from over here, so please start from over there.”

Myullias headed off to one end of the line of half-formed thralls, so I walked down the line from the opposite end. They didn’t react at all when I purified them, their bodies turning to ash from the fingers up. They didn’t even scream or wail. Instead, I saw peace in their eyes.

Once they had all turned to ash, only their clothes and belongings remained. All of us, including the freed captives, sorted through their belongings to try and determine their identities.

“Hm, what’s this?” Nive asked. She approached a pile of ash from a thrall I’d purified and picked up a plant that had grown from my divinity. This time it wasn’t a sprout, but a sapling. A tiny, skinny sapling, but a sapling nonetheless. “What in the world is this?”

“I was blessed by a plant god, so plants grow when I use divinity,” I explained. “I don’t think it does any harm.”

“A plant god, you say? This is a rare specimen. May I take it?”

“That’s fine with me, but it’s just a tree.”

“Most trees aren’t tinged with divinity like this. Maybe this could grow into a holy tree one day. Those produce materials that are extremely difficult to come across, so it would be nice to have one around.”

“I don’t think that’ll happen. Also, how do you get ahold of materials from a holy tree?”

“Yes, well, I borrowed a branch or two,” Nive answered. “And I thought I was going to die during that whole debacle, let me tell you.”

The land of the high elves wouldn’t even let adventurers into their borders. I couldn’t imagine how hard it would be for someone to get in and take a piece of the holy tree they so cherished. The leaves alone were supposed to contain more divinity than my entire body, according to Clope. But somehow Nive must have gotten some.

“You snuck in?”

“It’s not like there’s another way to get holy tree branches. Those high elves pelted me with so much magic. If I had gotten hit, I would’ve been vaporized.”

“That’s awfully reckless,” Lorraine said. As naturally curious as she was, even she wouldn’t trespass on a place as highly secured as the nation of the high elves. “What did you need holy tree branches for, by the way?”

“Want to know? Well, it’s a secret. I’ll show you if the chance presents itself, but you’ll have to wait until then.”

It was typical for adventurers to reveal as little as possible, so I could understand why she wouldn’t tell us about something she’d gone to great lengths to obtain. We decided not to ask about it further. We went ahead and finished gathering up the thralls’ belongings.

“Hey, I’m sensing a lot of energy over here!” another adventurer said as he arrived. Some of the other elite adventurers who’d departed from Maalt with us had gotten here. We explained what had transpired.

“Then we should take these people back to town right away,” said a middle-aged man who seemed to be their leader. “We’ll take them. You should keep searching the dungeon.”

“Are you sure? We’ll get all the accolades if you do that,” Nive said. She held the highest rank and had the most experience of any of us, so she acted as our representative.

“You’re the ones who found the vampires first, so that’s fine. You have more skill and experience than we do. Besides, getting these folks back to town safely is important too. Take down whoever did this to our allies.”

“Of course. We’ll destroy every vampire we see. Look forward to that.”

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We left Raiz, Lola, and the other captured adventurers with the middle-aged man’s party and proceeded deeper into the dungeon. We were still only on the first floor of the New Moon Dungeon, though, and this floor was easy to traverse. It was also vast, but Nive had a map that automatically mapped out the floor, so we never came close to getting lost. Either way, I had the Map of Akasha too. But the strange thing was that while we could fully map the dungeon using it, it didn’t show any thralls or vampires. We could see the humans and their names, so maybe I was using the map wrong. I’d talked with Lorraine about its various functions, but we didn’t know everything about it, so there wasn’t much we could do. After this commotion was over, I figured it might be wise to think about different ways to use the map in dungeons.

“Here’s some more,” Nive said and came to a stop at another corner. She must have found another vampire. “I’ll charge in first, and you two can come in later. There are some active thralls this time, so you can handle those.”

I looked around the corner and saw a room similar in size to the last one. There was a boy who appeared to be a vampire, along with a number of thralls. Unlike the boy, their faces were rotten, and their flesh was dry and peeling off.

“Here goes!” Nive said as she ran into the room.

“Who are you?!” the vampire cried tensely.

“Vampires aren’t worthy of knowing my name!” Nive replied. Then she flailed her claw.

“Adventurers? I see, so you found us.” The boy dodged the claw, and the battle began. “Thralls! Attack this woman!”

The thralls were unable to follow his orders, since we had run in after Nive and begun fighting them. Thankfully, there were only five in all. They were a type of lesser vampire, but they were fairly powerful compared to orcs. For a couple of average Bronze-class adventurers, this would be a difficult battle. But while I was Bronze-class, I stood above the pack with my monster body, along with my mana, spirit, and divinity. Also, Lorraine was a full-fledged Silver-class.

Not to say this battle would be a breeze, but we were capable enough to keep the thralls from interfering in Nive's fight with the vampire.

Lorraine and I had to work together, however. I could probably beat them all myself if I made full use of my superhuman mobility and all of my divinity, but that would expose my powers to Nive and Myullias. I didn't think they were bad people, but I didn't want them to know everything either. Even if they didn't learn I was a monster, there was no telling what could get us on their enemy list. Religion was a largely peaceful and casual affair in Yaaran, but Lorraine had told me that the Church of Lobelia could be extremely unforgiving, so it didn't hurt to be cautious around them. They were probably going to find out a few things regardless, but nothing that would expose me as anything more than an ordinary adventurer.

I fought them up close while Lorraine attacked from behind—the most obvious approach. I used my sword to defend against their bites and claw swipes while slashing at them when I had an opening. Lorraine filled the gaps in my attacks and fired off spells at any thrall that tried to go after Nive.

Of course, fighting several foes like this would normally end poorly, but Lorraine and I had a decade of experience working together. We synchronized perfectly. We knew exactly what the other would do next without a need for words. For example, I slashed at a thrall, but it blocked the blow and knocked me back a bit. The thrall then came straight after me, but I sensed mana behind me and ducked, allowing Lorraine to launch a fireball straight at the thrall and set its head on fire. We took the thralls down one by one in this manner until only one remained.

"It's over," I said and cut its head off. I turned around to look at Nive and the vampire, and that fight was nearing its end too. The vampire looked unharmed, but he was panting. He'd probably used Division to regenerate so many times that his stamina was wearing thin. Unlike the two young vampires from before, though, he wasn't turning into sand.

"You're not using Division too rashly, I see," Nive said to the vampire. "It doesn't look like you're using San Arms either."

The vampire scoffed. "What, did you fight Jiziu and Wugong? I'm not like

them. They only joined us recently, so they haven't been taught much about their power yet."

"That's awfully cruel. If they'd been taught that overusing that power was dangerous, they could have avoided such a meaningless demise," Nive replied, but I felt like that wasn't actually true. She probably would have destroyed them in some other way.

"They're dead? Huh. Well, we didn't hide that information from them on purpose. If we had, I'm sure they could've stopped you before you got here."

Nive raised a brow. "You were going to tell them later?"

"Obviously. Well, after they got a little more combat experience. But to be honest, I wasn't expecting you to have this much skill. When it comes to small cities like Maalt, Silver-class adventurers are about the strongest you see. With Division, you'll never die and you can easily run away. In theory, at least."

Normally the boy's expectations wouldn't have been far from the truth, but Nive's obsession and her sense of smell were a bit extraordinary. If it wasn't for her, maybe they could have bought a bit more time and escaped after triggering this chaos. But Nive wouldn't let any vampires get away.

"But all things considered, you still seem to have a lot of fight left in you," Nive said. "I see. Interesting."

Objectively speaking, the young vampire was backed up against a wall. He had little energy left and nowhere to run. Despite that, he kept smiling as if everything was going according to plan. Nive must have noticed it.

"Oh, you can tell?" the young vampire asked.

"Buying time, I take it? Your real objective was in town, I'm guessing. But most of the adventurers are in town. What's the point of this?"

"Nive Maris, you undersell yourself. Without you, Maalt is no more than a hunting ground for us. Well, maybe that's going a little far. I recently learned that this little city has a surprising number of talented adventurers. Either way, hardly any of them could capture and kill us. It's possible that someone could kill me, if I'm being honest, but they wouldn't stand a chance against Mr. Shumini."

I didn’t know how to feel about that. There were a fair number of powerful folks, and I’d just learned that a vampire’s regenerative abilities weren’t limitless. If we fought them for long enough, we could probably destroy them eventually. But fighting in a cramped dungeon was one thing, while fighting outside was entirely another. They could use their Division to flee in that environment. Maybe Nive knew some way to counter that, but none of Maalt’s adventurers specialized in hunting vampires. Guildmaster Wolf probably had some general countermeasures, but only a vampire hunter would know how to exploit their weaknesses. Adventurers had to fight more than just vampires, so it was rare to find someone who focused on only that.

The previous vampires had mentioned Shumini as their leader, but apparently this boy wasn’t him. The boss was in town, from the sound of it.

“I see. Very well, then,” Nive said. “I’ll kill you, head straight back to town, and finish the job.”

“You think I’ll let you do that?”

The boy laughed, pulled a red rapier out of nowhere, and filled it with mana. The rapier emitted an unsettling energy that flowed into the boy and transformed him. His slender, dainty body made a popping sound as his arms, chest, and thighs swelled and his well-tailored clothes burst off.

“What the hell?” I whispered.

“That’s the power of San Arms,” Nive explained. “It’s functionally identical to how holy swords enhance humans. They’re the secret weapon of middle and greater vampires, but San Arms themselves are rare, so they’re seldom seen. Anyway, this is bad. When a middle vampire does this, their strength matches a greater vampire.”

The boy no longer looked like a vampire, instead resembling something closer to an ogre. But compared to an ogre, I could see intelligence in his eyes, and something about the way he moved was smart. That was no ogre. It was far more dangerous.

“Can you win?” I asked Nive.

“Yes, but it might take a bit. It wouldn’t be much of a problem at any other

time, but we aren't in the best of circumstances. Rentt, could you and Lorraine head back to town? Find and destroy the boss vampire."

"Are you sure?" I was positive she would want to do it herself.

"Well, I can't do everything. But as soon as I destroy this vampire, I'll return to town. If the boss vampire is still alive by then, I'll swoop in and take care of him," she said with a grin. She almost seemed cool to me there, but I didn't say so out loud.

I turned around and said, "Lorraine! We're going back to town!"

"Right!"

We ran out of the large room and down the hallway.

"Oh, you're not going anywhere," the ogre vampire said. He was next to us in an instant.

"Oh yes they are!" Nive shouted. She appeared right after the ogre vampire, knocking it back into the room with her claw before it could hit us. "Now go!"

"See you later!" I shouted, and left it at that. She was actually acting like a mature adventurer in this situation. I respected that, but I didn't mention it.

Myullias had remained in the hallway and was simply watching Nive's fight with the vampire. I thought she might come with us, but she had to stay and purify the vampire after the fight. "Be careful!" she told us.

We waved goodbye to her and left.

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I doubted that Nive trusted me to beat the boss. Rather, I assumed she wanted to be sure that all the vampires in and around Maalt were killed. But the one in the New Moon Dungeon was equivalent to a greater vampire, and while I was stronger than I used to be, I couldn't be sure that I would win even with the full extent of my power. Nive must have known it would be impossible for me, so she decided to do it herself.

We didn't know why the vampire was in Maalt or what he was trying to do, but he had to have some goal other than making thralls go on a rampage. Whatever he wanted to do, it took enough time that he had to lure Nive to the

New Moon Dungeon and keep her occupied there with San Arms.

The young vampire was right that Maalt's forces weren't entirely reliable, but they were probably able to buy some time for Nive to defeat him and make it back to Maalt. I think that was what she wanted me to do too. She acted like I could beat the boss vampire, but likely only to convince me to go. I would have struggled against a middle vampire, so I couldn't win against a potentially stronger foe. But maybe I could hold him back for a while. I just needed to get in his way and wait for Nive to arrive. I at least had to try. I could probably manage that much.

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When we got to Maalt, we heard a loud boom.

"Rentt! It came from the central square!" Lorraine said and rushed over there. I ran after her. She was a lot slower than me, but I would need the help of her magic to fight the boss vampire.

"Let's pick up the pace," I said. I then lifted up Lorraine as I kept running.

"Rentt! Sorry," she said, but I was just doing what made sense. I had the body of a monster and the training of a swordsman, so I was much more physically able. Lorraine was a magician and served as more of a glass cannon.

"You can pay me back when we fight the boss vampire," I said.

"Yes, of course."



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It was pandemonium. The central square was full of wailing adventurers rolling around on the ground. Some were bloody, and some were covered in wounds. Others had broken bones, while some had holes in their bodies. Healers were running around everywhere. But among all the injured people, one man was still standing and giving orders.

“Wolf!” I shouted as I put Lorraine down and ran toward him.

“Rentt? How was it at the New Moon Dungeon? And where’s Nive Maris?”

He was still standing, but he had wounds all over his body. Blood dripped from his skin. I couldn’t waste too much divinity, but I at least stopped the bleeding with my divine arts.

“You sure are convenient,” Wolf said, his eyes wide. He had mostly recovered.

This might have been the first time he saw me use divinity. He seemed only mildly shocked, though, maybe because nothing I did could surprise him anymore. This was much more commonplace than someone turning into a monster, anyway.

“So what happened? Who did this?” Lorraine asked Wolf. There were signs that something had exploded, but there was no culprit to be seen in the central square.

“Probably a greater vampire,” Wolf answered. “I couldn’t guess if he was a middle or greater vampire from his appearance alone, but his power was off the charts.”

“It was probably the boss vampire,” I said. “We met some vampires who served him at the New Moon Dungeon. One of them said he was planning to do something in Maalt. Nive is still fighting that vampire, but she should be back once she’s done.”

“Getting all these thralls to tear up the town was bad enough, but he’s still got more in store? I have to do something,” Wolf replied as he coughed up blood. The mild healing I’d given him only helped so much. I held up my hand to heal him some more, but Wolf stopped me. “Save your energy. I don’t know

who that vampire was, but he went that way. The mostly unharmed adventurers chased after him, and I want you to do the same. Take him down. Show him what Maalt's adventurers can do."

"But Wolf, somebody should heal you first."

There were healers around. It would have been best if they prioritized healing him. He was the guildmaster, after all. If the man in charge was this injured, it would cause problems.

"The others are hurt worse than I am," Wolf said. "They should be prioritized. Besides, there aren't enough healers in Maalt to fully heal everyone here. Not like I can help with fighting either. There'd be no point in it. But my head's working fine, so I can still give orders. That's enough. And you just healed me yourself too."

He wouldn't listen to me. I got his point, though, and I could see in his eyes that there was no convincing him.

"Got it. Then I'll go after the vampire. You better not die."

"Of course." Wolf grinned like a ferocious carnivore.

Side Story: Isaac Hart

“I knew you would come. We all loved blood, but you most of all. I caused all this commotion just for you,” a robed man said with a smile. He stood atop a building on the outer edge of Maalt.

Before him stood another man. It was me, Isaac Hart.

“I never asked for this,” I said, “and you expect me to be happy? I have nothing to do with you anymore. Leave this town at once.”

Never before had I been so callous to my old Allies, if I may say so myself. In the past, I would never have spoken like this. The Allies were my friends, brothers, and comrades. Our connections were stronger than blood. I could never have imagined that I would cut ties with them, but life is full of surprises.

Unimaginable encounters could change one’s view of things. He was no longer an Ally to me. But I knew he didn’t feel the same way. I knew because, had things been slightly different, I would have been in his position and he would have been in mine.

He seemed shocked by what I said, and his pale face turned even whiter. “What are you talking about, Isaac? You should be glad. Smile like you did in the old days. Our plan is coming together. What was once a pipe dream could soon be reality. Come back to us. Come back, Isaac!”

At first he sounded perturbed. But his tone gradually turned more somber until, in the end, there was anger in his voice. Every kind of emotion stirred around within him. It was painful for me too, but none of what he said appealed to me. Not the plan, not our dreams, not the fun we once had together. I remembered it all, but it felt distant now. Faded memories could be nice to reminisce about, but I never wanted to return to them.

“Shumini, you’re an old friend,” I said. “So I’ll tell you one last time. Leave this town, or else.”

Before I could say more, arrows came at us from below—magic too.

“There he is! It’s him!” one of them said. They weren’t aiming at me, but at Shumini.

“Damn you, humans!” Shumini grumbled. “We were in the middle of something important.”

Shumini began to gather mana in his hands. It looked like he was planning to use a big spell. There were about a dozen adventurers on the road by the building, and they were all eager to kill.

“Mystic power that dwells in all things, obey me and burn all to cinders,” I chanted. “Fire Storm!”

I blasted a fireball at his arm. It wasn’t especially powerful, but unlike the massive spell he was about to use, I could cast it quickly. The fireball hit Shumini’s arm and redirected his spell. As a result, it missed the adventurers below. It did hit a building in town, but this area had been evacuated already. That was why I lured Shumini here. Not that the owners of that building would appreciate what happened, but they could be compensated later.

Shumini glared at the adventurers flinging spells and arrows at him, then gave me an enraged look. “What did you just do?” he asked. “Why help them? This isn’t who you are. Remember back when we fought side by side? We killed humans, destroyed towns, and feasted upon their blood!”

“Yes, I remember.” I remembered the cacophonous cries of humans as they perished. I never questioned my actions. I thought it was what must be done.

“Then why?!”

“I didn’t know anything. I don’t expect to be forgiven for what I’ve done, but I can’t let it happen again,” I declared.

Shumini shrank away and fell to his knees as if he’d lost his balance. He laughed. “I see, so you’ve changed. I’m sure a human has tricked you. I’m right, aren’t I? Where is the insolent human who’s deceiving you?! I’ll go kill them. Then you’ll come back, won’t you?!”

I could tell now that he wouldn’t be convinced. It was too late. I knew from the start that our interests no longer aligned. Despite that, I held onto the faintest sliver of hope. For a long time, we’d shared the same goals and traveled

together. No matter how things had changed, I thought that maybe I could make him understand. But of course I couldn't. I'd forgotten that he wouldn't so easily give up his aspirations. It was me who had faltered, not him.

"I haven't been tricked," I said. "But if you intend to harm the people of this town any further, I won't hesitate to turn against an old friend. That's what I'm here for." I drew my sword. It was the sword I was given long ago.

"Very well, then I'll have to resort to violence," Shumini replied. "I promise not to do anything too brutal. I'll just hurt you until you give me a name."

He took out his weapon, a blood red sword. Our blades clashed. He wielded a San Arm, a special weapon that vampires possessed. With enough power, their blades of darkness could cut through anything. Vampire blacksmiths forged the blades from the blood of the wielder. They could be compressed and stored within the body, and they had special abilities.

Shumini's San Arm brought back memories. I'd seen him as a dependable partner when he wielded it by my side. I thought that if we fought together, we could achieve our ambitions. Now the sword felt heavy. What had been reassuring in the hands of a friend delivered a fearsome strike in the hands of a foe.

My weapon was the same. It had gone unused for a long time and had received no blood, so it had lost its former color, but it was as durable a blade as ever. An average weapon would chip or break when it struck a San Arm, but this sword wouldn't. Still, I couldn't deny that I hadn't taken care of it for a long time.

"What's wrong, Isaac?!" Shumini roared. "Have you forgotten the vicious swordsmanship you once used?! You think you can beat me like this?!"

He delivered a flurry of slashes, putting me on the defensive. I could only guess how much blood his sword must have drunk. It had been many years since we parted ways. The difference that all that time had made was now clear. I'd distanced myself from any intense battles. I did still slay some monsters, of course. But that was all. My main job as of late was to serve as a butler to the Latuule family, which involved no combat against humans or humanoids. To be frank, my senses had dulled.

But even so, I had to do this. I had to do it for this city, and for her. I tightened my grip on my sword. Spikes jutted from the hilt. They dug into my hand and brought blood. But none of my blood dripped onto the roof. The sword drank it before it could.

Also known as blood-sucking weapons, San Arms could absorb the blood of their wielders and victims to gain power. It had been a long time since I felt this, so it did make me wince. I could feel my blood rush into the sword. It must have been hungry. I hadn't fed it in years, so it was understandable. My sword gradually transformed. A red blade grew around the thin, silver one. It turned from a rapier into a greatsword.

Shumini saw this and distanced himself from me. He knew that this was my real fighting style. We knew each other well. Our weapons, combat techniques, ideas, favorite and least favorite things—none of it was a secret to either of us. That was why we couldn't accept each other as we were now. We wondered why it had to come to this, and why the other side refused to understand. It was probably my fault. I changed, not him. He was the same as ever. Maybe I should have let him kill me, but I couldn't.

"Now let's do this, Shumini," I said and readied my greatsword, holding it in both hands. It was now about as long as I was tall.

"Now this is the real you, Isaac," Shumini remarked with a smile. "Keep it up. Remember more of the time we spent fighting together."

I already remembered. Fighting spirit surged from within me. I felt like a dog presented with meat, and I was overcome with a loathing for injustice. Now I realized that those feelings had simply sunk deep in my heart, but I had no intention of scooping them back out. I'd decided to leave them there for eternity.

I brandished my sword and accelerated toward Shumini. Shumini saw me coming and readied his weapon. I swung my blade straight down at him, but he parried it. I predicted as much, so I used the momentum to spin and deliver a horizontal slash. But Shumini blocked this with his sword too. The greater weight of my blade did knock him back a bit, though, and I followed after him. I didn't hold back at all.

Arrows and spells raced toward him from the ground. They weren't that powerful, so Shumini just knocked them away with his sword.

"I knew they would interrupt," he said. He tried to cast another spell, so I slashed at him from the side to send him flying. "You stopped me again?" he complained.

"The adventurers will keep coming. If you don't want interruptions, let's go somewhere else," I said.

If he had said no, I might have dragged him elsewhere by force. But Shumini glanced at the adventurers on the ground, saw more of them running toward the building, and nodded. "Very well."

He probably didn't want these insects crawling around and pricking him with arrows and magic. Shumini always preferred to enjoy delicacies in peace. Interruptions made him furious. It brought back sweet memories, but I didn't want to think about that.

"This way. Come with me," I said. I wanted to say it would be his grave, but it could also end up being mine. I had to take this seriously.

Chapter 3: The Vampire and the Silver-Haired Man

I ran in the direction Wolf had pointed to until I encountered a group of adventurers searching for something. Wondering if they were looking for thralls, I eavesdropped on them.

“Where’d the vampire run off to?! He was fighting some tough guy with silver hair, but they both up and vanished!”

“How should I know? Maybe they teleported or something. Greater vampires can use some crazy magic, from what I hear.”

It sounded like the vampire had come past here, but apparently these adventurers had lost sight of him. The idea that they could have used a spell like teleportation in this chaos was absurd, though. They were just yelling at each other in frustration because they couldn’t find the vampire. At any rate, I approached them to ask if they found any clues.

“Hey!” I said.

“Oh, you’re that weirdo who came to Maalt’s guild recently. I hear you’ve got skills.”

I had my mask fully covering my face, so the adventurer saw me as Rentt Vivie. I didn’t know people were saying that about me. Well, the weirdo part I guess I understood, considering my appearance. But I put that aside for now.

“I heard you talking about the vampire being around here,” I said. “Do you have any idea where he went?”

“Yeah,” the middle-aged adventurer said and gravely nodded. “The vampire was actually on the roof of that building. He was fighting some tough silver-haired guy, but they both went off somewhere. I wonder where.”

It was the same thing that another adventurer had told us earlier. I didn’t know who this silver-haired man could be, though. Nive’s hair was gray, and while Myullias’s hair was silver, she was also a woman. And Nive was also a woman, for that matter. But that wasn’t as important as the whereabouts of

the vampire.

I thought about places he could have gone to until I heard a loud boom from somewhere. As I looked around to see where it came from, Edel jumped off my shoulder and ran off.

“Do you know the place?” I asked him.

“Sqreak!” he answered, so after looking at Lorraine to see what she thought, we decided to go after him.

The middle-aged adventurer gave us a curious look, so I thought about telling him that we knew where the vampire went. Considering my secret, though, it would be better if fewer people were around. And while most of these adventurers were veterans, they were also Bronze-class. Thralls were one thing, but a greater vampire would be too much for them. My skill level wasn’t that much different from them, but I was also physically difficult to kill. Lorraine was a Silver-class adventurer too, and I could serve as a human shield if necessary, so there was no problem there. I was still uneasy about our chances, but we had to try. With that settled, we ran off.

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Edel led us somewhere underground. It was probably an old sewer.

“I never realized this place existed,” Lorraine said as she ran.

Neither had I. We’d used an entrance hidden under the tiles in an old house, but that presumably wasn’t the only way in. Maalt had a long history, but this was still strange to see in a small city. A hidden passage like this would make more sense near the capital than here. There was no use wondering why it existed, though, so we just continued forward.

The dim, narrow corridor suddenly ended at a large opening. The room was shaped like a dome and had a high ceiling. There were many statues lining the wall. The ones in the north, south, east, and west corners were statues of women. They had been placed so that they were gazing toward the center of the room. I had no idea who they were statues of, but in the middle of the room stood a robed man with a sword. He had his foot on a fallen man who was holding a rapier.

“Oh? Do we have guests?” the robed man said. “I was just getting to the good part. Don’t ruin the fun.”

The robed man held up his free hand. I sensed mana gathering in his hand and heard him mumbling an incantation. We immediately knew that he planned to launch magic at us, so we split up just as a fireball charred the space where we had been standing. The man scowled, surprised that we had dodged a spell with such a quick incantation.

Lorraine countered with her own magic. Seven ice spears flew at the man. He frantically avoided them, moving away from the man on the ground. I remained cautious of the robed man as I approached the fallen man to help him up. This was probably the powerful fighter that the adventurers had mentioned. I looked at his face.

“Isaac?!” I gasped, recognizing his silver hair and cold features.

It was Isaac Hart, the servant of the Latuule family who I’d met at the Tarasque Swamp. I had no clue why he was here, but he was certainly powerful. Ordinary humans were daunted by the swamp, but he could traverse it with nothing but light armor, like he was simply taking a walk.

“Rentt,” Isaac whispered when he saw my face. I didn’t see any wounds. Something about this whole situation seemed a little unnatural.

“Rentt!” Lorraine shouted. I knew why she did. The robed man was approaching. Lorraine had been holding him back with magic, but that had reached its limit.

Isaac heard Lorraine as well. “We’ll talk later!” he said. He picked up his rapier and jumped away. I swiftly moved away too just before the robed man’s sword scraped the ground.

It was three against one, and the robed man was surrounded.

“I swear, today has been nothing but a series of interruptions,” the man grumbled.

“That’s what happens when you torment this city, Shumini,” Isaac said.

If the other vampires were to be trusted, Shumini was the name of their boss.

“Are you the mastermind behind this whole mess?” I asked.

“I would appreciate it if you stayed out of this conversation with my friend, human. But you seem to be a citizen of this town, so I suppose I can offer you an explanation. Yes, I am the one who plunged this city into the depths of Hell. I am Shumini Essel, a vampire and Knight of Rebellion who serves the Great Sovereign.”

There was a lot I could have argued about with his whole statement. I wasn’t even human, but it didn’t seem worthwhile to bring that up. I could tell him I was a monster, but I didn’t think that would win him over. He wasn’t the friendliest character, so I saw no use in mentioning it. Also, whatever he was talking about with Sovereigns and Knights of Rebellion meant nothing to me. But it sounded like he’d get mad if I pointed that out, so I didn’t know what to say. Talking to this guy felt like walking through a minefield.

Thankfully, Isaac spoke for me. “In which case, Shumini, destroying you will stop the thralls?” he asked.

“Well, I suppose so, but I have other subordinates. They could take over for me,” Shumini replied to Isaac, sounding more awkward than he had with me.

“The ones in the New Moon Dungeon? They’ve all been destroyed already,” I interjected.

Shumini’s composure slipped and veins began popping out on his forehead. I guess I’d stepped on a landmine. I was also surprised to find that vampires had veins that could bulge like that at all. It was questionable whether their hearts worked in the first place, but blood flowed through them, to be sure. I bled when I was cut too, but those wounds instantly healed. Either way, it made sense that they could have bulging veins.

“You killed them?” he asked.

Whether it was technically possible to kill the undead rather than destroy them depended on who you asked and what their religious views and morals were. From a vampire’s perspective, it seemed they felt they were alive and could be killed. I would probably feel the same way if I were being destroyed, so I understood it. But humans felt differently.

“When we destroy the undead, we don’t say we killed them,” I stated. “We purified them.”

It felt hollow when I said it, but that was the normal human perspective. I was a monster too, so I would’ve been offended if someone had said the same to me, but I felt safe enough to talk like this to someone doing harm to humans. I was a good vampire, so surely I would be spared. Or maybe that was wishful thinking.

Unaware of what I was thinking, Shumini ground his teeth and glared at me. “How dare you!” he exclaimed. “Do you know what your bigoted ideas have done to vampires?!”

He quivered with rage. It was scary, but I’d seen it coming.

“Shumini,” Isaac interjected. “Do you still dream of making a world just for vampires? Do you really think it’s possible?”

Shumini’s subordinates had said they were making a nation, but this sounded bigger than that. To make a world just for vampires presumably meant wiping out the humans that dominated it. It was mostly humans who viewed vampires as opposition anyway. Elves and dwarves were classified as human too, but they were treated as a subspecies, and they seldom discriminated toward other creatures. I’d heard that elves and dwarves didn’t get along with each other very well, but that wasn’t so much discrimination as a difference of disposition.

“It’s no mere dream, Isaac,” Shumini answered. “I told you that victory is within reach. Everything that was once but a dream is now possible. I just want to share some of this joy with you.”

“It feels like I’m repeating myself, but I’m not interested. Leave this city. If you do, I won’t pursue you.”

That last part was surprising to hear. It sounded like these two were friendly with each other, like they knew each other from way back. I wondered if Isaac might also be a vampire. I’d had my suspicions before, but Isaac never gave off the aura of a vampire. Shumini, on the other hand, very much did. I didn’t know if Isaac had some special way of hiding it, or if there was an entirely different reason that these two knew each other.

But it seemed clear that Isaac stood in opposition to Shumini and intended to defend Maalt. That was good enough. I looked at people in terms of their stances, not their species. That's how I hoped others would treat me. Though, even if Isaac and I didn't chase Shumini out of Maalt, Nive would never give up. But I decided not to tell him. He probably knew anyway and had his own countermeasures.

"After all this, I wouldn't be let off the hook that easily, would I?" Shumini said, as expected. "At any rate, I see there's no use talking to you. Very well, then I give up on you too, Isaac. If it were possible, I wish I could have entrusted the rest to you."

"What are you talking about?" Isaac asked and cocked his head.

However, Shumini suddenly pulled a knife out of his robe and held it up. The knife was black from hilt to blade, and I sensed a strong presence from it. He pointed the blade not at us, but at himself. "I will make up for what I lack by using myself as a sacrifice! Farewell, Isaac!" he shouted and thrust the knife into his chest. Cracks began to spread throughout his body, dividing his pale skin up like tiles. Bright blue light shone through the cracks.

"Shumini," Isaac muttered, but this didn't seem like the time to worry about him.

"Rentt, this looks bad!" Lorraine cried. "We should run."

It did very much seem like something was about to explode. If it came to that, I couldn't imagine the scale of the blast, but it seemed like Isaac knew something.

"Isaac! What's happening?!" I asked.

"I don't know," he said. "I would just say that it might be best to get out of here. Let's go."

We ran toward the exit. As we left the room, we heard a loud blast and felt a strong gust of wind blow us forward. It wasn't hot. It didn't seem like a bomb had gone off, but something about the wind felt deeply sickening. It was like lukewarm wind during the summer. But while it felt unpleasant, I didn't feel negatively affected by it.

“So did he self-destruct or what?” I whispered.

“I’m going off of old memories, but Shumini was never one to do such a thing before,” Isaac answered. “He was willing to make sacrifices to achieve his goals, but self-destructing to defeat his enemies is far too short-sighted for him. He must have had some other objective.”

“He did say something about using himself as a sacrifice.”

“A sacrifice?” Lorraine said. “For a summoning ritual, maybe? Could a powerful monster have appeared in that room?”

It sounded plausible. We looked at each other, wondering if we should go see.

“It might be dangerous, but we ought to check,” Isaac said, and it was settled.

Isaac probably also just wanted to know what happened to Shumini, but either way, we had to check before we left. Reporting to the guild first was also an option, but at the very least, we needed to see what happened to Shumini.

We cautiously went back down the path we fled from. We peeked in the room from outside the entrance and saw something massive sitting in the middle.

“What’s that?” Isaac asked. “It looks like a dragon.”

“If so, it’s not a very interesting one. It’s like an alligator that’s standing upright,” Lorraine said, offering her appraisal of the creature.

I felt like Lorraine’s assessment was more accurate. It was substantially larger than an alligator, though, at about ten meters in length. It was also built differently, with muscles and bumpy skin all over its body that made it look freakishly strong. Whatever it was, I didn’t want to fight it.

“Is that a person’s face?” I said and pointed to the creature’s stomach.

“No doubt about it. It’s Shumini,” Isaac replied sadly.

The giant alligator’s stomach was mostly covered with green skin, but part of it jutted out unnaturally. Upon closer inspection, it looked like a person’s face. Not only that, but it was clearly Shumini. Either the monster had absorbed him, or he was the monster itself.

At any rate, we had to decide what to do next. The most important decision was whether to fight the monster or return to town to report this incident. Lorraine and I agreed that it would be better to return to town for now. We weren't confident that we were strong enough, and if we were killed here, the townspeople might not learn about this for a while. I was fairly confident in my strength as of late, but I wasn't naive enough to think I was sure to win this fight. I was still just Bronze-class, when it came down to it. Lorraine was Silver-class, but she didn't often take jobs, so her combat intuition wasn't that great. She did know a lot of spells though, including powerful ones.

Isaac, on the other hand, looked ready for action. He likely wanted to do something about Shumini. They'd stood opposed to each other until just moments ago, but they were still old acquaintances. As to whether Isaac wanted to help him or be the one to kill him, it was probably the latter, but it was easy to imagine that he felt some mixture of the two. But while Isaac felt that on the inside, he seemed to realize what was most important right now.

Isaac glanced at the monster and shook his head. "I can't let my selfishness expose Maalt to further danger. Let's go back for now. I want to stop it, but it can wait until after this situation has been reported."

Lorraine and I nodded, and we slowly went back down the corridor, trying to escape the monster's notice.

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Something strange happened a while after we started heading to the exit. I heard a familiar grunt. Isaac heard it too and looked at me. "Rentt, did you hear that?" he asked.

"Yeah."

It came from a little ways away, so a normal human like Lorraine couldn't hear it. "Was there a sound?" she asked. But she learned what it was soon after.

A bit further down the corridor, an arrow flew at us from around the corner. Lorraine kept a magic shield up at almost all times, and I was ready to stop the arrow with my sword, but Isaac caught it in his hand. We heard another grunt, then saw what it was coming from.

“A goblin? What’s it doing here?” Lorraine wondered.

Goblins could show up anywhere, so some would say it was never a surprise to encounter one. That was generally correct, but only outside of cities. The only time you’d see them inside a city was if they were peaceful goblins who were trading with humans. Monsters were generally barred from human establishments. Tiny monsters like puchi suri could slip through the cracks, but a single goblin could harm an adult man by itself, so they were treated with caution. Specialized magicians set up barriers to inform them of invaders, at which time knights or adventurers would be sent out to search for them. Because of this, it was strange to encounter a goblin under Maalt.

Of course, we couldn’t just leave it here, so we had to fight. There were another two goblins with it, but the three of us would never struggle against goblins. The fight went as easily as expected. Goblins excelled at working together, and it was said that picking them off one at a time was ideal, so that’s what we did. Of course, each of us could have handled one of the goblins on our own, but their presence here was unusual and they might have had strange powers. They turned out to be ordinary goblins, though.

“What was that about? I know we’re underground, but this is still Maalt. What are goblins doing here?” Lorraine asked again, but nobody had an answer.

“Maybe it has something to do with what Shumini did,” I speculated. “Anyway, we should go back above ground and see what’s happening in town.”

Lorraine and Isaac agreed. We hurried to the exit.

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When we exited the house that contained the entrance to the underground, we saw adventurers fighting monsters all around town. There were many types of monsters, including goblins, slimes, and skeletons. However, I didn’t see any that were especially strong. Nobody seemed that threatened by them, so we didn’t need to join in.

“What’s happening?” Lorraine said, distressed by the state of the town.

“Let’s ask someone about it,” Isaac suggested. He walked up to a man fighting a goblin and slayed the monster in one blow. “What in the world is going on

here?”

The man was somewhat taken aback by Isaac’s abrupt appearance, but he answered him anyway. “Well, I dunno myself, but monsters just showed up out of nowhere! All the adventurers have been going around fighting them!”

“They appeared entirely without warning?”

“Yeah. You guys should help out. There are some thralls too, so be careful!” the man said and ran off to defeat another monster.

“Did you hear that?” Isaac asked.

“Yeah, but I don’t know why this happened,” I said. “Maybe we’ll learn something if we go to the guild.”

“Who knows?” Lorraine replied. “But we have to report what happened underground. There’s a good chance that’s what caused this.”

We rushed to the guild.

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Everyone in the guild was running about. All of the staff members were present and working. There were injured people lying about until they were tended to by healers, after which they immediately left the guild. It looked like a hellish routine. Not many seemed fatally wounded, at least.

I saw Wolf, still heavily injured himself but persistently taking charge, and approached him. “Rentt! Did you do something again?!” he asked the moment he saw me.

I took some offense to that, but I knew how he felt. This had happened some time after I began to pursue Shumini, so it was natural to assume it was my fault. I might have actually seen the cause of it, so that was all the more reason I couldn’t argue.

We explained the situation to Wolf. We hid some things in case others might hear it, but Wolf got the general idea.

“I still don’t know exactly what happened, but that’s probably what triggered this,” he said. “Someone will have to exterminate that thing.” He looked at us expectantly.

Wolf didn't explicitly tell us to go, maybe because he felt like he was working us too hard. Given the situation, though, every adventurer was overworked. That was plain to see after one look at this guild. Wolf himself was severely harmed and still working after just some cursory first aid. We were in no position to refuse, nor did we intend to.

Even Isaac wanted to go. He wasn't a member of the guild, but there was no rule saying that he couldn't come. What we had told Wolf probably convinced him that Isaac was powerful enough. Besides, Isaac gave the guild a lot of work. Wolf had no place to object.

"All right, we'll go," I said. "Isaac can come with, right?"

"Sure, sounds like he'll be able to help. I don't mind if he goes. The only problem is payment."

"No payment is necessary," Isaac said. That was likely both because he was personally invested in this and because he had more than enough money to begin with.

But Wolf wasn't aware of any of that. "No, we can't have that," he said. "If you're risking your life, you have to be appropriately compensated. I'll treat you as a temporary guild member and pay you later. Just let me calculate your pay after everything has settled down. Now go!"

We nodded and left the guild.

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We encountered and slayed many monsters as we ran through the town.

"None of these monsters are that strong, but there are so many of them," Lorraine muttered. "Where could they all be coming from? Is something perpetually summoning them? How could that be possible over such a large area?"

But the answer was clear when we saw a group of people running around town. There was no small number of people trying to flee from Maalt, or at least to a place safer than their homes. We heard sudden screams from one such group.

“What?!” Isaac shouted. Lorraine and I looked to see what had happened.

“I see, so that’s how it is,” Lorraine murmured.

“How horrifying,” I cried.

We saw a denizen of Maalt transforming into a monster.

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In the end, I had no choice but to kill the monster, even though it had once been a citizen of Maalt. The others around me watched uneasily. They didn’t look critical of what I did, but I could see the fear in their eyes. They feared that if they turned into monsters, we wouldn’t hesitate to kill them.

This was no laughing matter. I was also a human who had turned into a monster against his will. If possible, I didn’t want to kill them whether they became monsters or not, but this one was about to attack a nearby pregnant woman. Once it was apparent that they were no longer human in both mind and body, I had to kill them.

We ditched the area and ran to the entrance to the underground. We said nothing as we left. Nobody knew how to feel.

“Rentt, I’m sorry. I should have been the one to do it,” Lorraine whispered.

But I disagreed. Lorraine wasn’t at fault for anything. I reacted first, and I was the closest to the monster. Lorraine had frozen up for a moment, which was a perfectly human way to react, but I didn’t freeze up at all. Regardless of how I felt about it, I guess I was ultimately a monster. I was kind of disappointed in myself.

“Rentt, you’re a fine adventurer,” Isaac said. “You protected a woman and her future child, you know.”

He was absolutely right. If I hadn’t done anything, they might have died. But I was more focused on my humanity or lack thereof. That wasn’t good.

“Yes, you’re right,” I said and shook my head. “Sorry.”

“Don’t mention it.”

We all felt strange, and if this was the mood we were in when we got to

Shumini, there could be some issues. We had to get it together. I tried to shift gears and focus on what was coming next as I hurried toward the entrance to the underground.

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"Who's that?" Lorraine asked.

When we exited the house that contained the entrance to the underground, we saw someone standing outside. She wasn't a monster or a thrall, but a girl in a black dress.

"Mistress Laura," Isaac whispered.

Yes, it was the head of the Latuule family, Laura Latuule. I wondered why she was here. Maalt was in an extremely dangerous state, and it was no time for a young girl from a famous family to be walking around. But at the same time, I didn't think that was much of a problem for her. She was Isaac's mistress, after all. I was mostly confident that I knew what Isaac was by now, and if he was serving Laura, it wasn't hard to guess that she was the same as him. She was plenty mysterious herself. I didn't need to ask her about it right now, though.

"Laura, why are you here?" I asked instead. I was curt and maybe not as polite as I should have been with someone of her status, but I'd dropped trying to be polite a while ago.

"I'm here to explain the situation," she answered. "I want you to know what's happening to Maalt right now."

Her explanation didn't seem so important right now. Slaying that monster that used to be Shumini was a higher priority to me.

"You'll have to know precisely what's going on if you want to fix this," she continued. "You'll see what I mean shortly. Lay your hands on mine, everyone."

Laura held out her hand. Isaac was quick to place his hand on hers, but Lorraine and I were hesitant. It wasn't as if we could say no, however. We didn't have much time and needed to hurry, so it wasn't long before we placed our hands on hers as well.

"I'm going to borrow your eyes. It might feel a bit odd, but no need to worry.

Your bodies will still be here," Laura said.

Laura's body exuded a strange aura. It wasn't mana, spirit, or divinity, though. I tried to guess what it was, but before I could, I abruptly saw a vision of something else. I was now closer to the sky. I saw the ridges of mountains in the distance. There were forests and plains too. I looked down and saw the entire city of Maalt below me.

"What the..." I said and clearly heard my own voice. It felt kind of unusual.

"I'm sure you realize that you're seeing through the eyes of a bird in the sky. Rentt, it's the same as how you use your mouse's eyes," Laura explained.

I heard her voice with my own ears. My body must have still been outside that house, like she said. But that wasn't important right now. She'd said something I couldn't ignore.

Chapter 4: Explanation and Resolution

“How do you know about that?” I asked.

Maybe Laura didn’t actually know and was baiting an answer from me. If so, then my question itself was confirmation, but I wasn’t exactly trying to keep Edel a secret anyway. Laura could do the same thing, so it probably didn’t make much of a difference if she knew. And she could enable others to see through an animal’s eyes, something far greater than what I could accomplish. It was hard for me to take issue with her.

Besides, if Laura had wanted to do me harm, then she likely would have made it impossible for me to live in Maalt. I didn’t often think about it since she treated me so well, but she held so much influence in Maalt that she was effectively the lord of it. If she’d seriously wanted to do something to me, she would have forced me out of the city. That was why I felt optimistic about her intentions.

“It would take a while to explain that, so I can tell you once this is all taken care of,” Laura said. “Anyway, look down below. I know you can see all of Maalt, but have you noticed anything about it?”

I could have kept asking, but we didn’t have time to waste. If she was willing to explain later, then I was willing to put it aside for now. I did what Laura said and gazed down upon Maalt.

“Is that a magic circle?” I asked. Parts of the ground under Maalt were faintly glowing. Looking at it as a whole, they appeared to form a gigantic magic circle.

“That’s right, and this magic circle is ancient. It’s much larger and more effective than the modern variety. I didn’t think anyone still knew of these magic circles.”

“Is what’s happening in Maalt the result of a large-scale spell? It would have to be very costly to cast this,” Lorraine said, and it sounded like her voice came out of nowhere. Hearing someone nearby who I couldn’t see felt bizarre. I

needed to get used to it.

“That’s true,” Laura answered. “I’m sure you all know what the cost was. The humans who were turned into thralls, the blood of those sacrifices, and when that wasn’t enough...”

“Shumini sacrificed himself to make up for it,” Isaac said somberly.

“I expect he used many magic crystals and magic items as well. That’s how difficult it is to trigger this spell. But he pulled it off, unfortunately.”

If we ignored how wicked this deed was, we could call it a great accomplishment. But I couldn’t think highly of any spell that turned townspeople into monsters.

“But what in the world does Shumini have to gain from this?” I asked. “Did he want to destroy Maalt?”

Laura shook her head. “I suspect not. The effect of this spell is, to put it simply, the creation of a dungeon. He likely wanted to be the master of that dungeon.”

“He created a dungeon?!” Lorraine cried. “Magic can do that? Is that even possible?”

“There are many kinds of dungeons, but the type we see here is made with magic. They certainly exist, so we must accept that it’s possible.”

“But why are the townspeople turning into monsters?” I asked. “I thought that dungeon monsters were summoned, or that they appeared naturally.”

“That’s true of completed dungeons. As we said before, however, this spell comes at a high cost. Shumini likely paid as much of that cost as he could, and it still wasn’t enough. But the spell has triggered regardless, and the dungeon is absorbing the rest of what it needs from its surroundings. In fact, I would wager that Shumini knew this would happen and triggered the spell anyway. Look.”

Laura had the bird fly lower. There was a flash of something like lightning that prevented it from descending too far. Next the bird tried to fly around Maalt and look for a way inside, but from every direction and any altitude, an invisible wall deflected it.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“The dungeon spell prevents anyone from getting in or out,” Laura said. “Not until the dungeon is complete, anyway.”

As the bird flew around Maalt, I saw people ramming against the invisible wall and trying to get in. There was a familiar face among them.

“I finally got back, and now there’s some wall in my way!” she shouted. “Rentt! I’ll be right there! Don’t slay the vampire without me!”

She looked like a Gold-class adventurer I knew, but maybe it was my imagination. Just kidding, it was Nive, and even she couldn’t break through the wall. That had to be one fearsome barrier.

“What should we do? Can we stop the spell by slaying the monster that Shumini turned into?” I asked.

A basic rule of magic stated that without the caster to keep the mana stable, the spell would fail. That could mean that the spell didn’t trigger, it would trigger improperly, or another spell would be cast entirely. Whatever the case, it wouldn’t work as intended.

“Once this spell is triggered, it will proceed to completion on its own,” Laura said. “Killing the caster won’t change that.”

It sounded like there was no stopping it. I feared that this was the end of Maalt.

“But that doesn’t mean it’s hopeless,” Laura continued. “Every dungeon has something called a core.”

“So we just have to destroy that?” I guessed.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself. You mustn’t destroy it. Rather, we have to take control of it. That will stop the dungeon from growing any further, ending this chaos.”

“Can it be controlled?” I’d never heard of dungeon cores before, and I had no idea how one would control something like that.

“It’s possible. You have to destroy the current controller of the core and touch it to become its new owner.”

“And it’s currently under Shumini’s control?” Lorraine asked.

“Most likely. He’s the one who used the dungeon spell, so I don’t see why he would grant control to anyone else.”

It was true that Shumini had gone through a lot of scheming for this. It had also turned him into that strange creature, though, so I had some doubts. Still, he did say he wanted to entrust Isaac with things. Maybe it wasn’t that strange, but I wasn’t so sure that this was his plan. At any rate, I had to put that aside.

I came up with an idea and asked Laura about it. “What if we just took some random puchi suri and made it the new master?”

Shumini was pretty maniacal, so it was possible that he had considered making a pet puchi suri the master of the dungeon. Well, maybe there really wasn’t any possibility of that. Jokes aside, if the dungeon master were something hard to discover, nobody else would be able to take over the dungeon. It sounded like a reasonable idea to me.

“Not just anyone can control a dungeon core,” Laura said. “The specifics of what is necessary depend on the size of the dungeon, but this is a relatively large one, so it would likely be difficult for an ordinary human to control. I think that Shumini had no choice but to be the master. If there were someone else of comparable power, that would be another story, but I can’t imagine there was if he was hoping to depend on Isaac.

“And if this were a small enough dungeon that a puchi suri could control it, it wouldn’t be a problem for us had Shumini chosen to use one. It would be simple to defeat that puchi suri and replace them, like we’re trying to do now. However, something more powerful than the puchi suri could simply touch the core and overwrite their control of it. But the dungeon master has to be substantially weaker than you for that to work, and it could lead to various problems down the road. With Shumini as the dungeon master, it would be especially difficult.”

There were a lot of details there, but it sounded like the gist of it was that we could figure something out as long as we beat Shumini. Our goal was the same as before. If we hadn’t known this, though, we might have been confused that nothing had been solved just by beating Shumini. Thankfully Laura had told us

this.

“Now it’s clear what we have to do,” I said. “Guess it’s time to go see Shumini.” Isaac and Lorraine nodded.

“I’ll accompany you, if you don’t mind,” Laura said. “I won’t drag you down, I promise.”

I couldn’t see how she’d be able to fight effectively in that dress. That said, she sure knew a lot. Her knowledge far surpassed that of the average human. Besides, she was Isaac’s mistress. She was probably more than right that she wouldn’t drag us down. Her peaceful and well-mannered demeanor must have been a facade.

“My mistress is far stronger than I am,” Isaac said, confirming my suspicions. That meant she was leagues stronger than me, so I couldn’t complain.

Lorraine and Nive were strong too, come to think of it. It almost felt like the women were stronger in Maalt as a matter of course. That kind of made it an uphill battle for me as an adventurer, but I had to accept the facts. Maalt had around a dozen sayings about not defying the will of women, so maybe this was just customary here.

“Then let’s go together,” I said. “Is that fine with you, Lorraine?”

Lorraine shrugged. “Yeah, it’s far preferable to having nothing but foul men in the party.”

I didn’t think we were that foul. Isaac was a pretty handsome man. And maybe I could be described as suspicious, but not so much “foul.” Well, she was just joking anyway.

“Thank you for having me, everyone,” Laura said and curtsied. It was adorable and elegant, but she was supposed to be way stronger than me or Isaac. I had to learn not to judge by appearances. She didn’t have a weapon, either, but it felt rude to ask about that.



I decided to ask for details later, leaving just one important question. “What does a dungeon core look like, by the way?” I asked. We wouldn’t be able to control or destroy it if we didn’t know that. Not that we were supposed to destroy it.

Laura made a face like it had slipped her mind. “There are many kinds, but they often look like black orbs. There are rarer sorts, but judging by this magic circle, it won’t be anything so special. I wouldn’t worry about it, and if it is something harder to identify, then I’ll know it when I see it.”

A black orb didn’t sound like something I would accidentally smash, at least. I didn’t know if it was because of my new body or what, but I’d had more frequent destructive impulses as of late. I decided to reserve those impulses for Shumini.

“Then shall we go?” I asked. The rest of the group nodded, and we entered the house. I felt like we were kind of unorganized, but it was to be expected.

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We descended underground. The passage was in a much different state than when we last left it, to our surprise. The first time we’d passed through here, it was an ordinary underground tunnel with a stone floor. It was well-constructed and had survived over the many years since it had been built. But what had once been a straight path was now a wandering one. It was full of unnatural twists and turns, and there were large bumps in the floor. It was still made of an artificial material, but it sometimes undulated as if it were alive. There were what appeared to be veins as large as pipes as well, and when I took a closer look, I could see them pulsing.

“It doesn’t look like there’s much time,” Laura said.

“Did the dungeon spell cause this?” Lorraine asked as we proceeded down the passage.

“Yes. This spell’s approach is to treat the dungeon like a living creature, and it will keep expanding if we don’t stop it. This is a simple but very dangerous version of the spell. Oh dear, and the monsters have gotten stronger too.”

Monsters jumped out from around the corner, and they weren’t goblins or

slimes this time. There were three lizardmen with iron equipment. They weren't remarkably strong monsters, but they were fairly powerful compared to normal goblins. Lizardmen weren't found in the New Moon Dungeon until the fourth floor and beyond. It was questionable as to whether they posed a threat to this party, though.

We all prepared for battle without exchanging a word. Isaac and I charged ahead and swung our swords, slashing two of the lizardmen's shields. When Lorraine saw an opening, she fired several stone spears, landing lethal blows.

This was all normal so far, but Laura dealt with the last lizardman. When she held her palm out toward the monster, a black void appeared in its abdomen and its whole body was compressed into it. Its bones cracked and its metal equipment crunched. The tiny ball that had once been the lizardman fell to the floor with a plop.

"Shall we go?" Laura said.

What she'd done was similar to my divinity-mana-spirit fusion, but it would take more than all the energy I had to do this even once. Laura, however, seemed to find it effortless. I could see why Isaac had called her strong. I wanted to ask all about it, but it could wait until later. We ran forward, desperate to solve this conundrum in time.

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"Looks like we made it," Laura said just outside the room where we had confronted Shumini.

"Well, I remembered the general location," I replied. "The path was more twisted this time, but the route was mostly the same."

"So it seems. Dungeon spells change the structure of the dungeon over time, so thankfully we didn't wait too long. I'd like to go in there now, if everyone is ready."

The room itself had probably remained unchanged, but the spell had constructed a door outside it. It was like the door to a floor master's room that could be found in any dungeon. It differed only in that this door was more garish and adorned with ornaments. Maybe the dungeon master's room was

different from a floor master's.

"Yeah, we came this far," I said. "We'll just have to try."

"I don't know how many other chances I'd get to see a dungeon's ruler and a dungeon core up close and in person," said Lorraine. "I look forward to it."

"I'd like to send him to his grave myself if I'm able," said Isaac. "But I won't demand that I get the final blow, so don't hold yourselves back just for that."

I'd already thought about whether to try and give him that honor, so hearing that gave me some relief. I would have an easier time fighting then.

Adventurers sometimes let other adventurers have the final blow for all sorts of reasons. Perhaps the kill would determine who got to take the floor master's treasure. Or maybe it was simply for personal reasons, as in our current situation. Of course, making sure everyone survived was more important, so it wasn't always possible.

"Then let's go," Laura said as she put a hand on the door. We gripped our weapons and took a deep breath, imagining what would be on the other side.

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"It's gotten a lot bigger," Lorraine said.

The giant monster was there, and it had grown since we last left it. It had been about ten meters tall before, but now it was around eleven or twelve. It had also grown wider. The only part that hadn't changed was Shumini's face on its stomach.

When we stepped into the room, the creature roared at us. The loud, piercing sound shook the whole area. I could no longer sense any humanity from the beast. It was purely a monster, and I felt none of the hesitation that I would have against a humanoid foe. Well, I guess goblins counted as humanoid, and I never hesitated against them. I was only reluctant when I saw humans turn into monsters, like I had in town. When you've been adventuring for a while, you don't hesitate so much anymore.

The upright alligator monster came at us faster than I could have imagined from its large size, then opened its mouth wide. "Everybody spread out!" Laura

said, and we scattered to the sides of the room. We would have done it whether she said so or not because we knew not to give it an easy target.

The battle began.

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Isaac delivered the first strike. The monster shrieked so loudly that it almost could have collapsed this underground room, but Isaac ran at it fearlessly. Or maybe he was actually scared. His feelings about this big, tough, powerful creature were mixed with sorrow over the need to destroy his former acquaintance, and possibly former friend. I couldn't look into why Shumini would give up his life to create this dungeon and serve as its master right now, but maybe Isaac had some inkling as to the reason. Believing Shumini's actions to be needless, he gripped his sword. He blamed himself for not being able to stop him. That's how it seemed to me, but maybe I was overthinking it.

At any rate, Isaac was fast and aggressive. Given the abnormal size of his opponent, his speed seemed unnecessary. But the monster didn't sluggishly throw its weight around either. Rather, it was relatively nimble for its size, and Isaac might have been eaten if he'd let his guard down. Its tail was also long and flexible, erratically waving around to try and strike us. It was hard to get close, but Isaac dodged the tail with perfect timing and steadily closed in on the alligator monster.

As soon as he was within range, Isaac swung his blood red greatsword. The instant he slashed it, the alligator monster let out a cacophonous cry. It faced Isaac and opened its gargantuan mouth wide. Isaac jumped away with shock just as it fired a beam of light from its mouth. It was more like a laser than fire breath, and it scorched the floor, leaving a line of melted ground. A hit from that would blow a hole in me. It probably wouldn't kill me, though. Unless it struck my head. That might be bad.

But it seemed it couldn't use that attack more than once in a row. Instead, the alligator monster closed its mouth and charged at Isaac to try and crush him. Its bloodshot eyes glowered at him. Maybe its memories from when it was Shumini had some influence on it. It seemed kind of fixated on Isaac. I felt bad for him, but at least that made the monster predictable.

Lorraine seemed to realize the same thing and began to cast a powerful spell with a somewhat long incantation. That meant my job was to hold the monster back. I ran at the alligator monster. The flailing tail got in my way, but its focus on Isaac made it sloppy. It wasn't too hard to get near it and swing my mana-filled sword.

The monster's hide was hard to pierce, but not impossible. My sword sliced through its skin, and I felt it enter the flesh underneath. It wasn't that deep a wound, but this was only my first strike. I pondered whether to go in for another blow or to retreat, but then the monster noticed that I'd struck it and tried to ram me with its colossal head. I did the latter and dodged its headbutt.

I jumped on its head and slashed down at its skull. Unlike before, I felt my sword slide cleanly inside thanks to the additional mana I'd packed into it. It came at significant cost to me, but I had to be able to cut into the monster somehow. It got results, so I decided it was worthwhile.

I thought that maybe piercing the head had killed it, but only for a moment. The alligator monster let out something between a cry, a scream, and an intimidating roar, and its body trembled. I knew it was trying to shake me, so I decided to jump off like it wanted. Thankfully, its back was at a very steep slant rather than perfectly straight, so I was able to slide down.

I got some distance from it just as Lorraine finished casting her spell, firing a vortex of lightning from her wand. It was a high-level spell called Barrack Ceara, and it was powerful enough to incinerate a hundred goblins. It was one of Lorraine's more powerful spells. Not even a giant monster would be able to take a hit from it unscathed.

The spell tore into the alligator monster's body and even struck its innards with lightning. It lasted for over ten seconds and filled the room with the smell of burnt flesh. It was kind of grotesque, but it didn't seem like this monster would go down to anything less.

By the time the lightning had subsided, a huge lump of charred flesh remained. I wondered if it might be dead, but not for long.

"It's not over yet!" Laura shouted as the alligator monster began to regenerate. Its skin recovered as if time was moving in reverse, and in the end,

it returned to its original state.

“Well, I didn’t expect it to be that easy,” I muttered.

“But it looks like it at least did some damage,” said Isaac, who had gotten next to me at some point. He pointed out a part of the monster’s body that hadn’t recovered.

“I guess we can do this if we try hard enough.”

“Yes.”

We attacked the alligator monster once again.

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I don’t know if it was due to the damage we’d dealt or something else, but the monster slunk down to stand on all fours. It looked like a giant alligator in the first place, so this looked more natural. But if I’d thought it would be easy just because it seemed like a typical alligator, no doubt I would’ve been taken by surprise, so I braced myself. After a decade of experience, I knew to be cautious—not that the other three weren’t.

The monster began to move. It was by no means slow when it was standing upright, but it seemed more suited to this posture. It glided across the ground and spun, its tail flicking much faster than before. I wanted to ask why it ever stood upright in the first place, but only the monster would know, and I didn’t expect it to answer.

Isaac and I tried to slash at the monster, but to no avail. It nimbly dodged our attacks by rolling out of the way.

“Get away from it!” Laura shouted.

The instant we did, a black orb appeared just above the monster. It looked the same as the black hole Laura had used on the lizardman in the hallway, but this one seemed to have entirely different effects. It didn’t compress the monster into its center. Whether that was because it couldn’t or simply wouldn’t, I didn’t know. Instead, it pinned the monster to the ground the moment it appeared. I heard a crackling sound and saw the ground sinking slightly, so the orb was probably pushing it down with incredible force.

Isaac and I saw this as our chance to attack. We looked at each other and ran at the monster. When we got right in front of it, Laura dispelled the black orb. Her spell probably affected everything within a certain radius, so she canceled it before we got within range. Now that we were this close, we wouldn't miss. Isaac and I slashed at the monster, and unlike before, we both landed a hit.

Isaac took out one of the monster's eyes, and it screamed out in anguish and rolled around. It was so massive that it shook the room when it rolled. We expected it to recover soon enough, but we could rack up more damage if we kept pushing, so we ran after the monster. The instant we did, though, it stopped rolling.

Its stomach was facing us. I took a close look at Shumini's face and saw that his once closed eyes were now open and glaring at us. His mouth was moving like he was reciting an incantation. We couldn't hear all of it, but Isaac and I could make out the final part.

"Hell's Flame," Isaac said as a huge magic circle materialized on the floor.

The circle was big enough to cover the whole room, and considering what that meant about its range, that wouldn't end well for us. Maybe Isaac, Laura, and I could manage, but I wasn't sure about Lorraine. I was about to head over to her, but I saw her staring at us and grinning. It looked like she was going to be fine. Magic was her specialty, so I didn't have to worry about her when it came to spells, I guess. I just had to worry about myself.

There was nowhere in the room that I could run to, though. I just conjured up a shield around myself and used spirit to enhance my body. Now I would at least survive.

Right when I finished, the magic circle glowed and there was a loud roar. Searing fire consumed the whole room. My surroundings turned white with a bit of crimson, destroying my shield. Then it burned me directly, but thanks to my spirit, it wasn't so bad. Thank goodness I'd trained as much as I had. My face still hurt, but the shield kept me from having to endure that for too long.

The color returned to my surroundings and the fire disappeared. I checked my body and found severe burns on everything not covered by my robe. Miraculously, the robe hadn't burned at all. The burns healed in less than a

minute too.

The entire rest of the room was charred. Regardless, Laura was unharmed and Lorraine seemed mostly fine too. Isaac looked like an incinerated corpse, but he regenerated before my eyes. I'd seen my own wounds regenerate a number of times before, but now that I was seeing it from an outsider's perspective, it looked pretty grotesque. Next thing I knew, he was back to his old handsome self. All of his clothes had been burned too, but now they were back on him. I wondered how that was possible, but it wasn't important right now.

I looked for the monster and found it clinging to the ceiling, staring at us. It was breathing deeply, exhausted after this last attack. Thankfully, it couldn't use the same spell more than once in a row, or I'd be done for. Laura and Lorraine seemed like they could take it, but Isaac might have a hard time being burnt to a crisp over and over. It was about time to finish this.

The way it kept regenerating was a problem, but we just had to keep attacking. If that didn't work, we could think about what to do next when the time came. We knew most of this monster's tricks by now, so we could take some risks. Maybe I was being too optimistic, but letting this fight drag out would be riskier. It was worth a try.

I started to run. Lorraine cast a lightning spell on the monster, striking it so it fell from the ceiling. Now it was my turn, but I couldn't think of what to do about a constantly regenerating opponent. From what I could see, though, the monster's stamina and regenerative abilities weren't limitless. Vampires couldn't regenerate forever either, so assuming this monster's regenerative abilities came from Shumini, it stood to reason that it couldn't last forever. There were parts of it that didn't fully recover from before too, so it was highly likely that it couldn't regenerate quite as well as a vampire. I decided to take the most simple approach and just keep attacking it.

Isaac and I flailed our swords at the monster. We split up between its head and its tail because we couldn't decide on one place to target and because fighting next to Isaac was pretty limiting due to his broadsword. I wasn't sure who should go where at first, but Isaac quickly chose the head. That was the more dangerous area, but given his strength, it was the right decision. I was

likely the weakest person in the room. I was a little stronger than I used to be, but that didn't mean I couldn't be the weakest link in a party. That was the case for this party, but in most parties, I would at least be decent. Or so I hoped. But that was enough about my lack of confidence.

In any case, Isaac struck the monster's head while I sliced at its lower half from behind. We were much more accurate than before thanks to how much the monster had slowed down. It was still regenerating, but its energy was running low. I assumed that was why it couldn't move as fast as before. Its tail whip was still brutal, however. I could dodge it well enough for now, but a hit from that would send me flying.

"Rentt, Isaac!" Lorraine shouted.

She had finished casting a spell. Isaac and I sensed the magic behind us and got out of the way. Dozens of thin ice spears assaulted the monster. Not only did they stab it, but they froze the flesh they pierced and encased the monster in ice. Now that it was fully immobilized, Laura ran up and climbed onto the monster's back. She held her hand down toward it and launched a black orb into its body.

I thought it would be crushed like that lizardman, but the opposite happened. First I heard an explosion, then the ice broke and the monster's body burst apart. Chunks of its flesh scattered about the room. I didn't think it could recover from that, but then the pieces of its body began to slide across the floor, trying to gather in one spot. They were extremely slow, and there was no way it could regenerate immediately, but I had a feeling that the parts would fuse back together if we didn't do something.

"Let's burn the pieces," Laura said.

We approached the largest chunks first and burned them to ash. When Isaac approached an especially large piece, he grimaced. It was the stomach that featured Shumini's face. He still seemed to have a mind of his own and looked at Isaac. There was no hatred in his eyes. It was like he was looking at a close friend.

"Shumini, where did you go wrong?" Isaac asked, but Shumini didn't answer. He just smiled at Isaac. Whether that was because he could no longer talk or

because he simply wasn’t interested, only Shumini knew. But Isaac knew what he had to do. He held up the bloody broadsword that so clashed with his noble appearance. “Farewell,” he said, and he cut the face that once belonged to Shumini in two. It didn’t scream or curse him. The two severed pieces turned to ash.

As if that was the core of the monster, the other chunks of flesh turned to ash as well. It saved us the trouble of burning everything ourselves, but Isaac didn't look cheerful. He probably had a lot on his mind. I was in no position to say anything, so I just kept quiet.

Isaac seemed to get his feelings in order after a bit. "We defeated Shumini. Shouldn't we look for the dungeon core?" Isaac asked Laura.

She avoided mention of what Isaac had done. "Yes, it's probably nearby. Let's proceed further inside," she said.

There was only one path deeper into the dungeon. The core had to be that way. We headed down the path.

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"This looks like the place," Laura said.

We were at a blue door. I sensed some bizarre pressure coming from it. Unlike the door to Shumini's chamber, it wasn't especially huge, but I felt a strange energy when I stood in front of it. Maybe I was sensing the dungeon core's presence.

"Is everybody ready? I'm going to open it," Laura said.

When we nodded, she put a hand on the door. It opened more easily than I thought it would. Then we saw what lay beyond it.

"This is unexpected," she muttered.

There we found a black orb like Laura had described, but it was buried in the left hand of Rina Rupaage.

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"Why is Rina here?" I blurted out.

Laura pried her eyes away from Rina and looked at me. "Do you know her?" she asked.

"Yeah, she's a new adventurer who I met in a dungeon. Without her, I wouldn't have even been able to enter town."

If Rina hadn't accepted me and taken such a positive outlook, my spirit might

have broken. It was easy to stay optimistic when she was around. And while she was still new at adventuring, her swordsmanship was sharp and she had potential.

“What the hell is going on here?” I asked. “Is that black orb on her hand the dungeon core?” I also wanted to know whether Rina was safe.

“Yes,” Laura answered nervously. “That’s definitely the dungeon core. But to be more specific, both Rina and the orb are likely functioning as the dungeon core.”

“So what’s going to happen to Rina? Can she be saved?”

“First, I’ll have to check if Rina is still human or not.”

We were taken aback by that, but Rina had clearly been kidnapped by Shumini. I didn’t know when that had happened, though. Raiz and Lola were in a party with her, but I hadn’t gotten much of a chance to speak to them earlier. They’d probably come in search of Rina and had gotten captured.

Also, Shumini had been a greater vampire. I didn’t know exactly what had happened, but if Rina was here as the dungeon core, presumably Shumini had made her follow his orders. If so, then making her into his servant would have been the fastest way to make that happen.

Laura waited for us to come to that conclusion before she continued. “If she’s not human, then we’ll have to solve that first, which will take a bit. But not to worry. No matter what happens, I can help Rina be herself again,” Laura said.

That was a huge relief to hear. I didn’t know what Laura was, but I believed she could do what she said she could.

Laura approached Rina and touched her. Rina squirmed. She was floating in midair, so she moved in an odd way. Of course, Laura didn’t let Rina escape her hand, instead seizing her arm. Then Laura cut part of Rina’s arm with her nails. Laura looked at the blood, and her eyes flashed red for a moment. “Oops,” she whispered, and her eyes turned sky blue again. Laura looked at the cut for a few seconds, and then it disappeared. It happened slower than it would have for me or Isaac, but no human would regenerate that quickly.

“I knew it. He turned Rina into his servant,” Laura said.

“So Rina’s a thrall?” I asked. When a vampire created a servant, that was usually what it was. They could later evolve into lesser vampires, but lesser vampires supposedly couldn’t be created from scratch.

But Laura shook her head. “No, Rina seems to be a lesser vampire. I don’t see any rotting on her body, and while it’s not real, she has some simulated blood flow.”

“But I thought vampires couldn’t make lesser vampires,” Lorraine pointed out. “That’s what they say, anyway.” As a monster researcher, this must have been of some interest to her.

“It takes a lot of energy, but it is actually possible for some vampires to create lesser vampires. However, it can only be done once or twice in their lives. It’s mostly used on romantic partners or whomever else they might particularly like. It’s hard to believe that Shumini thought of Rina that way, though, so I would guess it was a necessary step to connect her to the dungeon core. As I said before, controlling the dungeon core demands a certain degree of strength. It would be difficult for an ordinary human or a thrall. A lesser vampire could just barely manage to do it.”

“Why didn’t he just control it himself?” I asked.

“Dungeon masters have certain limitations. I assume he wanted to avoid those. Having a servant do it instead let him control the dungeon without those limitations, so it was a logical decision. This method has been in use for ages.”

“For ages?” Lorraine repeated with confusion, but Laura didn’t elaborate.

“At any rate, leaving her as Shumini’s servant will pose a problem for us,” Laura said. “Even after their master is dead, a vampire’s servant must obey them to some extent. After we remove her as the dungeon master, I can’t promise that she won’t continue Shumini’s work. Let’s free her.”

It might have been amusing to see Rina act like Shumini if it wouldn’t have done any harm, but obviously it would hurt the people of Maalt. I doubted that Rina would want to do that either.

“But how?” I asked. “There’s no way to turn a thrall back into a human. Why would there be a way to do it for vampires?” And if there were a way, I’d want

to test it on myself first. My ultimate goal was to become human again, after all.

“When did I say I could turn Rina human again?” Laura asked.

“Huh? But you said you’d save her.”

“Yes, but that doesn’t mean turning her back into a human. I’d do that if I could, of course, but I can’t. All I can do is free her from being Shumini’s servant.”

I didn’t know how to feel about that. She wouldn’t have to follow Shumini’s orders and do something she didn’t want to, but she would still be stuck as something inhuman. I knew how that felt because it had happened to me, and it had left me with a lot of melancholy. For Rina, I suspected that it would be rough. But it sounded like Laura couldn’t do anything about that. If so, then preventing Shumini’s will from controlling her was the least we could do.

“How can we free Rina from Shumini’s control?” Lorraine asked. “I’ve heard that once a vampire becomes a servant, they’re stuck that way for the rest of their lives.”

“It’s possible to change that, just not on their own,” Laura answered. “I don’t know all the rules regarding this either, but vampires aren’t supposed to go after one another’s servants. Vampires end up serving the same master forever because of that, but it is actually possible for a vampire to take someone else’s servant for themselves.”

In other words, someone else just had to take Rina as their servant. Specifically, another vampire would have to do it. That meant we had to talk about something that had thus far gone unquestioned.

“I’m sure you’ve figured it out by now. Isaac and I are vampires too. That’s why I know all of this,” Laura said nonchalantly. It was already pretty obvious, so she probably wasn’t trying to hide it.



“Do you know about me too?” I asked vaguely.

“Well, yes. That blood was helpful to you, wasn’t it?”

She meant the vampire blood that she’d given me before. I guess she’d known it back then, and that’s why she had shown me the blood. Her acting had been so natural that I’d had no idea.

“Yeah, I’d like to talk about that, but let’s focus on Rina right now,” I said.

“Right. At any rate, if another vampire makes Rina their servant, that will solve that problem. That just leaves the question of who should do it. Rentt, I think it would be best if you did.”

“I guess I could. I’ve never done it before, though,” I replied, but the mouse on my shoulder pounded on my head. “Well, I’ve only done it with a puchi suri. And that was just by coincidence, so I don’t know what I should do.”

“We’ll help with that.”

“Wouldn’t it be more likely to work if you or Isaac did it?”

If I accidentally did it wrong, I would never live it down. Rina had a future ahead of her, and I would hate to ruin that. Although, I didn’t know what kind of future awaited her as a vampire. But the same applied to me and I didn’t really want to think about it. I still hadn’t given up on anything, at least.

“No, that wouldn’t do,” Laura said.

“Why? You’re both much more powerful than me.”

“That’s not wrong, but it isn’t quite right either. Isaac and I are vampires, but you’re a little different, Rentt. That difference will likely determine whether Rina lives or dies.”

“I’m different? You mean I’m not a vampire?”

“Well, about that—” Laura said, but she was interrupted when something rumbled. The walls pulsed harder and the room expanded. “We don’t have any time. If we don’t do something, all of Maalt will be turned into a dungeon. Rentt, let’s put the details aside for now and hurry.”

“But what should I do?”

“Suck some of her blood, and let some of your blood flow into her through your fangs. It’s simple.”

I don’t know if it was because she was in a rush, but Laura hadn’t elaborated on much. I figured there wasn’t time to ask for more details, so I approached Rina, wrapped my arms around her shoulders, and brought my mouth close to her skin. I bit down and felt her skin break. I tasted blood—and it was exhilarating—but this was no time to savor it. The blood sommelier wasn’t on the job today.

After I sucked some blood, I focused on letting some of my own enter her through my fangs. I wondered if it would even work, but to my surprise, I was able to make blood flow from the tips of my fangs. I didn’t know if I was doing it right, though. I sucked around a tenth of Rina’s blood and provided her with about the same quantity of mine.

As with my experience with Edel, it felt like I had connected to something, but not as clearly as before. Maybe it was because Rina was unconscious. I was worried about whether it worked, so I looked to Laura.

“It all worked fine,” she said. “Rina is now your servant. Now there’s one last thing.” Laura stared at the dungeon core submerged in Rina’s hand.

It had turned out that I was able to make Rina my servant, but I had no idea what to do about the dungeon core. It was supposedly possible to control it by touching it, but this dungeon core appeared to have completely fused with Rina. That seemed impossible to change through normal means.

“What should we do?” I asked Laura.

“Nothing too complicated. Someone simply has to take the dungeon core into themselves. But that would be difficult for you, Rentt, and Lorraine or Isaac certainly couldn’t do it either. It would be different with a normal dungeon core, but I can’t teach you how to absorb this one when it’s been fused with Rina. I’ll have to do it myself, but I wish I had a little more time. Rentt, look this way for a bit.”

I cocked my head and faced Laura. She suddenly scratched her wrist, pried my mouth open, and let her blood pour inside. I was surprised, but my vampiric love of blood forced me to swallow. Once Laura saw that I had, she looked

deeply remorseful.

“I’m sorry, but there’s very little time. I had to be a bit violent,” she said and pulled her arm away from me.

Her wound instantly healed, of course. She regenerated faster than Isaac or I did. It almost looked like a magic trick. I knew we had no time because the city was transforming into a dungeon, but I didn’t know why Laura had done that.

Laura walked up to Rina, took her left arm, and touched the dungeon core. “Rentt, there’s a lot I wanted to explain, but it looks like that may prove a bit difficult. I would at least suggest that you travel to temples and ruins around the world and gather legends from ancient times. That should get you closer to your objective. You’ll be able to reach Mithril-class too, killing two birds with one stone,” she said to me.

Next she turned to Lorraine. “Lorraine, I want you to support Rentt if possible. Your knowledge will no doubt be helpful. And this may be bothersome, but if it all becomes hopeless, I can solve matters for you. Don’t think too deeply about it,” she said vaguely.

Lastly, she looked at Isaac. “This is the fourth time now. I’ll reach my limit soon, so I will likely need to sleep for a while. You take care of matters in the meantime.”

With that, Laura gazed at Rina’s dungeon core again. It shone with a dark glow and instantly enveloped Rina. It looked like it wasn’t going anywhere, but Laura gradually absorbed it into herself. Once all the light had been absorbed into Laura’s chest, the dungeon core disappeared. Rina stopped floating and fell to the floor. I didn’t know the exact details, but I assumed that the dungeon core had transferred to Laura.

It looked like Laura was about to fall over, so I tried to head over and support her, but Isaac ran over much faster than I could have and held her steady by the shoulders and hips.

Impressed, Lorraine and I approached Laura and Rina. Rina was breathing, and I felt a stronger connection to her than before. Maybe Rina had been conscious all along, but the dungeon core was blocking the connection for some reason.

“Is Laura asleep?” I asked.

Her eyes were closed, and she was snoring. She looked like a doll in the first place, but even more so now that she was completely still. She was like a beautiful corpse, probably because she was undead. I questioned why she needed to breathe in that case, but she did have blood flowing through her veins, and there would be no end to my questions if I started to ask them. Laura had said that the blood wasn’t real, so that was all I had to go on.

“So it seems,” Isaac answered. “I can’t possibly predict when she’ll wake up, however.”

“Why is that?”

“My mistress has absorbed more dungeon cores than her limit permits. Now she’s in the same state that Rina was a moment ago.”

“Her limit?”

Laura had mentioned that a certain degree of power was required to control dungeon cores, but also that a lesser vampire like Rina was just barely strong enough. I’d thought a much more powerful vampire like Laura wouldn’t have any trouble.

“Including this dungeon core, she controls four in all. Everyone has their limits, I suppose.”

“What?!” I was about to ask more, but I suddenly felt extremely dizzy.

“Rentt?!’” Lorraine cried and approached me, holding me steady before I fell. But the dizziness didn’t cease.

“My mistress’s blood must have caused this,” Isaac said. “You’ll be fine, Rentt. Get some rest. It’s Existential Evolution.”

Isaac’s voice seemed to fade away in the distance as I fell unconscious.

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When I woke up, I was no longer in the underground chamber. I felt something soft underneath my back. Unlike the cold and strangely visceral air of that underground room, the air here had a flowery fragrance.

I sat up and found that I was on an extravagant bed. It looked too expensive for a commoner to afford, and everything around me seemed similarly costly. This was a bedroom in a rich person's estate, and it was obvious at a glance. But it wasn't too gaudy. In fact, the colors were subdued and calming.

"Where am I?" I whispered, but nobody was around to answer. I needed to check what state my body was in, so I grasped one hand with the other and touched my face. I seemed to be fine.

I recalled what Isaac had told me before I'd passed out. I'd had trouble remaining conscious because of Existential Evolution, according to him. I couldn't tell if I had actually evolved, but my body felt lighter than it did before I fainted. I got out of bed and moved around a bit, but I didn't learn much. I twisted my neck enough to see my back before I realized that my flexibility didn't mean much of anything. I could move as if I had no joints in the first place, so I was already about as flexible as possible.

If there was anything else I could test out, it was my strength, but that would be tough to do here. I didn't have a clear idea of what my limits were. And even if I knew my current limits, I could increase them by training or defeating monsters, so that wouldn't give me a precise idea. I could also test them by picking up a heavy rock or trying to crush one in my hand, but it didn't look like there was anything here I could safely destroy. I didn't have any options.

Everything around me was highly valuable, and I wouldn't be able to pay for damages. As much as I wanted to say that I could afford it now, I'd spent so long being poor that I couldn't bring myself to waste any money. I was willing to dish out some coins for a magic bag, but when it came to buying ordinary goods, I was a penny-pincher.

Anyway, I finished checking my body and decided to figure out what was going on. I approached the window to see if I knew where I was. A vast garden spread out outside. Green hedges formed a convoluted maze. I saw a gate in the distance and a guard standing in front of it. It didn't exactly take long to figure out my location, thankfully. This was the Latuule estate. Someone must have brought me here after I passed out. I wanted to find Isaac, so I opened the door to leave the room.

“Sqreak!” something cried.

I looked down and saw Edel standing on his hind legs, gazing up at me. I thought maybe he’d evolved too, but nothing much had changed about him. Or maybe it was just his appearance that hadn’t changed? But he was just a big puchi suri as far as I could see, same as usual.

When I wondered why he was waiting here for me, he answered that he’d been exploring the Latuule estate and just got back. It wasn’t that he was being considerate and trying to avoid waking me, apparently. I didn’t mind, but I thought Edel could have searched the Latuule estate at any other time.

Then Edel told me that invading the estate was usually impossible. He’d tried to find a way around the hedge maze, or a way to dig under it, but he’d been blocked out no matter what. I used to wonder why some rich person in a small town had such an incredible defense system, but now I knew that Laura and Isaac were greater vampires. It would have been easy for them to set something like that up.

But now Edel had this rare chance to explore. I didn’t know if he should do that without permission, but apparently Isaac had said it was fine. He also wasn’t allowed to go just anywhere. There were many doors he couldn’t open and areas he couldn’t access. Edel was only allowed to see what they were willing to show.

“So do you know where Isaac is?” I asked aloud, although he could have read my thoughts anyway.

“Sqreak...” he answered and scurried away, now back on all four legs. It looked like Edel wanted me to follow him.

We walked through the estate and encountered a number of servants. They all stood to the side of the hall and bowed to me when they saw me, waiting for me to pass. Or maybe they were doing that for Edel. I wasn’t sure if they were human or not. They could have been thralls or lesser vampires. The head of this household was a vampire, so ordinary humans would probably find it tough to live here in more ways than one.

I wondered if that meant the servants couldn’t be human either. I was able to coexist with Lorraine, but most humans wouldn’t work here if they learned the

truth. But from what I could tell from their faces, the servants weren't thralls. Thrall faces were easy to identify. I sometimes couldn't tell when they were disguised with magic, though, as I'd learned from this incident. I decided to ask Isaac about it later.

We continued forward for a while until Edel stopped. We were in front of a door, and he looked at me like he wanted me to open it. I thought it should be my servant opening doors for me, but Edel's body structure would have made that hard, I guess. Well, he probably could have jumped up and grabbed onto the knob with his teeth to turn it with his weight, but even the knobs in this house were finely crafted and clearly valuable. I didn't want to risk damaging them, so I grabbed the knob myself.

Unfortunately, I crushed the doorknob in my hand. The beautifully carved wood was now a bunch of splinters. I started to panic as three servants approached me from out of nowhere.

"Oh, uh, I can explain," I said, but they didn't have anything to say to me. They replaced the doorknob, and two of them bowed to me as the third opened the door and then bowed as well. I was awfully ashamed about that. I might have even felt better if they had gotten mad instead.

I thanked them for going to all that trouble, then entered the room. Edel was already gone. He'd ditched me and rushed into the room when I was in trouble. It wasn't very becoming of a servant. Well, he would have helped if I were in actual trouble, so I couldn't complain.

When I entered the room, I heard the door quietly shut. The servant who had opened the door had closed it for me. They were so thoroughly helpful that I almost felt bad.

I looked around the room and saw Isaac in a perfectly ironed butler uniform. Rina was there too, wearing the sort of extravagant clothes that Laura wore. Rina was sitting in a chair, but Isaac was standing, and he appeared to be serving her. The table in front of Rina had a cup of tea and many delicious sweets sitting upon it. It looked like Rina was getting some similarly thorough hospitality.

They heard me come in and turned toward me. Rina stood up and trotted

over. It was a big room, so it would've taken a while if she'd walked. The scale of this place was much larger than any of the cheap inns I'd stayed at, or Lorraine's house.

But I guess that was kind of rude to think about Lorraine's house, especially when I was freeloading there. Lorraine's house wasn't that small anyway. It only felt that way because of all the piles of books and papers. I seldom got to live anywhere with this much open space. But whatever.

"Rentt!" Rina cried and jumped into my arms. I held her, and she felt light. Maybe the Existential Evolution had boosted my strength a lot. It had been hard to control my strength when I broke the doorknob too, so I couldn't touch people without a lot of caution. I needed to get a bit more used to this.



“Rina, are you okay? I mean, you went through a lot,” I said.

Rina had been captured by a vampire, turned into a vampire, and fused with a dungeon core, so she’d had quite an adventure. Considering the encounter she’d had with a certain ghoul too, I had to assume that Rina was cursed. I felt like we were kindred spirits in that sense. But I didn’t know how much Rina knew, so I kept it vague.

“I’m fine,” Rina replied. “I feel healthy and don’t have any particular issues. There are moments when people kind of look like food to me, though.”

Those sounded like pretty horrific thoughts to have, but I knew how she felt. Sometimes when I looked at someone, some part of my brain would subconsciously think they seemed pretty tasty, or that their blood might be silky smooth, or that they’d be a good source of nutrition, or that they’d have a rich flavor. Rina was probably experiencing the same thing. It wasn’t impossible to suppress, so it wasn’t that big of an issue.

“I see, so you know what happened while you were unconscious?” I asked.

“Yes, I’m a vampire now, aren’t I?”

Isaac came up to me after Rina. “Good morning, Rentt.”

“Oh, morning. Did you tell Rina everything?”

“Yes. Lorraine was here too until a moment ago, but now she’s holed up in the library. She was thrilled to see it.”

Isaac must have noticed me looking around for somebody and guessed that it was Lorraine. If she was in a library, though, she probably wasn’t going to come out for a while. If left to her own devices, she could read for days. I couldn’t count the number of times she’d suffered from malnutrition after one of these episodes and I’d had to cook something for her. I took a mental note to go check on her and make sure that didn’t happen this time.

“So how are you feeling? You look to be in good shape,” Isaac said.

“Yeah, no problems here,” I answered. “But it’s hard to control my power. I actually just wrecked a doorknob. Sorry.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Isaac said with a chuckle. “That tends to happen

with vampires who go through Existential Evolution. It was a long time ago for me, but I remember similar accidents. I would guess that Mistress Laura had the same experience too."

"What happened to Laura? Is she still asleep?"

"Yes, but I wouldn't be too concerned about her. Mistress Laura is a far greater being than me, so this wouldn't threaten her life. But her power has diminished as of late, so it will take some time for her to absorb the dungeon core."

"Why has her power diminished?" I asked.

Generally speaking, vampires didn't age. That meant she shouldn't have been suffering from the ravages of age as long as she was eating right.

"Remember how we asked you to collect Dragon Blood Blossoms? Those are for purging malice, which makes them useful for suppressing a vampire's power. That's only if the correct amount is collected, however. Too much of it can weaken the vampire. Mistress Laura has been consuming the undiluted Dragon Flower Blood from the Dragon Blood Blossoms for years, you see."

"Why would she do that?" If what Isaac said was true, that was almost suicidal.

"I don't know," Isaac answered. "Maybe she was bored of life after living for so long, or maybe she had another reason. But she hasn't used as much since she met you, Rentt. She was gradually getting her energy back, so I think she'll wake back up after a while."

"When will that happen? Tomorrow? The next day?" I had a lot to ask Laura.

"I'm sorry if I got your hopes up, but it could take months, if not years."

Most vampires lived long lives, and these two probably perceived time differently than a young vampire like me. Months or years probably just felt like a little while to them.

Unfortunately, now I couldn't talk to Laura. At least Laura had thought of that and told me some things before she absorbed the dungeon core. She'd said something about going to temples and ruins to collect legends, but I had no

idea what she meant.

“Laura did what she had to,” I said. “She absorbed the dungeon core to protect Maalt, and nobody else could’ve done it.”

“Thank you for saying so. I’d like to explain as much as I can, but unfortunately, I don’t know much. Is there anything you’d like to ask?”

“Do you know what she meant about collecting old legends?”

“I suppose it means what it sounds like. It’s what you should do for yourself and your future.”

“Well, that’s not what I’m asking.” I wanted to know why I was supposed to do that, and exactly what these old legends were. I had to assume that Isaac knew.

“I can answer to some extent, but I’ve misinterpreted this information in the past. I believe Shumini did as well. If I were to try to explain it, I think I would make some mistakes. I suggest that you investigate it yourself and come to your own conclusions. I imagine that Laura would tell you the same.”

Isaac wouldn’t answer me in the end, but I understood what he meant. If this was about something from an ancient era, any information about it would naturally be lost or twisted over time. I had to gather these legends and interpret them on my own. But there could be errors in my own interpretation. Presumably, Isaac was saying that he’d gone through this himself. What he meant to say was that I might repeat his mistakes. That’s what I got out of it, at least. He wanted me to find that information on my own and think about it myself. If so, then this wasn’t something I could ask Isaac about.

What I had to do was clear, so I just needed to head out on that journey. Temples and ruins existed all around the world. I did all my adventuring around Maalt, though, and those weren’t exactly long journeys. Solo Bronze-class adventurers never got escort missions, and I wouldn’t have had much opportunity to make money in other regions. Even the travel expenses would have been brutal. But now I was strong enough to take escort missions or accept requests from guilds around the world to make money while I traveled.

I was excited, but I was also going to miss Maalt. Well, I could probably use

the teleportation circles to return there from some locations, but then people might ask questions about how I was in Maalt when I was supposed to be on a journey. I would have to use those as little as possible. I also longed to travel by carriage. Just teleporting around wouldn't be so interesting. It wouldn't feel like a journey.

"Well, I got it," I said. "I'll ask no more about that, then. What else was there? Oh yeah, you said I evolved, but what'd I evolve into? Do you know?" I didn't know. I hadn't actually tested anything out yet, so it was a mystery. I seemed a little stronger, but that was about it.

"You're a little different from us, if you recall," Isaac said.

"Yeah, Laura mentioned that."

"Right, so I can't say what type of monster you are in particular. I can tell you what rank you would be if you were a vampire, however. If you want me to do that, you'll have to show me your power first."

My physical strength alone likely wasn't enough to judge. Vampires of the same rank could differ in that area the same way humans could.

"Is Rina not an ordinary vampire either?" I asked.

"Oh, am I not a vampire?" she said in shock, but I needed to ask about this. I would have no problem with her being a regular vampire, but Nive was likely still in Maalt. That barrier was probably gone now, so Nive might have been prowling around the town. If Rina got caught, Nive would shred her with her claws.

"You're likely not," Isaac answered. "The easiest way to tell is from your aura. Humans wouldn't be able to tell, but we vampires can sense each other. You and Rentt, however, don't give off our aura."

"So Rina and I aren't vampires? But I drink blood and hunger for humans. Don't you?" I asked Rina.

"Humans look delicious!" she replied.



That was a little disturbing. I mean, she wasn't wrong, but that wasn't something you'd want to say out loud around town. She would be treated as either a man-eating monster or a lunatic. I didn't want either to happen to Rina. I needed to warn her about that later.

"Of course, I can't say you're completely different," Isaac said. "You could be another species closely related to vampires, but you would have to ask the Goddess of Appraisal to know for certain. I can't guarantee she would appraise you, however."

The Goddess of Appraisal seldom appraised anything personally. Going to a temple for that wouldn't necessarily be a waste of time, though, and there was also the matter of my mask. I figured she would look at that. The spirit in Hathara had said it was something like a divine item, after all. If I could ask what species I was at the same time, that would be convenient.

"Well, there are some things I do know about, and I can check those for you," Isaac said. "I'm a vampire who has lived a fairly long life, and I've honed a number of skills in that time. You may be able to use some of them, Rentt. Let's go to the garden. I'm sure Lorraine wants to watch too, so perhaps we should stop by the library first."

If he was willing to teach me some skills, I greatly appreciated it. The only skills I was especially good with were swordsmanship, life magic, and attacking with spirit. I would more than welcome the opportunity to learn more. In fact, I'd always yearned to learn a wide variety of skills. But I knew that I shouldn't neglect the basics in favor of gaining new skills, so I never planned to.

I knew that I wasn't up to snuff based on our fight underground, after I saw Laura, Isaac, and even Lorraine's power. I was without a doubt the weakest of them. Maybe I could beat Lorraine by making use of my physical strength and regeneration, but she knew I was some sort of vampire. She could probably keep hitting me with magic that wouldn't let me move at all. I wouldn't even be able to get near her. Never mind, I didn't stand a chance against Lorraine.

"Sounds good," I said. "Whenever I evolved before now, I had Lorraine take a look at me. She'd probably be the best person to spot any changes this time too. She should also have some thoughts on what species I might be. I like to

think that I'm reasonably knowledgeable about monsters, but nothing beats an expert."

"Right, Lorraine studies monsters. I know plenty about my own kind, but only so much about other monsters. Shall we go get Lorraine, then?"

We left the room and headed to the library.

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"Oh, Rentt, you're awake? How's your body? Are you feeling well?" Lorraine asked.

When we entered the library, we found Lorraine sitting at a table covered with books. Apparently, she'd still set aside enough space in her mind to think about me and not just the books.

"Yeah, I don't seem to have any problems at the moment. Anyway, that's a lot of books."

"This is only a small portion of what I want to read. This place is incredible. There aren't many libraries with this many books. Not even the nobles in the imperial capital have libraries on this scale. Not only that, but these books are all quite rare. I would love to live here."

I feared the possibility that Laura or Isaac might actually allow that. Lorraine's house was already more just a place to put her books than it was a functional home. Maybe it would feel pretty much the same for her to live in this library.

"Well, jokes aside, I take it you're here because you need something?" Lorraine said. I guess she wasn't serious after all. She'd looked at least half-serious to me when she'd said it, but pointing that out could get me in trouble. I acted like I didn't notice.

"Yeah, Isaac said he's going to see what rank we'd be if we were vampires. He's also going to teach us some vampire skills. We're about to go test some things in the garden, so we figured you should watch and see if you have any ideas."

"So you aren't a vampire after all? Something closely related, then? Or a subspecies? Maybe you're something entirely different. Talking to Isaac about

that should be interesting.” Lorraine evidently didn’t think I was a typical vampire either. Well, we had talked about that a few times, so it wasn’t especially strange.

“I don’t know as much about monsters as you do, so I don’t know if I’ll meet your expectations,” Isaac said, but from Lorraine’s perspective, she had an opportunity to ask an actual vampire about vampires. That was already enough to meet her expectations. All the vampires we had been around as of late made it easy to forget, but most adventurers never encountered vampires. That was even true of lesser vampires, let alone the much rarer vampires of higher ranks.

“I get to talk to a high-ranking vampire,” Lorraine said. “That’s not something I get to do every day. I’ll gladly take the opportunity, Isaac.”

Side Story: Vengeance and the Subconscious

“Oh, Rentt. Sorry, but could you take out the garbage? I left it all at the door. I’ll make breakfast while you do that.”

It was an ordinary morning. I left my room on the second floor of Lorraine’s house and headed down to the living room, where Lorraine had made this request. She was in the middle of cooking and had her hands full. I was living there for free, so I ought to have been the one to both make breakfast and take out the garbage, but Lorraine was willing to do some of the chores. That was unless she was tired or absorbed in research or something. And we didn’t always divide up roles the same way either. We each did our part as necessary and found that easiest. We’d known each other for ten years, so we knew how to work together without needing to exchange many words.

“Sure, got it,” I said without complaint. I didn’t even need to ask where to toss it out as I grabbed the trash bag and went outside.

I walked to the place where the denizens of Maalt dumped their garbage. They accepted different types of trash depending on the day, and today was the day for metal. It was going to be melted down and recycled. It would have been stolen if left out in front of people’s houses, so it was all deposited here. Who collected it depended on the dumping site.

“Oh, working hard, everyone? There’s a lot here today. Ah, Rentt,” said a priest as he arrived.

He was Adela, a priest from the Church of Alchemy who collected these metal materials. The Church of Alchemy believed alchemic techniques themselves to be divine and worthy of worship. They were a bit odd. Their god was Dayla, the God of Alchemy. Most of their followers were ordinary people, as with any religion, but their priests were advanced alchemists. That was why they preferred materials instead of monetary donations. Lorraine wasn’t a follower of this religion, but as a fellow alchemist, she would sometimes bring them what she didn’t need. But I was usually the one to haul them to this dump, so I

knew Adela better than she did. Adela was a fairly talented alchemist, but I had yet to see him use his talents.

“Hello, Father Adela,” I said and bowed.

“Are these all your materials?” he asked.

“They’re more Lorraine’s than mine.”

“Right, of course. Thank you as always. You two provide a fair number of highly valuable materials, so our members always fight over them.”

“I don’t feel like it’s much at all, so thanks for saying so.”

“From our perspective, this is plenty. Much of this would be hard to get my hands on myself.”

Lorraine and I had collected a lot of the materials from dungeons or mountains. We had intended to use them ourselves, so we’d picked out only the highest quality, and much of it was better than what was available in stores. Most adventurers wouldn’t even be able to identify some of these materials, and they were hardly in circulation. I understood what Adela was saying.

“Lorraine and I collect these ourselves, so I’m sure there’s plenty of unusual stuff there.”

“Yes, but they’re all well-known among alchemists. Unfortunately, there aren’t many adventurers who could identify them.”

“Adventurers tend to take what’s easiest to identify and collect, yes. It’s hard to remember which materials are seldom used but high in value.”

“I see. It’s good to hear an adventurer’s opinion. Perhaps we should keep that in mind when we send requests to the guild.”

We kept chatting as more materials arrived. The crowd eventually started to thin out.

“It’s about time, Rentt,” Adela said. He was going to take everything to the church.

“Right, goodbye, then.”

We parted ways.

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“Oh, you’re back. Breakfast is ready,” Lorraine said and took off her apron when I got home.

Her apron wasn’t the cute sort that the women around town liked. It was for use in experiments and made of sturdy material that wouldn’t melt or burn from powerful acid. It was, of course, not the least bit alluring, but it fit Lorraine well. It was perfectly functional. The problem was that it would get stained by contaminants from her experiments, but she cleaned it thoroughly before each use. That was mostly because it would interfere with her work if she didn’t. That kind of scrupulousness was crucial for researchers.

All the food on the table looked delicious. It was seasoned in the perfect way to make me hungry. That was to say that it was seasoned with Lorraine’s blood. I think it would’ve tasted fine either way, but the presence of blood made a big difference. It sated my appetite a lot more too, so in terms of efficiency, I appreciated it.

“Looks good,” I said. “Should we get eating, then?”

“Yes, let’s.”

We sat at the table. As we ate, I brought up what had happened earlier.

“Father Adela said that?” Lorraine asked. “Hm, he doesn’t have to thank us.”

“That’s what I said, but he’s a polite guy.”

“Well, he’s always been like that. He could be more famous than he is with his talent, but he chooses to live in this small town.”

“Really?”

“Yes, he could get a job in Vistelya if he were so inclined, or even find work in the empire. Not that he’s any match for me, of course.”

Lorraine spoke highly of herself, but if he was only a little worse at alchemy than her, then he was still fairly skilled. I didn’t entirely understand why Lorraine lived in Maalt either, considering her abilities.

“If he’s living in Maalt anyway, maybe it’s because the Church of Alchemy doesn’t like him too much,” I said.

“Well, that’s the most likely possibility. All of these organizations turn out to be corrupt in the end. The Church of Alchemy claims to prioritize science, so it’s sad that even they have the same inclinations.”

“Sounds rough.”

“I suppose, but he could leave the Church of Alchemy and join some research team instead. I presume he stays with them because he wants to, so it’s not our place to comment on his circumstances.”

“I guess so.”

Sometimes people in unfavorable circumstances stayed in them for their own reasons. Those reasons could vary, but if Father Adela had one, then there was nothing we could say.

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One day, someone knocked on the door to Lorraine’s house and yelled my name. I opened the door and saw two people, one of whom I knew and one of whom I didn’t. The former was Alize, our apprentice. Next to her was a girl around the age of ten. I could tell from her clothes that she was a commoner, but not one from this city, so she must have traveled here.

“Alize, who’s she?” I asked.

“She says her name’s Mimir. She’s lost.”

“Lost? Why’d you come here anyway?”

“I thought you’d help find who she’s looking for.”

“Well, who is she looking for?” It could have been a parent, a friend, or a guard. There were plenty of possibilities.

“Her dad. She says they came to Maalt together, but she suddenly lost him,” Alize explained.

“Got it. I’ll help.”

“Wow, thanks! What’d I tell you, Mimir? Rentt’s gonna find your dad for you.”

Mimir must have been nervous about that. She’d stayed silent up until then, but now she gave me a relieved look.

“Thank you, Rentt,” she said.

“Don’t mention it. I’ve got nothing else to do today anyway. But it won’t help anyone if you get lost again, so you two should wait somewhere. Sound good?”

“Should we stay in the orphanage?” Alize asked.

“Yeah. But before that, Mimir, I need to ask you about your dad. Is that all right?”

“Yes!”

“Good answer.”

I let the two girls into Lorraine’s house to question Mimir. Then I saw them off to the orphanage and began my search. If you wanted to know where Lorraine was, she’d left after she got an urgent request from the guild. She probably would have assisted with the search, but unfortunately she had her hands full. I had Edel’s information network, though, so I figured I’d be fine.

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“Alize, I’m here,” I said two hours later when I visited the orphanage.

“Oh, Rentt! Mimir, Rentt’s here!”

“Rentt! Did you find my dad?” Mimir asked.

“I found out where he is, but he seems to be outside the city. It sounds like he’s an adventurer, so I guess that’s typical.”

Mimir’s father was a Silver-class adventurer visiting from Vistelya, and he was fairly talented. He was exploring the New Moon Dungeon to find materials for a noble and said he wouldn’t be back until night. I thought it was wrong of him to leave Mimir on her own, but he could only stay in Maalt for so long, and the noble was rushing him. He’d put out a search request for Mimir at the guild before heading out of town. I doubt he was happy to do that, but it was a complicated situation. Maalt was a peaceful city anyway, and the chance of any danger befalling Mimir was low, so maybe that influenced his decision. At any rate, Mimir was here now, and we knew where her father was, so they would be able to meet up again at night.

“Thank goodness,” Mimir said. “Then I just have to wait at the guild?”

“Yeah.”

“Mimir, why not wait here?” Alize suggested. “This place is nothing fancy, but we should have something to eat before you go!”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Mimir didn’t seem to want to bother the orphanage any more than she had.

“It’s fine! This orphanage hasn’t been hurting for food lately! Sister Lillian even hunts monsters sometimes!” Alize said.

I knew that her disease had been cured, but I’d never considered that she was healthy enough for that. Well, she had divinity, so she could probably do the work of the average adventurer if she were so inclined.

“Okay!” Mimir said. “Rentt, I think I’ll wait here after all.”

“In that case, I’ll tell the guild about it,” I replied.

“Thank you. See you later, then.”

I returned to the guild again. I had time on my hands, so I figured I would wait for Mimir’s father myself.

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It was night and time for adventurers to return to the guild and deliver their reports. Most of them gave their reports, accepted their rewards, and left like usual, but I saw one group enter the guild in a panic. Lorraine was among them, so I was especially curious. I didn’t want to bother her right away, though, so I waited for her to finish her report and notice me.

“Did something happen?” I asked Lorraine.

“Yes. A special monster appeared and petrified a member of our party. No ordinary healing spells or divinity could cure him, so we had to come back and get materials for the medicine. Now we need to mix them together.”

Petrification could be caused by monster breath, magic, or curses, but that was relatively easy to cure. This situation must have been an exception. But while they were in a panic, Lorraine hadn’t said that curing him was impossible, so they must have had something in mind already.

“I see, then I’ll help,” I said. “I’m sure I’ll be good for something.”

“You’re well-educated, so you’ll be good for plenty. Shall we go?”

Lorraine ran on ahead, and I followed. I wanted to wait for Mimir’s father, but this was urgent. I had already told the guild where Mimir was, so there was nothing to worry about there.

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“We’ve got a problem with the materials,” Lorraine muttered during the final stages of mixing the medicine. She’d noticed that we didn’t have quite enough.

“This is something we just gave away, isn’t it?” I asked.

“Yes, unfortunately.”

“Well, why don’t we go visit the Church of Alchemy to ask them about it? We help them, so why wouldn’t they help us?”

“I suppose,” Lorraine muttered. “It would be hard to collect this naturally or buy it at a store at the moment, so I see no other option.”

We came to an agreement and went to the church. Father Adela greeted us.

“By all means, use it,” he said. “And the adventurer in question is Fazira, isn’t it? He was taken to our house of healing.”

“I knew he’d been taken to a house of healing, but I didn’t know you ran it,” Lorraine said. “That’s perfect.”

Adela provided the materials, and Lorraine began the final steps for mixing the medicine right away.

As she worked, Lorraine looked at the materials. “This wasn’t processed when we gave it away, but I see that’s been done now. Did you do it, Father Adela?” she asked.

“Yes. It’s easier to preserve that way. Is it not to your satisfaction?”

“No, it’s perfect. I should be able to finish mixing this in no time. In fact, I just did. Let’s head to the house of healing.”

Lorraine stood up and rushed away. I followed behind her, and Father Adela bowed to us as we left.

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“Man, I thought I was a goner this time!” Fazira said with a hearty laugh as he lay in a bed in the house of healing.

He was Mimir’s father. Mimir was sitting next to the bed, delighted to see that her father was safe. By the time Lorraine and I had arrived, he was already petrified all the way up to the neck. We got him the medicine just in time, and now he had fully recovered. But he would have to stay in the hospital for the next couple days to ensure that his body was in working order. He’d already found what he needed for his job and wasn’t in any rush, so he’d accepted it.

“Dad, stop getting yourself in danger already,” Mimir said.

Fazira looked perturbed. “Well, that’s what adventurers do,” he said and scratched his head.

We had nothing more to do here, so Lorraine and I got up and left. When we exited, we encountered Father Adela. Presumably he was here to check on the Church of Alchemy’s house of healing, or maybe he was just curious about Fazira. We bowed and passed by him.

“Lorraine,” I said.

“Yes, I sensed something a little strange. Very strange, actually.”

“What should we do?”

“Let’s wait and see what happens for a bit. He’s probably here to see Fazira.”

“Then I’ll be the best for that job.”

“Right.”

We confirmed that we’d both noticed something suspicious, then split up to do our parts.

◆◇◆◇◆

The room was pitch black when a hand slowly reached out toward the person on the bed. It was gripping a sharp knife, and anyone could guess that it was about to do something nefarious with it.

“Stop right there,” someone said before that could happen, and the knife did

stop.

The bearer of the knife noticed someone in the room aside from his target. It was a strange man with a black robe and a skull mask. In other words, it was me.

“Oh, Rentt. Why are you here?”

“That’s what I want to ask you, Father Adela.”

Yes, it was Father Adela, and Fazira was lying in the bed.

“It’s simple,” Adela said, sneering. “I bear a grudge against Fazira, so I was hoping to take his life.”

“I thought you were a better man than that, Adela. Why would you do this?”

“Do you want to know?”

“If you’ll give this up after you tell me, sure.”

“I don’t have much choice but to give up now regardless. The reason, you see, is that I was once an adventurer. I was in a party with Fazira here, but one day, he said I was being removed from the party.”

“What, did you get into a fight?”

“No. He said they had no need for an alchemist. He said I was useless. I was certainly a novice at the time and lacked much skill, but I was getting better by the day, you know. But he was more than happy to abandon me. I had no place to go for a while, but in the end, the Church of Alchemy took me in and gave me some way to make a living. Fazira, however, managed to become an adventurer in the capital in the time since, while I’ve been forced to come to Maalt instead.”

“Oh, I see.”

Stories of party members being forced out of their parties were common, and grudges in such situations were understandable. Despite that, Adela had managed to put aside his desire for vengeance...until today. Some encounters could be good, but some could be devastating. If Fazira hadn’t come here, this wouldn’t have happened.

“Even I know it’s laughable, but the moment I saw his face, I couldn’t control my hatred,” he said. “You aren’t going to let me kill him, are you?”

With a twisted smile, Adela swung the knife. I closed in on him and grabbed his arm.

“Stop.”

“Why protect him?” Adela asked.

“That’s what I want to ask.”

“What?”

“If you had wanted to kill him, you could have just not given us those materials. But you did. Is that because you’re a proper priest now?”

Only now did Adela notice that contradiction. Tears began to stream from his eyes. “It’s true, I didn’t question what I did there. It was simply what I had to do. I’m sorry, Rentt.”

“I’m glad you regret what you’ve done,” I said.

“I feel like I never could have done it. I must face the consequences for this.”

“That’s not necessary. Not like you did anything to me,” Fazira said. I’d noticed him wake up a while ago, but he didn’t react in any way, so I thought he might have still been half asleep. Apparently he was quite conscious.

Adela hadn’t seemed to notice it. “Fazira, I thought you were asleep,” he said.

“I was up till a bit ago. But when I heard what you had to say, I thought, hey, maybe I deserve to die. So I kept quiet.”

“You did?” Adela asked, surprised.

“Adela, I know it’s too late now, but sorry about what happened. I was young. I know that’s no excuse, but I didn’t know much about alchemists. You even saved my life today. I was a moron.”

“Oh, it’s fine. I’ve given up on killing you. I have to face the consequences now.”

“I’m telling you that’s not necessary,” Fazira insisted. “Not like you actually killed me.”

“Are you serious?”

“Considering what I did to you, it’s nothing. Besides, you kind of saved my daughter’s future too.”

“Mimir? She’s a good girl. I nearly took someone’s father away as well.”

“Come on, stop hating on yourself.”

It sounded like there were no more problems between the two of them, so I left the room. It wasn’t clear if they had fully made up, but they were gradually moving past their conflict.



Afterword

Finally, the eighth volume! Thank you so much for purchasing this book. The sixth volume of the manga was released at the same time, so check that out too if you're interested!

Now, as far as what I'm doing lately, I've been thinking about how to manage my time. I've never been good at that, and I always worry about how much time to spend on which tasks each day. I write about eight pages an hour on average, but I can't do that for hours on end. If I don't take a break every two or three hours, I hit a roadblock. I could just do something useful with those breaks, but I'm often bad about that and end up doing nothing at all.

Do I have any readers who use their time well, or not? I'd like to get better at that. The reason I'm thinking about this is that I've always loved reading, and I used to read a whole book almost every day, but that's changed since I became an author who has to write every day for a living. I don't know if it's because I subconsciously want to get away from text, but it's hard for me to even read a book a week now.

Sometimes I feel like that doesn't matter, but I'm not so sure. At a glance, it seems like you only need a pen and paper to write a book, or even just a computer nowadays. But I feel like it takes a surprising amount of energy. It takes all the values, memories, knowledge, and emotional experiences you've accumulated over the course of your life. None of these things have a physical form, so it's easy to think that you can use them endlessly and they'll never run out, but when you write a book, it strangely feels like you start running thin.

I feel like I have to get some more of these things from somewhere, or I'll wear out like a car that's driven hundreds of thousands of kilometers. The easiest place to get these things is novels, movies, manga, and other forms of stories written by other people. I desperately want time to experience those. If I can't, I eventually won't be able to write anymore. I haven't found a good way to find the time for that yet, but I want to try and figure out how to resupply all

that energy draining from me.

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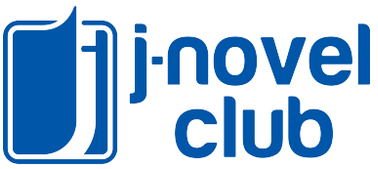
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The Unwanted Undead Adventurer: Volume 8

by Yu Okano

Translated by Noah Rozenberg Edited by Suzanne Seals

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