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Realistically speaking, it was sufficient to simply gather the magic crystal, scales, fangs, claws, and eyes. It was as if I were picking out parts to eat.

Ahh, if only I had a larger magical pouch... Perhaps one would show up at an auction soon? I couldn't purchase such a pouch at a run-of-the-mill store. There was the issue of price as well...though I could simply sell the rest of the Tarasque to cover the expense.

In any case, procuring a considerably large pouch might be quite difficult. Even if I did, I wouldn't get rid of my old one. In fact, having two at my disposal would make transporting materials that much easier.

After some time, I'd finished dissecting the Terra Drake. It was now time to move on. I was considerably tired, however, and it occurred to me that I should return as soon as possible. I did have enough magic crystals at this point. But I had yet to excavate a suitable vein of Mana Iron.

*I guess I could press on...just a little longer.*

This mentality of mine was perhaps a little too reckless...



There were two doors in the chamber that had once housed the Terra Drake. I had entered from one of those doors, so the other was presumably the exit. It had remained closed all throughout the battle, but it swung open as soon as the Terra Drake was defeated.

This must have been the way forward.

I was surprised at what I saw beyond those doors as I slowly approached. There were no obvious paths beyond that door, instead terminating much like a cliff would. I could see small footholds and grips, a means of descending this sheer surface.

While I wasn't facing a mountain, I could tell where I was judging from the darkness that lay before me, and the fact that I was surrounded by a sea of stone.

It was a large hole in the ground; a cavernous depression. This space was wide, perhaps stretching on for at least a kilometer in each cardinal direction. The ceiling was high as well.

Although my surroundings were dark and visibility was poor, I could say with certainty that this place differed greatly from the tunnels that I'd been passing through up until this point. In addition, there was a lot of equipment—magical tools perhaps—simply lying about. It reminded me of a mine. There were even tracks and mining carts lying about. For all intents and purposes, this appeared to be a man-made space.

This was, however, a location in the labyrinth. It was all but impossible for humans to simply create a mine here, so it was safe to assume that this, too, was something created by the labyrinth's mysterious devices.

There were occasionally tales of places within labyrinths that contained towns, cities, castles—impossible sights that couldn't possibly have been crafted by the hands of men.

With that in mind, a place like this wasn't all that mysterious. The only mystery in all this was the very existence of the labyrinth itself. If anything, odd features on the various floors, such as this one, were considerably more normal.

It was still fair to say that this strange sight had caught my attention, though. Were references made to parts of human civilization when the labyrinths were created? Given that castles and towns could be found within them, my assumptions most likely had some degree of truth.

Normally, labyrinths featured forests, caves, and other natural landscapes. Human settlements were somewhat natural occurrences as well, and if one thought about it that way, the sight before me wasn't all that strange.

Then there was the fact that labyrinths continued creating monsters, no matter how much time went by. That by itself was an astonishing display of creative force.



Regardless of why this space was formed, the fact that I was now standing in it did not change.

This was a mine. A place for excavation. I had come here in search of high-quality Mana Iron so...this was the place to do so.

I slowly descended the cliff, sticking close to the wall. Eventually I reached the bottom, and I began observing my surroundings. I couldn't see very far due to the lack of light, but I did recall seeing the moving silhouettes of some monsters from my observations while at the top of this pit. There were no silhouettes near where I'd landed though, so I was able to descend without too much worry.

After some time, it became clear that there were no monsters in my immediate vicinity. A bit of relief for the weary adventurer. There were instead more mining carts, and what appeared to be a magical tool of some sort, as well as a switch-like object.

*Hmm... What should I do?*

Would anything happen if I pressed that switch? The safest thing to do would be to not touch it at all...but that would be a most boring development. Safety took precedence over my boredom, of course, but...there didn't seem to be any traps, or danger, in the immediate area. I'd also come from above, so it wasn't like anything would fall from the ceiling, nor was I standing on a pitfall trap...

If I was going to press the switch, then maybe I should just get it over with. If anything untoward happened upon its activation, I could simply turn it off again.

...Well. I couldn't discount the fact that I may not be able to turn the switch off, but...

Whatever the case... *Click.*

With a soft, mechanical sound, the switch depressed under the weight of my finger, and almost immediately, the darkness was illuminated by light. Instinctively, I looked up. It seemed the light source was very high up indeed, its rays shining down into this massive pit.

In other words...this was a light switch for the mine's lights.

...I was simply glad it wasn't a trap.

The lights didn't light up the entire space, but instead illuminated my surroundings, up to a few tens of meters. I supposed there were other switches like this one in the darkness, and that the rest of the pit would remain dark if they weren't pressed.

I, of course, could see in the darkness to some degree. My much-vaunted Undead Sight was mainly used to track living creatures, however, so it didn't do much for inanimate objects like switches. While I couldn't say being a Vampire was completely without benefits, it just so happened that my vampiric abilities weren't very useful in this situation.

All I had to do was find some rocks containing veins of Mana Iron, then excavate it. But to do so, I needed a normal light source. I supposed there was no other way than to dig, find a switch, and repeat ad infinitum.

As I stood contemplating the situation, I noticed the presence of monsters close by. Observing quietly, I saw the silhouettes of what appeared to be two Mina Goblins slowly approaching the illuminated space. The lights had turned on, so someone or something must be here...was probably what the goblins thought.

So, this was a trap of some sort after all...?

This meant that illuminating other areas would draw monsters to them in a similar fashion, though I couldn't be absolutely sure.

In any case, I needed to deal with these two Mina Goblins before inspecting my surroundings for ore. I'd seen some promisingly-colored walls when I'd inspected the pit from above. All I had to do was find them, excavate the Mana Iron, and that...was that.

Or so I thought...



*Clink! Clank!*

The sound of my pickaxe hitting rock echoed through the air. I'd already disposed the two Mina Goblins that had wandered into the light earlier. They

were formidable foes, but they didn't seem to have any companions. After I slew the two of them, no other Mina Goblins showed up. It seemed camaraderie wasn't a Goblin's strong point.

With that done, I circled around the pit, following the curved walls, striking at any parts that looked promising. I did, for the record, look for the appropriate switch, and managed to illuminate the area I was currently working in.

It seemed like someone had been here before me, as there were traces of excavation in this particular wall, and I could see veins of metal shining through. Surely I'd be able to gather high-quality Mana Iron here.

Honestly speaking, even the rocks at my feet that had crumbled off the wall were of a respectable quality. I could tell just by picking one up and staring at it.

*In that case...*

Of course, if I was going to dig for ore, a piece from the ground wouldn't do. I intended to go from vein to vein, searching for the perfect place, then I'd excavate a great amount and bring that all back home.

For now though...this was enough. I left that vein behind, and headed toward yet another possible excavation point...



The feeling of fear and apprehension began setting in only after the third excavation point I'd visited. By then, I was all filled up and ready to return... It was then that it happened.

I'd been observing and walking along the walls of this strange pit all this time, until I finally began understanding the structural intricacies of this place.

The ground I was walking and excavating on was actually on top of another space—another floor, I surmised. I somehow had a feeling that this other floor beneath me existed. Perhaps it was because my surroundings were too dark, and that was why I didn't notice. I didn't know that there may be something lurking in this space beneath my feet.

I suddenly had a feeling—a feeling that something was there. It just so happened that the light shining onto the third excavation spot illuminated this

cavernous space below, so I slowly approached, carefully hugging the cliff walls as I looked down.

It was then that I saw it—a terrifying monster.

What faint rays of light shining through the cracks had already hit the ground of the next floor, I thought. Then the ground itself began moving, ever so slowly.

My eyes and Undead Sight could see creatures in the darkness. This much was true. However, there were exceptions. For instance, one's abilities may fail to activate when faced with an incredibly strong foe. For the first time in my life, I experienced this firsthand.

What, exactly, was this thing lurking in the darkness? The dim lighting made it hard to discern.

The first thing I understood was that what I'd seen, a carpet of smooth, shining rock, was nothing more than a part of a larger creature. Its skin, or hide, which seemed to continue on indefinitely. Then, just ever so slightly, the light shining from above illuminated what appeared to be the creature's face, just for a split second.

An eye. An eye as large as my entire person.

At this point in time, I was still unsure. Should I escape? It seemed the creature's eye was currently closed. It appeared to be asleep; I could see that much, even at this distance.

I felt a wave of terror wash over me. I could never, under any circumstances, challenge this monster, not even with my current abilities.

I couldn't let the monster notice me, become aware of my presence. Instinctively, I felt a strong pull; I had to leave this place as soon as possible.

For some reason, during my journey down to the fourth floor, I'd felt that I could keep advancing. So long as I was cautious in my advance, I wouldn't be exposed to any potentially fatal dangers.

I'd read up on the different types of monsters and their strengths, the various traps, and all sorts of other dangers present before my journey. My assumption

that I could keep pressing on was nothing more than an internal rationalization.

However, what lay beneath me now... I didn't have to assume or rationalize anything. A single look was enough to tell me that this foe, this existence, was beyond me.

What lay beneath me was none other than an Earth Dragon. It had an almost frog-like, bearded face, with eyes that betrayed intelligence and logic. On its back were two tiny wings, seemingly out of place with the rest of its huge body.

Its size, however, was anything but frog-like. Forty...? No. Fifty meters perhaps...? It was huge. Massive. Entire towns and cities would crumble to dust should it thrash around with its giant body. Buildings wouldn't even last a single second. There were even quite a few legends of angered Earth Dragons flattening entire villages, towns, and even kingdoms and countries.

It did much more than just thrashing about. It could easily cause earthquakes with its sheer size and power. The earth would ripple and shake, buildings would crumble, streets would be swallowed and destroyed. Stones falling from the sky would make short work of any who attempted to escape, and those lucky enough to get out would become feed for its minions.

To think something like that laid here...

There were no reports. Nothing at all.

Why? How? Something so large... There was no way no one knew about this.

As I continued thinking, observing the Earth Dragon from a distance, its previously closed eye suddenly opened. With a deafeningly loud rumble, the dragon stood and began moving.

This was bad... Had I been found out? I see... So my life would end here and now.

A familiar feeling assaulted my body. It was what I'd felt when I first encountered a "Dragon." A feeling close to surrender, yet much akin to release...along with the sheer emotional force of seeing a legendary creature up close.

It was a relatively rare experience to feel. One would simply think it was all

right to die right there, and a part of me had felt that way as well.

This may be a given, but I couldn't simply die in a place like this. I was going to become a Mithril-class adventurer. That was why I hadn't given up, even after my body became like this.

With all that said, however...what, exactly, was I to do in such a situation? All it took was a single swipe of the Earth Dragon's massive limbs and I'd surely give up the ghost then and there.

There was an impossibly large gap between us, one that couldn't be compensated for just because I was an Undead.

I... I couldn't do anything. Not one single thing. I didn't feel like I could do anything at all.

That gigantic life form apparently hadn't noticed me yet. Perhaps it already knew of my presence, but felt I wasn't worth the effort. All I could do was pray that this was the case.

I suddenly realized I could hear my own heartbeat. My own heartbeat, in this lifeless body of mine. I felt a cold sweat come over me, my muscles slowly cramping up. I was shivering, but I did my best to stifle all sound, like my life depended on it.

Then—

For a single instant, I felt our eyes meet.

Or...maybe it was just my imagination.

Slowly, the Earth Dragon turned around, and with its great limbs, began digging—deeper and deeper. Its massive body began fading into the ground.

Consider the fact that we were in the middle of a large, floating mountain. The so-called ground here was in fact hard, solid bedrock. Not that this mattered to the Earth Dragon. It simply continued to casually dig.

As expected of an Earth Dragon.

All I could do was stand there, taking the utmost care in not making a sound as I did all I could to hide my presence.

A small rain of rocks and debris was dislodged by the Dragon's digging. I, in turn, had to dodge, deploy a shield spell... There was quite a bit for me to do. The dislodged rocks weren't even a type of attack, merely a side effect of the Earth Dragon's subterranean movement. However, each individual rock had as much force as the Terra Drake's stone spears... It was truly terrifying.

Surely, a Mithril-class adventurer would be able to fight something like that head-on. I suddenly became very aware of just how far away from my goal I was.

One day, I would surely defeat this monster.

*One day...* I thought, deeply and solemnly.



*I...see.*

I was staring at where the Earth Dragon had once been. It was now a place dominated by loneliness, without a single trace of the sheer strength and power that was present there just moments ago. I stared out at the now-empty space. Although the Earth Dragon had just been there, all that remained were a few fallen rocks.

If this was how the beast had always moved around, then this was the reason why there'd been no reports of it up until now. Perhaps there had been an adventurer or two that had run into it, but they were either all dead, or had kept their silence, in no small part due to the sheer terror they may have felt.

If I weren't an Undead, and didn't have a different mentality from most humans, I could have simply stood still, unable to move, or perhaps even wet myself in fright. Such was the sheer terror I felt.

I could feel the Earth Dragon's pressure, much like sharp pinpricks on my skin, even though it was now a fair distance away. If the Earth Dragon's mana was like that of a lake, then my reserves of mana would be nothing more than a cup of water.

Given its massive size...even if I were to raise my sword against it, would my attacks feel like toothpicks pricking it? Would it even feel a thing? I didn't believe I could injure it, or do much of anything to it really.

An adventurer who could remain calm in the face of such an encounter... At the very least, they would have to be Platinum-class. There wasn't a single one of those individuals who were based on the fourth floor.

*...Sigh.*

Was my luck good today? Or was it terrible? I supposed not dying was a good thing.

I made a mental note to be more careful in the future. I really should stop putting too much confidence in my abilities, even if it were for the sake of collecting information...

*Go home, Rentt. Go home.*

I could no longer muster up the strength to do anything else today. All I wanted was to return home, tuck myself under clean sheets in a safe place, and sleep. Ah, and maybe I could get Lorraine to whip up some Hot Wine for me...  
*Yes. Let's do that, Rentt... Let's do that.*



"...An Earth Dragon, you say? I see you have had yet another outrageous encounter, Rentt. Perhaps it is safe to assume that you are being haunted by something..." Lorraine, the owner of this abode, said, exasperation and disbelief written all over her face.

After my encounter with the great beast, I'd left the Labyrinth of the New Moon behind, returning back to the world above. After selling any and all perishable monster materials to the guild, I returned home, shaking and shivering all the way.

I kept magic crystals and materials that weren't easily perishable, including the items required for the creation of Alize's weapons. I couldn't exactly grab a hammer and start refining the Mana Iron in my possession, so I'd set it aside, intending to pay Clope a visit and put in the appropriate customer order. I'd take Alize along in such an event.

Clope had his quirks, ones I was familiar with. If the individual the weapon was being forged for wasn't present, I'd surely be bombarded with questions.



“Even I’d be willing to believe that at this point. For starters, what was an Earth Dragon doing there? There was no news! No news at all from the guild. Not to mention that was only the fourth floor. Isn’t that strange?” I said, gulping down the Hot Wine that Lorraine had made for me. I was almost complaining and airing my grievances, much like any drunk adventurer at a tavern.

In truth, I wasn’t really that drunk. The Earth Dragon appearing had nothing to do with Lorraine. I had no intentions of complaining to her, of all people, but I just needed to voice my discontent, my outrage, at something. I just had to.

It was like this:

The situation I’d faced was much like that of an Ogre suddenly appearing on the first floor of the Moon’s Reflection. Or perhaps a giant horde of Goblins suddenly appearing in the streets of a relatively safe city... It was an unreasonable occurrence. No matter how much one prepared, it was simply impossible to avoid situations like that. Even if one were to escape calmly and rationally, one would first need to have the capabilities and strength of a Platinum-class adventurer, so it goes without saying that I couldn’t match that by any means at this point. It was impossible.

Perhaps it was because Lorraine understood how I felt, or because she’d seen through my drunken ramblings and simply let it slide, but she responded with an empathic smile.

“Well, Rentt. It is not impossible for a strong monster to appear on a shallow floor... But an Earth Dragon on the fourth floor is truly unreasonable. It goes beyond you simply having bad luck. However...you returned with your life intact. Should you not be grateful about that? Come now. I have made quite a few dishes for you to eat. How are they? Delicious, no?”

The table was lined with plates of food, all prepared on a much grander and luxurious scale than usual. Each of these items was made by Lorraine’s very own hands, and adequately infused with some droplets of blood so they’d taste palatable to me.

The food was truly delicious, as was the wine.

*Nom nom... Gulp...gulp.* No, wait. That wasn’t it.

“It’s delicious, but...” Was Lorraine attempting to distract me from the issue?

I looked up, looking into her eyes. She nodded curtly in response.

“Well...yes. I suppose there are some things to be concerned about.

According to what you told me, Rentt, did the Earth Dragon not disappear back into the ground...?”

“Yes. It was near what appeared to be a mining spot, like an excavation pit of some sort.”

“There, you say? I see...”

Had Lorraine been down to the fourth floor before? It sounded like she recognized the place I was describing.

“Do you know of it...? This has been bothering me for some time... Was that place created by the labyrinth to look like that, Lorraine?”

“...Not exactly, Rentt. That facility was made by the hands of man...albeit, quite a long time ago. Just like how you had ventured into the pit to excavate ore, others had done the same. Mana Iron was mined there, you see. That pit was most likely a purpose-built mine, Rentt. Perhaps dating back a few centuries, if not thousands of years.”

The discussion had greatly increased in scale. If that facility had existed that long ago...did that mean Maalt didn’t even exist back then? Was the labyrinth that ancient?

Although I’d initially planned on developing a better understanding of the labyrinth’s inner workings and its monsters, delving into history was something else altogether. While I did have some knowledge on the history of the Kingdom of Yaaran, and Maalt, anything regarding civilizations that came before lay firmly in the heads of specialized scholars.

“Take the Mana Iron we are currently talking about, for instance,” Lorraine continued. “The excavation techniques of the Dwarves shine when it comes to mining this particular material. If one desired a large quantity, it would be faster to get in touch with them, and simply buy the required amount. However, such was the case when that excavation facility was still active. If I had to guess, Rentt, Mana Iron was most likely a precious resource back then, and procuring

it was most likely very difficult. Mana Iron is still valuable today, yes, but with an increase in the amount of potential ore veins and locations one could extract it from, it is hardly as costly. If this were not the case, even if it were only the fourth floor, no civilization would purposefully build an excavation facility in a place where monsters roamed free.”

Lorraine had a point. But if that were true...

“Why, then, are the magical tools still where they lie there?”

“Are you asking about how they still remained where they were, or why they were still operational, Rentt?”

“Both, really.”

I had a hard time believing that adventurers wouldn’t just make off with the tools, given that they were valuable instruments. As for the tools themselves, it was strange for them to continue operating now that there was no longer anyone infusing mana into them. No matter how well-made the magical tool, it was all but impossible for it to continue operating indefinitely, barring some very specific exceptions.

Lorraine nodded, before calmly answering. “In truth, Rentt, the answer to both those questions is one and the same. The magical tools were simply consumed by the labyrinth; a reasonable assumption, no? As such, anyone who attempts to bring such a tool back would then find it impossible to do so, and these tools would continue operating for eternity. Not a system I understand very well at all, yes, but...that is just how it is, Rentt. There is little to be done about it.”

*Consumed by the labyrinth...*

This referred to the phenomenon of dead adventurers and monsters eventually disappearing if left alone for long enough in the labyrinths. Were magical tools susceptible to this too?

However...considering the fact that the weapons of dead adventurers occasionally appeared in treasure chests, I supposed that wasn’t too strange. But in that case...

“Were there instances of items being consumed by the labyrinth, then

reproduced as they were before...?”

I’d certainly heard of no such phenomenon.

“Ah, yes. There are, in fact, some examples, Rentt. Not many, but enough for our purposes. Have you heard the story of Good King Felt, Rentt? The king who built a city within a labyrinth?”

Good King Felt... It was a story of a king who’d left his original kingdom, leading an ethnic group of citizens who were being unfairly persecuted by the kingdom. They wandered the lands, eventually chancing upon a gigantic labyrinth, within which the Good King built a city... Or so the legend goes. The story was featured often in picture books, plays, and the like. Good King Felt was a well-known folk story character.

Of course I knew about him.

“Ah. I have. But what of it?”

“That is no mere story, Rentt. It is a historic record of events. I know of the labyrinth that he had built his city in...and there, standing to this day, is that exact same city.”

“Wh-What?!” I’d never heard of anything like that.

As if anticipating my surprise, Lorraine continued on coolly. “Yes, yes, Rentt. I know how you must feel. However, you must keep this fact to yourself, yes? That the story of Good King Felt is real. After all, the existence of this city is still treated as a huge secret in my own hometown to this day. If you value your life, Rentt, then surely you will remain silent?”

“Come on now...” I’d been suddenly told of this terrible secret, and now it sat in my mind.

“Given these facts,” Lorraine, ignoring my protests, continued on once more, “the case of the excavation facility is not all that strange, Rentt. But of course, the only one in this kingdom who would believe in such a theory is yours truly.”

“What do you mean?”

“You see, Rentt, the people of this kingdom, be it the adventurer’s guild, or the townsfolk of Maalt... All of them simply assume that the excavation facility

on the fourth floor is an oddity created by the labyrinth. But of course they would think they way. The theory of man-made magical tools installed by the hands of man being absorbed by the labyrinth and made to work forever... Hardly a popular theory, I would say. Do you believe in it, Rentt?"

I snorted slightly at Lorraine's question. But of course I believed it. Did Lorraine even have to ask such a question?

"It's almost like you're testing me with those words, Lorraine. Surely you understand as well. There's no reason to not believe what you said. If I began doubting your words, then who would I trust? Who is the individual who'd so seriously investigated and researched this body of mine, if not you yourself?"

I spoke true. I'd be hard-pressed to find anyone who'd believe a tale as tall as mine. In fact, I couldn't think of anyone other than Lorraine who'd actually conduct research sincerely regarding my...condition.

Hypothetically speaking, there'd probably be a few individuals who'd be all too eager to examine me should I show them my body and ask them to teach me its secrets. But those individuals would most likely treat me as a lab animal, a test subject, and would butcher me terribly, leaving me to wander in one research facility or other. I'd be like a caged bird for the rest of my life. At the very least, I was sure they wouldn't allow me to roam about as freely as I could now.

Lorraine smiled at my slightly heated response.

"...Yes, yes. It is as you say, Rentt. I apologize. Perhaps I, too, am a little drunk."

For a moment, it seemed like Lorraine was looking toward an unseen place far, far away. I inquired after her, concerned.

Lorraine shook her head slowly. "No, it is nothing. I was simply...reminiscing. About the time I had spent back in my homeland. After all, the people there treated me as an oddity, an irregular, no matter what I said."

"Eh?" It was extremely rare for Lorraine to speak of her past.

Her homeland... If memory served, it was the kingdom that Lorraine had lived in before she came to Yaaran. If I could recall, it was known as the land of

knowledge... Hmm, what exactly was it again?

“Your homeland... Was it the Empire of Rermutt?”

“Yes, that is it. Quite the memory you have.”

“A rural bumpkin I may be, but surely I’d remember the hometown of a dear friend. Though it is quite far, and I’ve never set foot on its lands.”

From what I’d heard, the empire occupied a large area of land, and was based somewhere in the west. In addition, the Church of Lobelia had quite the presence in the empire...

But of course, I’d heard all this from Lorraine.

The Kingdom of Yaaran, being a small kingdom in the east, hardly felt the influence of the empire. Perhaps it was more accurate to say that the Empire of Rermutt simply had no interest in a small, boring kingdom like Yaaran. Yaaran wasn’t even really known for any notable exports. The empire had nothing to gain by conquering this place...

That was what I thought, having lived for most of my life in this kingdom myself.

If the Empire of Rermutt ever did invade Yaaran, it would be after Yaaran itself had been absorbed into some other, bigger kingdom. After all, Yaaran was a boring, rural kingdom...and that was all it was.

I felt sad just thinking of that. It wasn’t *that* bad a kingdom, all things considered! Though, many other aspects of Yaaran did leave much to be desired...

Unaware of my inner monologues, Lorraine pressed on.

“Unlike the Kingdom of Yaaran, the flow of time almost seemed faster in that place. Now that I think of it...it was truly a tiring existence. Its citizens would work hard every day, kicking their competition to the side, or using them as stepping-stones on their way to the top. The empire was filled with such individuals. Considering that the empire and its citizens were reasonably prosperous, I suppose I cannot fault their approach..but it was a good example of a lack of moderation, if nothing else.”

“Is that why you came here?”

Lorraine seemed to freeze up slightly at my question, but eventually nodded.

“That was one of the bigger reasons, yes. Perhaps I could say I was simply searching for some peace... But enough of that. I lived quite the different life back in the empire than the one I do now, you see. I was quite the academic elite. If I felt really up to it, I could easily aim for the seat of chancellor at Rermutt’s First University.”

I tilted my head at the unfamiliar noun. A mouthful, for a country bumpkin such as myself.

“...What is this...Rermutt First University?”

“Ah. My alma mater, I suppose. A castle of knowledge, and one of the most prestigious in the empire. However, anyone could enroll so long as they worked hard. Not too impressive from that angle, yes... The seat of Chancellor was one that was most desired among the empire’s academics—well, one of them, anyway. I, too, was no exception. I had attempted to obtain that very same seat for myself. Many things happened, and I had quite a few achievements under my belt. However...there were quite a few individuals who got in my way, for the purposes of obstructing my research of course. I had laid out some truths, yes, in ways anyone could understand. However, those individuals denied whatever I said with all their might.

“Do you understand, Rentt? Suppose that there is an orange before you. I claim that it is an orange, yes? But then someone comes along and says it is an apple. Before long, another will claim that it is a loaf of bread...and the naysayers simply continue to multiply. Soon enough, I would be seen as the one in the wrong, as far as public perception would go anyway. Even so, no matter how I looked at it, the object before me was none other than an orange. One could lose their mind thinking about all this.”

“That’s...”

It was all too familiar of a tale. At least, I understood that much of human subtleties to understand it.

In other words, there were people who were discontent with the pace at

which Lorraine was rising to the top, and quite many of them at that. Although one couldn't discount the possibility that the person in question sincerely didn't believe that they were looking at an orange, in this case it was obvious they were trying to prevent Lorraine from reaching her goal.

*What a terrible series of events*, I thought...and perhaps this showed on my face, for Lorraine chuckled softly in response.

"Well...I suppose I was bad at dealing with people back then. I was just a child. Perhaps I would be able to react better as I am now... I would think so anyway. Now that I've thought back upon it, it was not too terrible of a place, you know. Though it was still a trying place to be... I was tired about so many things, which is why I came here. Suddenly, and out of the blue... Somehow, it just happened that way."

"...Was that not reckless of you, Lorraine? From what I heard, it seemed like you were in charge of some important work."

"And so it was, yes. However...if I had not done so, I would have surely lost some degree of my sanity. I wanted to say goodbye to those days, to that boredom and the constant feeling of irritation that plagued me. Honestly speaking, I felt a sense of release after coming here. It was a sort of mental stimulation I had not felt in such a long time, and I was excited. It was good that I came to Maalt, yes... And, of course, this was where I met you."

While I'd known all this time that Lorraine was a scholar from Remrutt, who'd come all the way to Maalt because she got sick of her previous life, this was the first time I heard about it in such detail.

I'd never really believed Lorraine's tale about how she was just some second-rate scholar from Rermutt, reassigned to Yaaran without any title to show for it. I'd known her for over a decade now and bore witness to her academic and technical prowess firsthand.

I'd discussed the possibility of Lorraine becoming a court scholar in Yaaran before, just with a little bit more effort of course. Lorraine, however, was never too keen or pleased with that prospect, and I eventually stopped bringing it up altogether. I supposed Lorraine had no interest in factional infighting and politics...but I never imagined that she came from such circumstances.



Even so...I now greatly preferred that Lorraine remained here instead. After all, she'd helped me countless times and was my closest friend in the township of Maalt.

*No matter one's past, all one had to do was enjoy their days from here on out.*

For some reason, this was what I thought as I finished the rest of my meal.



The next day...

Plans were in place for me to meet the auctioneer staff at the Stheno Trading Company. The subject of our discussion was none other than the issue of the Tarasque materials. To think that the items would sell for several times their estimated auction value... I found myself looking forward to this.

The problem was the issue of the buyer. What kind of person were they...? The rich and powerful often had certain discriminatory views. In fact, many of them were quite strange, and this realization caused some degree of fear to creep into my being.

Perhaps they would be an idiosyncratic, whimsical person, much like Laura was. But that didn't seem very possible... Laura was, after all, a bit of an exception.

Then there was the issue of evaluating the materials I had collected yesterday. I had to show them all to Lorraine for a once-over since it was impossible for me to gauge if those materials were acceptable just by looking at them. They were most likely quite all right, is what I thought.

The reason I had put this off for a day was because I'd returned very late the night before. Then there was the sheer amount of materials I'd brought back to consider, as well...

"Ah. Already awake, Rentt?" Lorraine asked as she entered the living room, leaving her bedroom behind.

She wasn't in her pajamas, though. Lorraine had already changed, and she now looked like how she always did, in her mage-like attire.

I could never really grasp if Lorraine was a morning person or not. But

thinking about it, the only times she was sleepy was when she burned the midnight oil, working on some experiment or research document. I suppose Lorraine was a morning person in that case.

“Yes. The amount of time I spend sleeping has shortened drastically ever since I’ve become an Undead. In fact, as a Ghoul, I hardly slept at all.”

“You do sleep a bit now, no? To think that you now require sleep after going through Existential Evolution... Quite interesting. Perhaps you are now closer than ever to becoming human again, Rentt.”

“I’d be glad if that were the case...”

There was no way of knowing for certain, though. I was capable of sleeping as and when I desired, and could wake up whenever I felt like I should. I hadn’t actually tried it, but I felt like that was very well within my capabilities.

“Becoming more human is one thing, but to have your sleep shortened...I am envious, Rentt. Too many a time have I been ambushed by sleep just when I had gotten to the best part of an experiment... Alas. I suppose it is simply a necessity of mankind.”

“Ever the scholar, I see. But I like sleeping. I’d love to return to a body in which I could sleep well again. I can only sleep lightly now, and I only do it because this body requires it. It’s hardly enjoyable...”

Even so, the fact remained that I was capable of sleep, and I ended up sleeping one way or another. It was difficult to break free from an ingrained habit.

While becoming an Undead brought with it many advantages, I noticed that I’d also lost quite a few things. The capability to enjoy a good night’s rest was one of them.

“An interesting topic, in many ways. But we should set that aside for now. You were going to show me the materials, yes? And of course, the Mana Iron has to be refined as well,” Lorraine said, interrupting the conversation.

It was a conversation we could have anytime, so I supposed she was right to hold off on it for now. We were somewhat short on time.

It wasn't simply about showing Lorraine the materials on hand. Lorraine had to go through the trouble of extracting the Mana Iron, forming the metal into ingots via alchemy. What I'd extracted were rocks containing veins of Mana Iron within, not refined ingots. The ore that I'd harvested was high in purity, but it wasn't something that could be used immediately without any processing.

I could bring the ore to the Blacksmith's Guild, but that would cost me a fair amount of coin. While I'd excavated the ore myself with the aim of saving some money, unexpected expenses crept up at every corner. Honestly speaking, while part of going on this excavation trip was out of consideration for my disciple, Alize, spending some coin on creating the weapon was fine. However, since Lorraine was capable of refining the ore as well, I decided to simply leave it to her expertise. I could just pay Lorraine any fees that may occur. Knowing her, though, she'd most likely refuse payment for something so simple.

"Yes, but it's by no means a huge amount..."

Saying so, I placed each of the materials onto the table.

This was Lorraine's experimental table, which was wider and larger than her dining table. There was more than enough space for me to lay out the spoils. But I wasn't going to just dump everything on the table. For now, the magic crystals and Mana Iron ore would do. I'd have to pull out the lumber collected from the Ents one by one as there were quite many, and they were large pieces as well. Although Jyulapus Ents were commonly the size of shrubs, stacking piece after piece of lumber on the table would quickly get unwieldy.

"Quite a few pieces here and there, eh, Rentt? Hmm... This is an Orc Soldier's magic crystal, I suppose?"

As expected of Lorraine, she was able to tell which monster it came from by size alone.

While magic crystals had quite a few distinctive characteristics, including color and shape, to be able to identify the monster it came from just by looking at a crystal was surprisingly difficult to do. At the very least, I couldn't do it.

The quality of a crystal was easy to discern at a glance. This was an important fact, considering quality was often linked to price. The ability to tell if a crystal was worth much at all was what truly defined one as an adventurer. Those who

were able to precisely identify a crystal, however, were in another class altogether. The dissection chambers staff, or hobbyists who loved to collect crystals... And Lorraine, of course. These people had an almost encyclopedic knowledge of magic crystals.

“Yes. This one came from the second floor.”

“The second floor, Rentt? Ho... Then perhaps a flood is imminent, yes? Rare monsters appear in such events...and I do look forward to it, but...”

“You shouldn’t be enjoying floods at all, Lorraine. It’d be best if it didn’t happen in the first place.”

Even so, floods weren’t too dangerous so long as the adequate preparations were made. If the flood were severe, it was very possible for it to wipe out nearby towns and cities, but such occurrences were rare.

“True, yes, but no matter how much one struggles, floods are bound to happen. In which case, would it not be more advantageous to enjoy them?”

“Well... I suppose. If you put it that way.”

“Ah, yes, as for the Mana Iron... Hmm. As expected, Rentt. This is some good-quality ore... Hmm? This is...?”

Lorraine raised up a piece of ore she held in her hand. She stared at it for a while, saying nothing.

“What is it, Lorraine?” I asked as she continued inspecting the piece.

“Do you not see the difference in color, Rentt?”

As she said, there were traces of yellow in the Mana Iron ore piece. Mana Iron was, from what I knew, usually more purplish in color. Why, then, were there traces of yellow in this rock? How mysterious...

“Could you explain?”

“If I had to guess... You excavated this where the Earth Dragon was, yes? Most likely, the mana of that creature has changed the characteristics of the metal within. After all, Mana Iron is highly sensitive to mana, even without any refinement. Even so...such a pronounced example is somewhat rare, for all intents and purposes...”

“Do you mean to say it’s no longer usable as Mana Iron, Lorraine...?”

If that really were the case, I’d have wasted my entire excavation trip. To think I’d given it my all, shaking as I ran home all the way after escaping from the Earth Dragon... Now they were all unusable? This was too much.

Lorraine, however, quickly assuaged my fears.

“Not to worry, Rentt. To begin with, there are quite a few pieces in here that have not been affected. If you ever need Mana Iron in the future, we could simply draw from this supply. However, the affected pieces...”

“Are they defective after all?”

“Nothing like that, Rentt. In fact, it is quite the opposite. Mana Iron that has been altered by an Earth Dragon’s mana... This type of material would easily fetch a large sum of coin. You could even smelt weapons or equipment from it. Magical tools, even. Perhaps they might even come with a special effect or two.”

“A...special effect, you say?”

Lorraine nodded, providing her answer. “I cannot be absolutely sure that this piece in my hands would have the same effect, but... Say, a sword forged of enchanted ore like this could very well summon spears of rock and earth without expending the user’s mana. In other words, this ore could be used to smelt enchanted swords, armor...even magical tools of the same vein. The possibility is somewhat high.”

Enchanted swords and armor... Basically, equipment that had been enchanted with strong magic. They would be special pieces of equipment. They were exceedingly rare, and if one were to purchase them, one would best prepare for several platinum pieces to disappear from one’s wallet.

However, with all that said, there were actually quite a few individuals who used such weapons. They were either very skilled, or very wealthy. A second-rate adventurer much like myself would usually have nothing to do with items like that. If I were to ever wield such an item, it’d be after slaving away at numerous requests, saving up a large sum of coin. Or perhaps I’d increase my adventurer rank, become famous, and receive it as a reward from a client. Oh,

or perhaps I'd be lucky, and find one in a chest in a labyrinth.

To actually craft such a weapon, however...

I suppose there was some value in having run into the Earth Dragon after all, despite the ever-looming terror of death.

There was a problem, however. Crafting with such material was no doubt incredibly expensive... There was no way I could come up with such funds. Would I have enough after selling the Tarasque materials?

I could discuss all this with Clope at the smithy, but even so, I couldn't ask for too much of a discount. Hard work and skill should be compensated in kind.

Until I had enough coin to smelt it, this ore would just be sitting here in the meantime. I made a mental note to at least discuss this with Clope later.

"...I suppose this goes without saying, but this enchanted ore can't be used as a base for Alize's weapon, right?"

"Perhaps somewhere down the road, Rentt. I, however, would not recommend you gifting something like this to her right away. It would not do Alize any good, from an educational standpoint. If she were to wield a strong weapon, a weapon much more capable than her, from the get-go...she may very well form misconceived notions about her own capabilities."

I supposed that was true. However, even if I were to hypothetically create enchanted equipment from this ore, I didn't feel like I was capable of using such powerful equipment at this point in time. Perhaps I'd be worthy of such a weapon if I got just a little bit stronger... But of course, I still wasn't quite there. In that case, the idea of an enchanted weapon would have to be shelved for a while.

But...if I saved up enough money, I'd very much like to craft such a weapon. I really wanted to swing it around as well.

*...To prevent Alize from becoming an adventurer with such bad perspectives, it was prudent that her first weapon not be forged from such a material, I thought.*

"Well, then... I'll discuss this with Clope later. Now, for the remaining

ingredients. I collected quite a few types of lumber from the Jyulapus Ents... Would these do as materials for the wands?"

I arranged the magic crystals and ore neatly on one side of the table before placing down the pieces of wood I'd gathered from the Ents. I didn't take out everything, of course, but a bit of a sample from each. These were fragments that had splintered off during the battle. I arranged the fragments on the table, deciding to take out the actual pieces later.

Lorraine glanced at the samples on the table before turning to me. "Birch, fir, and...ebony. I see. I had thought you would bring back some strange lumber or another, but I see you have unexpectedly returned with useful materials."

I'd been praised for my efforts.

Actually...was that praise at all? It was almost as if Lorraine had expected the worst, for some reason or other...

"What do you mean by 'strange lumber'...?"

"Lumber that was not strong enough, or was difficult to work with. I assumed that may happen. My fault, yes, for not warning you beforehand about them. What you have brought me this time isn't bad at all. However, ebony may be a little too heavy for someone of Alize's stature. Birch or fir will suffice for our purposes."

Come to think of it, the ebony Jyulapus Ent was somewhat heavier than the other two. While I didn't have to exert much strength to place the materials into my magical pouch, each of its blows in combat carried with it a certain sense of weight.

*...Hmm?*

"Was ebony a bad choice for a wand then...?"

"To some extent, yes. However, it would actually be a good fit for you. After all, you have the strength for it. And you most likely swing your weapons with considerable force. Ebony is a relatively strong material, so that alone would not break it. A good fit for you indeed. But it is a difficult material to work with... It will be a challenge, Rentt!" Lorraine said, with a somewhat mischievous smile on her face.

...Well. I did collect this lumber myself, after all. I supposed I could have her shoulder the responsibility in this particular case.

“And the magic crystal...?”

“Spoiled for choice, yes? Do not hesitate too much, Rentt. Simply pick the color you like. I will have Alize do the same when she crafts hers.”

The crystals I could use for the wand were either that of the Mina Goblins, Orc Soldier, or Terra Drake. Other than those crystals, all the others were harvested from the first or second floors. Lorraine had specified that only one from the third floor or below would work.

“I wanted to ask... Is the magic crystal of a Goblin or Slime simply unusable in wands?”

“I would not say so, Rentt. It is not impossible by any means... But there would certainly be issues with the amplification and control of mana, among other things. Alize, in particular, has large reserves of mana within her. If such simple crystals were used, some basic spells from Alize would almost certainly cause it to crack.”

“...Unable to contain her mana, I suppose.”

“You could say that, yes. However, if one has been utilizing mana for a long time, moderation of one’s own mana flow is possible. Even a wand made with such a weak crystal could last quite a while in that case. It goes without saying that Alize hardly has the required experience. Hence, it is impossible.”

Now I understood. As it was a wand that was to be regularly used in practice, it’d be a big problem if it continuously broke. Considerable effort was required, and another wand would have to be made, should such a thing happen.

While I’d heard stories of mages breaking multiple wands while learning how to craft them, magic crystals on cracked wands often exploded when used, and were quite the hazard. There was no need to go out of one’s way to court such danger.

“With that being the case, Rentt, may I take all these magic crystals?”

I nodded. I’d gathered all these for the lesson, after all. While the



responsibility for gathering the required materials for the lesson originally laid with the teacher—in this case, Lorraine—she'd offered to pay me for my field work.

I, however, refused to accept any payment. To begin with, I was paying both Alize's and my own lesson fees. If anything, I was deeper in debt to Lorraine.

Lorraine was, of course, a most capable mage. Under normal circumstances, it was impossible to receive such tuition without paying a large sum up front.

However, I couldn't simply accept a monetary reward for my efforts. Lorraine did protest at my decision, saying I should take what was given. Even so, I insisted on not taking any payment.

Lorraine was insistent on me receiving some coin for my efforts, but I was insistent in my refusal as well. We should probably just give each other some leeway in that case and not charge for services in both ways. I had no intentions of simply mooching off Lorraine's goodwill.

In reality, however, I felt like I had already done plenty of that...

After our short discussion about payment, Lorraine continued.

"Well, then, next is the refinement of the Mana Iron ore."

Ore refinement...

There were quite a few ways to go about doing it. For instance, the blacksmith's guild often housed magical tools for this purpose—the large-scale refinement of ore. This was probably the most well-known method. There were older, more primitive methods that didn't rely on magecraft or magical tools, but they were more expensive, and also took much more time.

In border settlements, small-scale refinement operations were often present. Larger ones were somewhat rare. Yaaran was a rural border kingdom, so I could very well find a small-scale ore refining operation in a mountain village somewhere, though I wasn't sure if I'd ever have the opportunity.

As such, most ore was refined with the aid of magical tools. However, there was yet another way to go about it:

Alchemy.

Strictly speaking, refining ore with magical tools was considered alchemical in nature as well. After all, those tools were made with alchemy. It was, however, possible to control one's mana to perform the refinement without specialized tools. This was the very same method that Lorraine was going to utilize.

Alchemy was by no means restricted to mages alone. There did exist alchemists who weren't mages. But having some degree of control over one's mana made research in the alchemical arts all the easier. If one lacked this control, they'd have to use certain magic crystals, or specialized mana-moderating magical tools. It was all quite troublesome.

Lorraine, being the skilled mage she was, was capable of performing the refinement process with only one hand, and perhaps an eye closed. In fact, that was exactly what Lorraine was currently doing. Her hands were placed on some pieces of Mana Iron ore on the table.

"Well, then. Without further ado..." Saying so, Lorraine concentrated. The process had begun.

I couldn't understand it, given that I couldn't even see where Lorraine's mana was currently being focused. But the ore soon reacted to her mana and gave off a faint, purplish glow. Soon after, its form began changing. The glowing parts of the ore seemingly dissolved, becoming a glowing liquid. That was most likely the purified Mana Iron.

Like a series of snakes, the veins of Mana Iron began peeling away from the rock.

*Cling. Clang.* Soft clattering could be heard as small fragments of impurities flew out of the liquefied Mana Iron. The purified Mana Iron snaked and flowed, slowly gathering into a puddle on the table. The puddle then grew, and it became a large, metallic piece.

"...Hmm. I suppose this is all," Lorraine said, grasping a rectangular piece of purple metal as it floated in the air.

"You're done?" I asked.

"Yes, Rentt, it is finished. Quite well done, if I do say so myself. I am not one to toot my own horn, but most alchemists are not capable of creating an ingot

of such high purity, I'd wager."

With that, Lorraine extended her arm, handing the Mana Iron ingot over to me. I stared at it. Despite Lorraine's joke about being overconfident in her work, the ingot was, in fact, very well made. I couldn't say with certainty exactly how refined an ingot was once it reached a certain point, but a single glance was enough for me to know that the piece I was holding had a much higher point of purity compared to one obtained from, say, the blacksmith's guild.

But of course, the latter was a mass-produced product, whereas the ingot I held in my hands wasn't. The methodology employed was different as well. Considering the fact that a smelter usually improved upon the quality of ingots after receiving them from the guild, it was simply impossible to compare the two.

The piece I held in my hands was of a much higher quality. All in all, Lorraine had done more than well enough on her task.

"I may as well deal with all the other pieces as well. Would you prefer that, Rentt?" Lorraine asked. I nodded in response, emptying out all the Mana Iron ore pieces in my bag onto the table.

"Ah... Some of the enchanted pieces are in here as well. I'll split them up. Other than the yellowed pieces, should I just gather all the rest?"

"Ah, yes, the enchanted ore. While there would be some pieces with alterations on the inside, I will deal with that during the process. I could do all of it at once, but it is indeed tiring. Splitting them up would be the wiser choice here."

It seemed that Lorraine was more than capable of purifying both the normal Mana Iron and the ore that had been enchanted with the Earth Dragon's mana. This was apparently more mana-intensive, however, so I set about separating them.

From what Lorraine had said, the chance of failure was much higher should the two be mixed together. A trace amount wouldn't take too much effort to remove, though. With that in mind, I neatly organized the ore pieces at hand.

"So many..."

Lorraine wasn't referring to the amount of Mana Iron on the table, but to the enchanted ore that had been tinted with the Earth Dragon's mana. About a third of the pieces were that way. From what I could see, quite a few ingots could be created.

"Are you sure this Earth Dragon of yours did not simply release a wave of mana into its surroundings? Normal adventurers would most likely have passed out had they been present..." Lorraine said, ever so casually stating a terrifying fact.

It may very well have been due to this body of mine that I didn't suffer any ill effects. A normal adventurer wouldn't have died had they been present, but they could have been attacked by monsters in the vicinity after passing out, which would eventually lead to their deaths.

"No point dallying, yes?"

Lorraine placed her hands over the pile of normal Mana Iron and began focusing once more. Her progress was much faster this time around. Perhaps she'd developed a better understanding of the metal's structure.

Ingot after ingot piled up on the table.

"...All right, then. This is all we get," Lorraine said, about half an hour after the purification process had started.

She was incredibly fast. The average alchemist, in comparison, would take a full day to do what Lorraine just did before my eyes.

"Next would be...this."

Lorraine placed her hands over the enchanted ore. I could sense her concentrating as the ore began responding.

"Will you be all right, Lorraine...?"

I couldn't help but be worried. The sheer speed at which she worked was somewhat intimidating.

"Ha. This is nothing..." Lorraine said as ingots began piling up once more.

Unlike the purple Mana Iron ingots that I was now used to seeing, these new ingots were yellow. They were yellow, but they were also more pure in

appearance. While their glow was somewhat faint, I could feel a certain sense of pressure—an aura that was absent from the normal Mana Iron ingots. Was it just my imagination?

“All right, then. I suppose we are done,” Lorraine said after ten minutes, a significant decrease from the batch before. Even so, her work was perfect, as far as I could tell.

“As expected of you, Lorraine. But for you to do all this for free... I feel guilty.”

I would’ve expected to spend at least one gold coin if I’d gone to an average alchemist. It’d take them a day to do this, and the purity of the ore meant that a large amount of mana was required for the job.

Lorraine just shook her head.

“Should I be feeling guilty for the fact that I am researching a unique existence in the world then, Rentt? One that could not be found anywhere else? Surely such an experience would be worth a thousand pieces of gold coins, if not more. After all, it is very much possible to find an alchemist who is capable of doing what I just did, but impossible to find a being such as yourself. Don’t worry too much about it, Rentt.”

Was I the only one of my kind? At the very least, I hadn’t met anyone else who was quite like me, and neither had Lorraine. The prerequisite of being eaten whole by a dragon was quite the tall barrier to entry in and of itself...

“Well, then, I suppose we could consider this a fair exchange of services?”

Lorraine nodded at my suggestion, and that was that.

# Chapter 3: The Stheno Trading Company

“Well, then. Go forth cautiously, Rentt. You know how merchants are, yes? They cover all their bases,” Lorraine said, glancing at me.

“Yes. I think I understand that very well...”

I had done this several times in life—obtaining a valuable item of some kind and speaking to a merchant from a large company about it, that is. At least, I had assumed that was Lorraine’s intent. But she shook her head.

“It is different from how things were before, Rentt. As you are now, your body is in and of itself a valuable item. Have your wits about you...as if you were walking around with, say, a hundred platinum pieces.”

Hmm... Lorraine had a point. While most would either attempt to capture or slay a vampire should one appear before them, merchants would certainly go for the former. The adventurers they hired as bodyguards were often extremely capable as well. It’d be most troublesome if they were summoned.

I steeled myself. I had to be very careful.

...Not that I was going to be careless in the first place. I just had to be that extra bit more cautious.

“I understand. Well, then, I’ll be going now.”

With that, and a casual wave, I left Lorraine’s abode behind, walking out onto the streets of Maalt.



Located on a busy road, and in a relatively conspicuous location, was the main building of the Stheno Trading Company. It was what I would have expected from one of Maalt’s top merchant companies, as the building itself was quite large.

It was a brick and stone affair, five floors tall. The first two floors housed shops and the like, while the upper levels housed the company’s administrative

centers and warehouses. Judging by the consistent flow of individuals in and out of its doors, it was plain to see the company had no shortage of customers. It sold everything from daily grocery goods, to tools for adventurers, and a little bit of everything else. The selection was colorful, to say the least.

Among these customers near the entrance of the store was none other than myself, though most of them weren't masked and robed like me. Some had robes or masks on, yes, but I failed to spot another customer with a mask that stood out as much as my skull-shaped one.

Most of these masked customers were victims of burns or scars, so their masks were used as a means of obscuring their injuries. From these customers in particular I felt gazes of what felt like pity. I'd heard in the past that individuals with particularly large and ornate masks were respected in this strange way.

Even so, while there were some individuals with fancy masks, they usually had an equally fanciful outfit to boot. Someone such as myself, with an ornate mask and a relatively simple robe instead stood out more, like a sore thumb.

But I couldn't just stand here and do nothing. I was now at the entrance to the Stheno Trading Company's main building. Should I enter as is? Due to the fact that I usually operated late at night or early in the mornings—or at least in the less crowded hours of the afternoon—standing in the thick of such crowds was new to me. It was somewhat nostalgic, but I found myself nervous, wondering if I should change my attire. Perhaps this place unsettled me more deeply than my encounter with the Earth Dragon...

Bah. That was an exaggeration. *I had stood up to such a beast! Why would you be terrified of a normal crowd of people, Rentt?*

With that, I walked straight into the entrance, and through the doors.

"Welcome, welcome, dear customer! What may I assist you with today?"

A voice called out to me as soon as I had stepped through those very doors. Soon enough, a lanky man had approached me. There was a sense of professionalism about him. While he wasn't running, I could tell from the cadence of his steps that he was an adventurer.

As expected of a large, flagship store... Even its employees were something else.

Average stores were different; one could enter and leave as they pleased. Honestly, I preferred such stores, but if one desired items of a certain refinement and quality, a store such as this was much more reliable.

There was a reassuring presence about the man. It almost felt like one could leave their entire shopping list to him, and he'd select only the most fitting items for the purpose. Such an establishment could, of course, sell someone everything they didn't need. But then again, an establishment of this level most likely understood that doing such a thing would simply serve to thin their consumer base.

"Ah... Hmm. Ahem. Yes. I am known as Rentt Vivie. I was the one who had slain a Tarasque prior..."

Upon hearing my name, the man appeared convinced, but quickly cut me off mid-sentence.

"I have been informed of your arrival, sir. Please, this way," the staff member said, leading me to the back of store.

This area was no longer part of the sales floor, but instead a landing for an elevator of sorts, presumably one that we'd take to the administrative offices of the building.

"I haven't been to this establishment for a while. To think that something like this now exists here..." I said, looking at the elevator in surprise.

"Ah, yes. We've recently received and installed this contraption, you see. It was built by artisans—craftsmen of magical tools from the capital. Only this particular store in Maalt has such an installation. But...you *have* been to the store before, sir? Do excuse me, but how long has it been since your last visit...?"

Craftsmen of magical tools from the capital, huh...

I'd read about elevators in one of Lorraine's tomes before, but this was the first time I was seeing one in the flesh. From what I could recall, these machines were created by techniques from the western lands. At one point, I'd wondered



when Yaaran would adopt such technologies, but it seemed like it had already done so.

If there was an elevator in a border town like Maalt, would that mean there were many such machines in the capital, then? Hmm... Given that they could only be created by certain craftsmen, I supposed they weren't all that common. A show of power from this particular establishment perhaps? A declaration of wealth?

More importantly, this staff member was now asking about my last visit. Was he able to recall the faces of all his customers?

Well, I could have very well spoken with another staff member instead of this particular man and still be asked the same. I just didn't remember too well. Perhaps it was a requirement of this particular establishment, for staff to remember their customers.

Even so, this was a particularly troublesome question for me. I had to quickly come up with some excuse.

"When was it indeed... Perhaps it was another store instead of this one. If I recall, I visited with the intent of purchasing Maalt Hoonoki leaves..."

"Ah, in that case, kind sir, you'd most likely be referring to the Witta Trading Company. That particular establishment stocks many items geared toward adventurers. Items of a respectable quality too. Of course, our store will serve your needs equally well, if not better."

As the man said, Maalt Hoonoki leaves were only sold by the Witta Trading Company. Stheno didn't carry them. But of course, that was only an excuse on my part. The staff member, however, seemed convinced, a relief for me.

On another note, those leaves weren't exactly an item that flew off the shelves. It was largely up to the store if they offered it for sale to begin with. It was a bit of a necessity to us adventurers, however, and the Witta Trading Company had been stocking them since times of old. Due to the strong association between item and store, other shops didn't often carry them, if at all.

Since these plants grew abundantly around Maalt, it was easy enough for

Stheno's staff to sell them, but given that most adventurers simply bought them from Witta, there wasn't much point. There were many other products that brought customers to their door.

Honestly, they had enough customers as is. It was hardly a problem for the Stheno Trading Company.

"...We have arrived, sir. This is the fifth floor of our store. The meeting room is this way, if you would," the man said, guiding me once again as we stepped out of the elevator.

Finally, we stopped outside a set of double wooden doors—relatively expensive-looking doors at that.

Well, not so much expensive-looking. The doors themselves were probably worth quite the sum in coin. They were adorned with intricate, ornate carvings, and the knobs seemed to be made of solid silver. Was it this fanciful because it was a meeting room, or was the company simply that well-off...?

Whatever the case...

"Please, this way."

With a click, the knob turned, and the doors opened. I stepped through the doors as instructed, and the man soon closed the doors behind me after entering himself.

"Do make yourself comfortable, sir," the staff member said, ushering me toward a plush-looking sofa. He soon fetched an elaborate tea set from a shelf in the room, which exuded an air of elegance and a warm, gentle fragrance.

"Black tea, sir. Brewed with the best leaves our establishment has to offer. If you'd like, here are some other offerings that pair well with the tea. Now, if you'll excuse me, kind sir, I shall fetch my master. Please, make yourself comfortable during this time."

Saying so, the man bowed deeply, quietly leaving the room.

"Hmm... Delicious. These little snacks here, too..."

Momentarily lost in the delectable world of snacks and tea tidbits, I was unceremoniously surprised by a few loud knocks on the door. Panicking, I

quickly placed the teacup back on its saucer, did what I could to calm myself, and responded in a cautious voice.

“...Please enter.”



“Do excuse me then...”

With that, a large, round-bellied man entered the room. His clothing was vibrant, with colors fitting of a merchant. His entire being and presence announced that he was an individual of particular import. If I had to guess, this was none other than the head of the Stheno Trading Company.

Or, was my guess incorrect...? Fortunately, my assumptions were soon proven.

“So, you are the adventurer who slayed that Tarasque... Sir Rentt Vivie, correct? I do apologize for requesting your presence in such a sudden and brusque manner. I am the head of the Stheno Trading Company, Sharl Stheno. With regards to these developments...I do express my sincerest apologies. If you’d like, sir, we intend to offer you discounts at our establishment, along with other means of compensation and benefits that may be of use to you...” With that, Sharl Stheno bowed his head.



Even I felt somewhat bad at suddenly having been offered so many beneficial conditions right from the get-go. I was suspicious, however. Was there something else about this arrangement that I didn't know of...?

Under normal circumstances, concessions like these were usually given during negotiations on price and the like; at least, that was how it was when I'd sold rare items to various merchant companies in the past. And yet...

Were the Tarasque materials simply that respectable? Or did the individual who desired the materials simply wield that much power? Whatever the case, I couldn't let my guard down here. It was a rather exasperating thought.

I reshaped my mask so the bottom half of my face showed. Without allowing my true emotions to come to the surface, I instead laughed, addressing the merchant casually.

"Bronze-class adventurer, Rentt Vivie, at your service. Also, about the current state of affairs... There's no need for all that really. After all, I was the one who decided to show up here today. To think the Tarasque I'd worked so hard to slay would now be sold for several times the estimated auction value... Honestly, no adventurer wouldn't be pleased at this. In fact, I was so happy that I skipped all the way here to your establishment today."

The merchant laughed upon hearing the tail end of my statement.

"An unexpectedly casual person you are, Sir Rentt. Quite different from what the rumors say. They painted you as a more, how you say...rigid person."

That was a statement I couldn't ignore. Just how far had the rumors about me spread? I decided to pursue this line of inquiry.

"Rumors, you say? What kind? To be frank, I don't really have much of a good sense of these things, you see. What other people think of me and such..."

Perhaps I'd have been well known as Rentt Faina, but as I was now...

The amount of people I interacted with had significantly decreased. Other than Lorraine, Clope, and some others, I had almost no interactions with normal adventurers. Maybe I'd picked up an object or two that adventurers dropped and returned it to them. The conversation wouldn't be particularly deep in that

case.

It wasn't that I didn't want to speak to them, but there was the ever-present danger of my secret being discovered had I lingered. Sharl, on the other hand...

"Hmmm... Sir Rentt. As a merchant, revealing one's sources is really not respectable behavior, but this specific incident had been entirely brought about by us. I had mentioned concessions before, correct? I shall deliver upon them. Well...to start..."

Oh. What an unexpectedly empathetic merchant...

"Where to begin?" Sharl continued. "Honestly speaking, Sir Rentt, it was surprisingly difficult to gather information about you. We did know you were an adventurer—that much was simple. But we didn't know what sort of individual you were. However, and I didn't agree with this, good sir, the voices of the masses describe you as 'a most fearsome individual'..."

"Whatever do you mean by that?"

"Although you are a Bronze-class adventurer, you hardly speak to anyone. Perhaps, then, you could just be a reserved individual who doesn't care much for others? However, other adventurers who have witnessed your movements and behavior in the labyrinths didn't see the skill of a Bronze-class adventurer, but something more."

I see... The occasional adventurer I'd cross paths with... I supposed some had passed me, too, when I was locked in combat. It was one of the labyrinth's rules to not involve oneself with someone you didn't know. But even then, there was nothing to stop an adventurer from sneakily observing another. Depending on the situation, an adventurer may even *openly* observe another's battles. It wasn't a polite thing to do, but it was by no means prohibited. Most adventurers didn't pay it much heed as long as the spectator didn't get in their way.

Sharl must have obtained his information in such a fashion by speaking to the adventurers I'd crossed paths with somewhere along the way.

But...reserved and didn't care much about others? I didn't speak very much...other than to Sheila at the guild at least. Then there was Dario at the

dissection chambers, though he was the one in charge there, and I didn't really speak with anyone else...

Hmm... Did I seem like an individual without any friends?

In truth, I really didn't have any. If I had to point at someone and declare that they were my friend... Well, there was Lorraine.

I shouldn't be thinking too deeply about it. I could already feel myself getting lonely.

It was true, however, that I had many friends in life.

"It seems you're giving much praise! Though I'm no one that noteworthy. After all, there are many others who are on my same level..."

I wasn't being humble here. Honestly speaking, if I had to estimate my own capabilities, perhaps I'd be a lower Silver-class adventurer, or at least somewhere around there? While I did have quite a few aces up my sleeve, and occasionally displayed explosive bursts of potential, that wasn't quite the case under normal circumstances in my day-to-day.

If anything, the gulf between Rentt Faina and myself was suitably large. I also had the firm belief that I'd become stronger from here on out. It was a good thing.

Sharl nodded at my words. "I'd heard such rumors as well. I've also heard that you are very efficient, Sir Rentt. You're not only strong, but you don't leave any openings for your foes. You don't fight losing battles, or so they say... And that the aura of fixation... Determination, I suppose? It seems almost...inhuman. Not that I understand the last point very well myself, Sir Rentt..."

Not fighting losing battles... I did escape if it looked like things were about to take a turn for the worse. Strangely, that seemed to be held in high regard.

As for the determination... Did I really come across that way? Hmm. I did want to try my hardest and give it my all, but I had no intentions of releasing this strange...aura? At all.

As for the comment on me seeming inhuman... Well. I wasn't human to begin with—not that I could say that, of course. Though I'd momentarily wondered if I

could test Sharl with such a statement, just to see his reaction. If I did that, however, my life in human society would instantly end. Even if it were something brought up in jest, to be taken lightly... I couldn't be that flippant.

"Hmm... So basically, the masses see me as a coward and dangerous individual? Something along those lines? It seems like I have no noteworthy traits then."

"Why would you interpret it in such a way, Sir Rentt...? Whatever the case...perhaps we could leave that aside. Though, there was something that I simply couldn't find out, no matter how much we dug," Sharl said, shaking his head slowly, one hand on his forehead. I tilted my head to one side in confusion.

"Hmm? And what might that be?"

"Your birthplace, Sit Rentt. Well, we know that you are from the Remrutt Empire, but we couldn't find out much more than that. Could I perhaps ask where you were born?"

*"Huh...? I, Rentt Faina, a person from the Remrutt Empire?"* was what I wanted to say. However, I'd heard that Lorraine and Sheila cooperated to cover up my background somewhat, so I wasn't all that surprised.

Sheila, who had access to records at the adventurer's guild, most likely altered certain documents and registered this information with Lorraine's assistance. If I had to guess, my close ties with Lorraine most likely made it seem that I was from the same place she was. Adventurers often came from dubious backgrounds, but such was the nature of the job.

I could have just told Sharl the truth, but that was something I couldn't casually do with a merchant. I was a little strange, yes, but few individuals would investigate someone so intensely. It was good that we'd done all the little things we did when establishing my identity. In fact, me meeting with a merchant like this was also one of the many scenarios Lorraine had dreamed up.

"It is nothing all that mysterious, ha. Have you heard of the Mechanical City of Aavan? In the Remrutt Empire, of course."



I knew nothing about it. I'd never even been there. Lorraine had spoken to me of the place, which was how I came to know about it.

For instance, I knew it was a city of iron, magic, and oil. It was well-developed, with magical tools and machines of all types. Among it all was a plethora of mechanics and mages. They were workers and craftsmen who produced new products, working around the clock, all day every day. It was a place that had attracted many individuals looking for work. I didn't know if this was the reason for the amount of orphans in Aavan, though, working as servants and assistants.

Many individuals would travel to Aavan from the slums, attracted by the prospect of obtaining some means to feed themselves. I, too, would be one of these orphans—or so my story went.

With that, I described the atmosphere and smells of Aavan, details I'd remembered from sketches Lorraine had shown me of the place. Sharl, for his part, seemed convinced.

"I see. So it was something like that..."

It was impossible to tell if the merchant believed my words with a simple glance. But it did seem like my words were somewhat convincing. I'd answered quite a few of his questions, and didn't make any fatal mistakes...hopefully.

I made a mental note to ask Lorraine about the quality of my responses later.

"It seems we've had quite a lengthy discussion, Sir Rentt," Sharl continued. "I feel like I now have a better grasp of your personality. Alas, the time is upon us. The individual coming to speak with you will be arriving soon... Is that all right with you?"



Just as I nodded at his question...

*Knock, knock...*

A few swift raps rang out from the wooden doors. What good timing.

"...Lady Nive Maris and Lady Myullias Raiza have arrived," a voice said from beyond the doors. The staff member from just now, most likely.

Sharl looked to me for confirmation. I nodded once more.

“Open the doors, if you would.”

With that, he stood up. I, too, followed his lead.

The door opened...and in stepped two women. Two surprisingly, breathtakingly beautiful women.

One had a head full of grey hair and sparkling, radiant red eyes. It was impossible to read her expression or her intent. The other had silver hair and eyes like amethyst. This woman had an almost ephemeral aura about her.

The two were probably a little younger than 20, or perhaps somewhere near 25. While I wasn't particularly skilled in determining the ages of women in general, I'd like to think that I had a rough idea.

I hardly went to such places now, but my adventuring seniors in the past would often bring me to certain taverns where women entertained guests at the tables. They'd often ask, “Oh, how old do you think I am?” and my guesses would often be far from the mark. As for my seniors, they managed to guess the entertainer's ages, often missing by two or three years. It was a strange feat they were capable of. How did they even know these things?

Well, that wasn't worth thinking about right now.

As the two women entered, the staff member exited the room, closing the doors behind him.

“Well met, Lady Nive, Lady Myullias. This individual before you is none other than the adventurer who slayed the Tarasque, Sir...”

Sharl trailed off, turning to look at me, as if prompting me to introduce myself. Perhaps it was because he addressed the women in that way, but it was apparent to me that these two women were of high social standing.

What an unexpectedly empathetic merchant...

I introduced myself: “Rentt Vivie, Bronze-class adventurer, at your service.”

I bowed my head. With that, I heard a voice respond somewhat unexpectedly.

“Ah, I don't really care for formalities like that! Raise your head, Mister Rentt. I'm not anyone special, not really... Ah. Hmm. Maybe Lady Myullias is special—important! Ah, no, no. I'm not important or special at all. While I do have a title,

I'm more or less a normal citizen."

I slowly raised my head, somewhat cautiously, only to see one of the two women beaming.



From what I'd heard, the one who spoke was the gray-haired woman, Nive. In truth, I'd heard of her name before.

Nive Maris... That was none other than the name of a Gold-class adventurer from a neighboring land. She possessed an incredible amount of talent and ability, and was said to be the Gold-class adventurer closest to a Platinum-class in terms of power. In recognition of her achievements and feats, she'd been granted the title of Baronetess. That was probably why she'd said those words.

As for her feats... Well. They were feats that didn't quite mesh very well with me at all...

"Yes. I, too, am an adventurer, and I've heard of your name. If I recall, you slayed a Middle Vampire that had established a nest in a large city. Vampire hunter...Nive Maris."

She was an adventurer who, for one reason or another, seemed to specialize in slaying vampires. Even so, most of her targets were Lesser Vampires, Thralls, and the like. However, she'd once slain a Middle Vampire and its flock, weeding them out from the city they'd established themselves in. This act was what caused her name to spread far and wide.

While she was indeed strong, she also possessed abilities to seek out vampires who were walking among the living, hiding their form. I knew that much at least.

I did not, however, know of the means she employed to detect these vampires...

Whatever the case, it was undeniably true that she had crushed a Middle Vampire and its flock. She was truly capable of what the stories said, then.

Why did someone like this—a natural enemy of mine, even—show up here? Surely there were limits to how bad my luck could get?

That was what I thought from the bottom of my heart. I wanted to escape and leave right about now. I'd turn to her and say, "I apologize, but you are a Vampire hunter, and I am a Vampire. We cannot get along. Good day."

But of course I could do no such thing. The most I could do was speak to them

and learn what they wanted, then naturally return home... I didn't see any other way out of this situation.

What would happen if my identity as a vampire was uncovered? It would be all over then. All I could do was fight as if my life depended on it, then escape to some other faraway land and reconstruct my life all over again. How would it turn out...?

I could not read the atmosphere at all. Nive looked...normal. If anything, she seemed very cheerful. I felt like I was gazing into an abyss I couldn't see the bottom of. And yet, she wasn't showing any signs of aggression or caution toward me... So had I not been found out? Which was it?

There was a young girl looking at me, nothing more. Yet, I felt like the distance could be closed between us instantly, and I could grab her by the collar and ask, "Which is it?!" But if I did that, I'd most certainly die.

I supposed there was nothing left to do but to talk. If I were found out, I'd cross that bridge when I came to it.

"Oh, you know of me, I see. To think my name would spread to a rural place like this... Ah! I didn't mean to make fun of the place or anything, so you'll have to forgive me for that," Nive said, apologizing almost immediately for commenting on Maalt's geographical location.

While I didn't particularly care, there were some individuals who would be very displeased at such statements.

"What rural place? THIS. IS. A. CITY!" they would say.

It wasn't really much of a city, though... No matter how one spun it, Maalt really was just a small, rural town. Very rural. That was what I, Rentt Faina, who'd lived here for quite a long time, could say. It was an irrefutable truth. A reality.

"No. As you say, it is quite the rural place... What about that lady over there?"

I gestured toward the silver-haired woman. She was swift to respond.

"I apologize for my late introduction. I am priestess-saint Myullias Raiza, in service to the Church of Lobelia. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

She stared straight in my direction. Almost immediately, I felt a soft, strange sensation invade my body. It wasn't painful; it felt more like I'd been enveloped by an ambivalent feeling.

What...was this?

As I pondered, I could feel the divinity within me resonating, as if it were about to be pulled out of my very body itself. This was...

I turned to Myullias, who now had an expression of surprise on her face.

"Would you happen to be...blessed with divinity?" she asked.

I wanted to ask why she knew, but I already had my suspicions. I supposed I should keep up appearances in the meantime.

"That feeling just now... Was that you, by chance?"

"Yes, I thought to bless you with divinity... I am meant to cleave the darkness, you see... Um, how should I put this..."

Myullias quickly shot a glance at Nive. It seemed like she had difficulty explaining her actions. Nive, however, simply laughed at the gesture.

"Ah, no. Sorry about that. As you say, Mister Rentt, I'm quite famous, see? So, people try and off me all the time! If it was a normal attack or anything like that, I could deal with it, I'm sure, but I have to be careful about things like poisons, you know. That's why our priestess-saint, Lady Myullias, is here with us today... Well, I asked if she could come along and purify the surroundings more like. I can use divinity too, but things like cleansing and blessings... I'm no good with that stuff. Having an assistant from the Church of Lobelia is really helpful! I'm quite good at detecting vampires, you see. They're weak to divinity and all that, and if it's a weak one, just hit them with it, and poof! Off to the heavens they go."

Nive said.

Nive liked to talk, apparently. Although her words were casual and occasionally flippant, the contents were somewhat more important...

Myullias was a priestess-saint of the Church of Lobelia. For Nive to be able to request a personal escort in such a manner... I easily understood the amount of

influence and power she wielded. And then there was that statement about her being good at her job...

But vampires being weak to divinity? I still remained blessed with divinity, yet I seemed completely fine... Had I even heard of anything like that before? I didn't think so...

Was that really true? Well, one could channel it into their weapons and hurt a vampire with that... But hitting them with divinity alone? I'd never heard of anything like that. If that really were true, vampire hunting would be the monopolized territory of saints and priestess-saints.

That was not the case however. Was that a lie then? This method didn't seem possible.

Perhaps Nive had picked up on my doubts.

"Well, it's not like there's completely no effect if you do it normally, you know? I have my ways, you see. Of finding out for certain. A very established methodology. I even discovered it too! That's why I can do it, but others can't. That's all there is to it."



"A very established methodology, you say..."

Was there really such a thing? Other than what I instinctively knew of divinity and how to use it, I didn't have any other knowledge on the matter. As such, I couldn't gauge if such a thing was possible to begin with...

If anything, Nive was saying that only she could do it. Was this possible, even if she was well-versed in the ways of utilizing divinity...? I had no way of ascertaining the truth of her statements.

I glanced at Myullias, who was standing next to Nive. Her expression was one of muted suspicion, almost like she herself was saying, "Really? You can do that now?"

It seemed like these two women weren't exactly on good terms with each other. Nive may have asked for an assistant, but perhaps she didn't ask for Myullias specifically. Hmm.



“Yes, methodology!” Nive continued. “With this technique, I became a Vampire hunter who never misses her mark! Of course, normal humans wouldn’t feel a thing even if I did it to them. That is...if they’re a normal human.”

So...what exactly was all this supposed to mean? Was I found out? Or not? I couldn’t make any judgments on my situation at all.

This...“methodology” of hers. Had she already done it? No, that couldn’t be. If she’d already done it, I’d already be captured, and currently be in the process of being killed.

There was quite the famous saying about Nive Maris: her teeth and nails existed for the sole purpose of tearing Vampires apart. So in that case, I guess I hadn’t been found out yet?

Nevertheless, she was suspecting me. I understood that much. I also knew she was searching for information. In which case, would she be able to tell I was a Vampire with this strange method of hers?

I continued wondering, worrying over the state of my secret.

“Oh, you doubt me? No, no. I get it. I do. No one believes me when I say it at first, you know? So this one time, I found a Vampire walking around on the streets, and I tore them apart then and there...and everyone treated me like a murderer, see? But of course, the moment they realized the thing I had killed was a Vampire, a sizable reward was offered to me. Yeah...that was quite a disaster, wasn’t it?”

Nive laughed. I could picture it in my mind now... It was a terrible sight.

But it goes without saying that suddenly attacking a passerby on the street and tearing them apart would cause one to be treated as a murderer. From Nive’s angle, not disposing of a Vampire immediately upon spotting it was perhaps dangerous for the humans living in that particular place. Even so, to kill something in broad daylight, in full view of the citizenry... Of course they’d be treated as a murderer. If anything, they’d be immediately arrested.

Of course, an adventurer strong enough to hunt and kill Vampires wouldn’t be easily caught. If they were really innocent and had nothing to hide, however,

chances were they'd cooperate with the authorities.

"So... Since it seems like you don't quite believe me, how about you try it? Just once? It's quite the rare experience, you know? How do I put it... It's kinda like a divine blessing? Almost? Sorta? Most of the time, normal humans are very happy when they see it! I suppose normal people are like that, huh? Divinity is a good thing; it brings blessings and happiness and the like, or so they think. And then you have religious groups that go about with their holy people and all that, but they don't bless people all that often! So that makes my job easier, see? Blessing people on the street. Oh, no, no. That isn't a criticism of the Church of Lobelia at all...yeah?"

Myullias's expression had been visibly darkening as Nive continued a lengthy monologue. One couldn't tell very well from a passing glance, but it was evident that Myullias was becoming less and less enthusiastic about her task.

Although Nive had denied it, her commentary was obviously a criticism of religious bodies and organizations. The Church of Lobelia, in particular, only gave out their blessings when their priestess-saints ventured out for one purpose or another. They were only it for the money, I assumed, given how their whole holy water system worked.

In exchange for their relatively rare public appearances, the Church had quite a number of notably powerful practitioners of divinity. Was it because they were well paid?

To think the Church of the Eastern Sky got by on breadcrumbs and frugality... Well, that church did have strong practitioners of divinity as well, proof that humans weren't always predisposed to evil.

"Try it, Lady Nive? You say that, but...it is quite frightening," I said, sheepishly.

The meaning behind my words was simple: *No! That's a bad idea! I would be in quite the bind!* But Nive didn't seem to understand this.

"Ah, sorry about that. You see, other people don't really trust me too often... Especially someone like me. 'Can we trust a flippant girl like that?' 'No, probably not.' Don't worry. I get it. Oh, how I get it... However. I do not spin tall tales about my own strength. Even so... hmmm. Ah! Mister Sharl. Care to try it out? I can see that interest on your face, hmmm?"

Nive suddenly directed her attention toward the merchant, who'd been standing and listening to us this entire time. He'd most likely been silent all this time out of consideration, not wanting to interrupt the conversation between Nive and myself.

To begin with, it was Nive who'd wanted to meet me. Perhaps he'd decided he shouldn't participate in the conversation unless the situation called for it.

Well, in this case, Nive had spoken to him outright. Sharl, however, didn't have such an expression on his face at all. If anything, he looked slightly worried.

"Now, now! Think of it this way! You received a divine blessing! If you say that, wouldn't it be possible for such news to positively impact business? There are tangible benefits too, oh, yes! Monsters won't approach you for quite a while, you know! And, unlike the Church of Lobelia, I won't ask for any tithes or compensation! IT'S FREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE! I do think it is quite the good deal, no?" Nive said, as if trying to sell a merchant his own wares.

Sharl didn't seem all too enthusiastic about this at all. Perhaps it was because he'd sensed that this would never end unless he agreed...

"...I understand. It really does not hurt, yes?" Sharl spoke up, emphasizing the last half of his statement.

Nive nodded sagely. "Yes. If you aren't a Vampire, that is. If you *are* a Vampire, then it will hurt, oh, yes, it will hurt. But that's what it's for! You're...not a Vampire, right?"

The sparkle returned to her eyes, right as she uttered that last bit of her response.

Those were terrifying eyes. Eyes that pierced right to the bottom of my heart. There wasn't a single trace of the flippant nature that she'd been displaying up until now. Her words were also no longer light, nor were they spoken in jest.

So this was the Vampire hunter, Nive Maris...

Sharl swallowed for a moment as he noticed Nive's momentary expression. However, he quickly offered a response.

“But of course. I would be lying if I said I did not want to live forever, yes... But I don’t think I would want to give up my humanity. Not if it means I end up a monster. If my life were to end, I would like to die as a human and peacefully depart with the blessings and forgiveness of the gods. Well...all things considered, I have probably not lived pious enough of a life to depart in such a fashion...” Sharl said, laughing bitterly as he did so.

What could I do? I sincerely apologize for having become a monster, but it wasn’t something I’d purposely done or sought out. If anything, I wanted to go back to being a human. So if I said something like that, I’d be safe, right?

Something in the direction of feeling one’s pride as a human. At least, that was what I thought, in my heart.

Nive soon responded.

“You are a merchant after all. To have a store as large as this, I’m sure many things have happened. But you know, I don’t think the gods are that stingy, right? Surely they wouldn’t condemn you to damnation because of a little...merchant activity. Right, Lady Myullias?”

Nive looked at her companion. Myullias regarded Nive with a mix of incredulity and curiosity. Maybe Myullias didn’t know if Nive truly believed what she said.

With a vague expression, Myullias replied, “I cannot possibly fathom the will of the gods. All I know is that the gods would not discriminate. All those who wish for salvation will be saved.”

“See? There you have it,” Nive said offhandedly.

Sharl merely continued laughing awkwardly, but now seemed more relaxed about his fate.

“Well, then, Lady Nive... If you would. As you said just now, you do not mind if I use it in my advertising? That I, Sharl Stheno, had received a divine blessing from Vampire hunter, Lady Nive Maris...”

Given the nature of Sharl’s question, I could assume that few knew of Nive having reserves of divinity. “Were you not hiding it?” would be the true nature of Sharl’s question.

Nive, on the other hand...

“Oh, I don’t mind at all. I wasn’t hiding it anyway, see. Those who know will know. So, since I have your consent, I’ll do it now, okay?”

“Ah, yes. Please.”

With that, Sharl got on his knees, kneeling before Nive.

That posture was the same one adopted by devotees of the Church of Lobelia, the correct way in which one was to receive a divine blessing.



## Intermission: Myullias Raiza, Priestess-Saint

After Sharl had positioned himself, kneeling appropriately, Nive held out her hand, placing it some distance above the merchant's head. Her fingers were cupped, as if she'd intended to scoop something up with them.

Faintly, I could see traces of divinity gathering in her palm.

While mana was invisible to the naked eye, divinity was a little different. So long as one concentrated, one could make it out, ever so slightly. It was all but impossible to discern from a distance, of course, but it was hardly an issue with me this close.

Even so, I was witnessing quite the concentrated mass of divinity. My reserves would have already dried up had I tried to emulate such a thing.

Although Nive Maris held the title of Baronetess, she was, at the end of the day, an adventurer. It was surprising to see someone with such huge reserves of divinity run about in the wild in such a fashion. Under normal circumstances, individuals who possessed that much divinity would have long since received invitations from religious bodies or holy knight orders. Such organizations would have bent over backward to invite such talented persons into their ranks.

With that in mind, I suppose Nive herself had some sort of personal agenda. Vampire hunting most likely, judging by all I had observed thus far.

There was a soft, audible pop, and a small, flicking flame soon appeared in Nive's cupped hands. It was not a normal flame by any means. Glowing softly, it was an incandescent white. What a mysterious flame...

I, however, knew that the flame itself was a coagulation of divinity.

"Holy Fire, see? Even among practitioners of divinity, only those who are blessed with great reserves, and are well-trained in its use, can materialize it. A sort of holy flame that dwells within oneself, you see."

Myullias, who'd been spectating from the side, regarded the flame with a most mystified and curious expression.

“Why would you use such a thing to discern Vampires from normal townsfolk...?”

While Nive had claimed that her technique was unique to her alone, Myullias’s inquiry suggested there were many others who were capable of the same thing.

Myullias continued, “Those who receive the blessings of the Holy Fire often manifest unique abilities, based on one’s disposition. The ways in which it can be used are countless. I suppose Lady Nive’s Holy Fire has been specialized to detect Vampires... Such is a possibility...”

Myullias seemed to refuse making any concrete declarations.

Would I be able to use the same thing if I had worked hard toward such a goal? Would I be able to gain some sort of special power from it then? For some reason, I felt my abilities would mostly be limited to the creation or enrichment of plant fertilizer...

I turned to Myullias. “Do you wield such a flame as well, Lady Myullias?”

“It is all but impossible for me... I lack the sheer amount of divinity for such a thing, nor do I have the skill and technique to do so.”

“How many in the Church of Lobelia are capable of such, then...?”

“That... I do apologize, but it is not something I have the privilege of divulging to outsiders,” Myullias said, slightly troubled.

She made it clear that that wasn’t a question I should have asked.

Still, she continued on. “I make no references to the church on this matter, but in general, few practitioners of divinity are known to have this level of skill. A typical organization would have perhaps...two, three individuals. As far as I understand.”

She most likely included the church in her list of “typical organizations.” A bare-bones, but functional explanation.

From what I’d heard of Nive and her exploits, I’d imagined her to be quite the rigid person. Unexpectedly, Nive was hardly the religious sort at all.

Now that I thought about it... Nive wasn’t very religious at all, but the little

snide remarks she had for the church and similar organizations would be enough to annoy anyone. Then there was the issue of how she said it...

As I continued my inner monologue, the white flame in Nive's palms had grown to an astonishing size. It had now stretched all the way to the ceiling, just centimeters short of the flames licking the building. If Sharl could see this, I was sure he'd be surprised. Fortunately for him, his eyes were closed, and I supposed that was his salvation in the matter. After all, anyone would assume having such a huge flame placed on one's head would be nothing short of fatal.

Despite the presence of such a blatant tower of flame, the room didn't feel hot or stuffy. I didn't even feel anything from where I stood. I couldn't feel any heat from the flame at all.

Looking up at the ceiling, it looked like flames were ravaging the beams, but I couldn't discern any burn marks or damage. I supposed this Holy Fire of hers was different than the normal fire I was accustomed to, on some fundamental level.

Soon enough, Nive began parting her cupped hands. Almost like a silent stream of water, the Holy Fire fell upon the merchant, drops of luminous white trickling down onto his being.

*Fire! Sharl is going to catch fire!*

Instead, Sharl was hardly burnt by these drops of liquid fire. He was briefly illuminated as the flames wrapped around him, slowly enveloping his being...before quietly disappearing altogether.

Again and again the drops fell, this scene repeating itself. Eventually, the pool in Nive's hands ran dry, and a strange silence filled the room, as if nothing had ever happened in the first place.

"So! It seems like Sharl here isn't a Vampire at all! Well, then! Next!" Nive practically shouted as her eyes met with mine.

At that statement, Sharl opened his eyes, heaving an audible sigh of relief.

But why was she talking about it as if this were some sort of assembly line?

While that was what I wanted to say to Nive Maris, Vampire Hunter, she was



hardly a person I could argue with. Regardless, I wasn't able to risk undergoing the same process as Sharl.

*What should I do?*

Was there a means of escape...?

Ah... There was something.

"From what you mentioned just now, Lady Nive, monsters don't approach someone if they receive such a blessing, yes?"

"Hmm... I suppose not..."

"Well, then, I'm an adventurer. Not being able to encounter monsters would be problematic, so I'll respectfully decline..."

*A great excuse, Rentt, I thought. Nive however...*

"Ah, don't you worry about that. I can leave that specific part of it out, see. No problem at all."

A swift response...

I'd tried my best to communicate my reluctance, but it seemed like Nive was having none of it. But I wasn't going to back down so easily, either.

"Perhaps if I'd gone first, there'd be no issue, but having seen that... Well, I feel I'm not quite brave enough to accept this blessing..."

It wasn't a strange excuse. Even if one were told it was entirely safe, there was no man in these lands who wouldn't fear being burnt by what seemed to be fire—and nothing *but* fire.

But Nive...

"I understand how you feel... Hmm. Maybe it's just me? Mister Rentt...you've been kinda shifty just now, haven't you? A little avoidant too... Perhaps you feel unwell?" Nive said, tilting her head ever so slightly. That familiar glimmer was back in her eyes. She had that same look when interrogating Sharl on the possibilities of him being a Vampire.

I could hear myself mentally gulping, swallowing hard. The sound reverberated in my mind. I didn't let it show on my face.

Calmly...

“I’ve no intentions of doing that. It’s just that...I’m scared, you know? Of that fire, I mean. That’s all there is to it.”

Scared that I’d be found out, more like. But I couldn’t say that, so I made some excuse about being afraid of fire.

Nive, as if convinced, slowly nodded her head. “Well, it’s not all that scary, you know? Well, then... Hmm. I guess I’ll give up on it for today...but not really. ALL RIGHT, THEN! Let’s go!”

With that, Nive raised an arm in my direction, tendrils of white flame shooting out from them faster than the eye could see. All of those tendrils were aimed at none other than myself.

This was bad. I had to dodge them, but... As expected of a Gold-class adventurer, her aim was true. It was beyond good—not a single one of Nive’s flames missed. I could only cry internally at my lack of ability and skill.

Despite all the strength and benefits my current state had given me, I was still insignificant compared to a Gold-class adventurer who was on the cusp of achieving Platinum-class.

But of course, the entire kneeling affair with Sharl would be all but impossible on a typical passerby. I felt myself convinced despite the entire situation that Nive had other means of delivering her flames.

I wondered for a moment what I was doing, feeling impressed and ponderous in such a life-and-death situation. I was burning, burning up. White, flickering flames licked every inch of my body. My entire body was now enveloped by these flames, just as I’d seen moments ago with Sharl.

Would Nive find out that I was a Vampire, based on this ability of hers? Many people would surely be troubled at such a revelation...

A flurry and vortex of emotions raced through my mind.

Then...

“...Huh. It...isn’t much. Actually, it’s not very hot at all...”

Strangely, *unexpectedly*, nothing out of the ordinary happened. Perhaps I just

felt that way, but as far as I could see, there didn't seem to be anything amiss with me, despite the flames.

Did this mean...I passed?

I felt a momentary flash of elation, like I'd just won some bet.

But I should have already known that these flames didn't feel hot in the slightest, especially after observing Charl. Turning my mind back to the flames, it was a strange sensation indeed. If I had to put it into words, it felt like the flames were tickling me. They seemed to be poking around my insides, exploring me all over.



Relieved that there were no evident problems, I began enjoying the feeling. It felt like the divinity in me had become more vibrant, more alive, as well.

Was I just imagining things? It wouldn't be too terrible of a thing to stay like this for a while... It was much akin to the sensation one felt when entering a hot bath.

But I couldn't just stand here forever. After a while, the sensation of being kneaded and occasionally poked from within my body slowly disappeared. The flames, too, ebbed soon after.

With the white flames now completely gone, and Nive having conducted some sort of inspection, she stared straight at me, before loudly announcing...

"I see you aren't a Vampire either, Mister Rentt!"

*No, I am a Vampire!*

I wanted so badly to point this out to Nive, but I let it slide for now. Oh, how I very much wanted to point this out to her, even if death itself would be waiting for me as soon as I said those words...

But luckily, such events did not come to pass.



"Hmm... Pardon me for asking, but...what just happened? All I saw was Sir Rentt suddenly panicking and moving in a strange way..." Sharl said, his expression grim.

*Me? Panicking? Strange movements?*

Well...no. Not really. Come now. Who wouldn't panic at the prospect of being burned alive by a strange flame? It wasn't anything to run from, given Sharl's perspective of the entire affair...

"Mister Rentt here can see the blessing of divinity, you see? So he tried to dodge it."

Nive was quick to offer an explanation, as usual.

In other words, I assumed Sharl was unable to see it. Not even that gigantic Holy Fire on his head?

As I continued wondering about all this, Nive had chosen to busy herself by giving Sharl an in-depth explanation. Approaching me, Myullias leaned in subtly, softly whispering into my ear.

“Mister Rentt. Holy Fire is divinity given shape. Those who haven’t been blessed with divinity are incapable of perceiving it. But of course, it’s possible to make divinity visible, but if one doesn’t purposely do that, it usually cannot be seen by the naked eye. As such, to Mister Sharl, you would have been dancing in place on your own with no provocation whatsoever. At least, that’s how he would have seen it.”

A stunning description of events. Stunning, with regards to the segment where I began dancing for no reason whatsoever.

To think that Holy Fire would be invisible to those not blessed by divinity... I supposed it made sense, considering how mana worked. Some people could see mana outright, while others could not. Most mages and the like were unable to perceive it as well. There were also exceptions like Lorraine and her especially perceptive eyes.

More importantly, the fact that I’d been seen as some sort of strange eccentric was probably the saddest part of this entire affair.

“...Well. With that, Misters Sharl, Rentt. You both aren’t Vampires, and are no longer under any suspicion! Thank you for your kind cooperation,” Nive said, wrapping up her explanation to the merchant.

Nive had most likely explained that divinity was invisible, and events had ended with both of us harmlessly blessed without any issues, and that was that.

Sharl was one thing, but did I really cooperate? Hmm...

My discontent had somehow become apparent to Nive. Nive shook her head before responding in a somewhat indignant tone.

“What are you gonna have me do about it? After all, I’d heard nothing about you having been blessed with divinity, Mister Rentt. Not until I got here anyway. Honestly, all I wanted to do was sneakily use my Holy Fire to see if any of you were Vampires, then go home without saying a thing. Of course, I intended to eliminate any Vampires if we did find them, you see. No Vampires were harmed

in our little outing, no doubt due to me not having done enough scouting beforehand, yes. But...you're at fault too, you know? To have such special skills as an adventurer, and not go about using them... Yeah."

Such was Nive's one-sided declaration.

How terrible for her to say! Nive herself was the most irregular one here, yet she was framing that entire encounter as my fault.

Most adventurers who were blessed with divinity didn't command it at a level where it could be used practically. If they did have such reserves and skill, they'd already have made it into the rank of some holy knight order ages ago. From what I understood, they paid well, and one's social standing would be greatly improved.

But if I had no divinity, and didn't notice her flames...would that mean Nive could have easily detected me from the get-go, and suddenly plunged a stake of some sort into my heart?

Ah...truly. It was truly a blessing that I'd gone out of my way to fix up that rickety shrine... I really should go back and clean that place up once in a while... I was saved because of the divinity within me after all.

At least, I felt that way.

It was precisely because Nive was able to do this that she was able to detect Vampires hidden among normal townsfolk. I should've given it more thought to begin with.

Even if this were Nive Maris we were talking about, suddenly setting people on fire on the street, while claiming to be searching for Vampires, wouldn't exactly come across as sane reasoning.

Though in truth, that was exactly what Nive did...

I pictured her setting people on fire, laughing all the while as she did it. A vivid image in my mind... How fitting.

Hmm... I was possibly being a little too biased here. I hadn't even known this woman for an hour. Half of all this was due to Nive's terrible personality, though. I'd said I didn't wish to undergo this Vampire testing, but she went and

did it anyway.

“Hmm... I don’t quite understand, but are you telling me, and correct me if I’m wrong, that Lady Nive had willfully acted in such a way, which would cause Sir Rentt to think he was in danger?” Sharl inquired.

Slight hints of anger could be observed on the merchant’s face. What was Sharl angry about...? I didn’t quite understand, tilting my head.

“As long as you two aren’t Vampires,” Nive spoke up, “there are no problems. I had no intentions of harming anyone in the first place. But see, looking at Mister Rentt’s reaction, I kinda had a feeling, and it played out like it did. I’ll apologize to the both of you for that... Especially you, Mister Sharl. For asking all that of you.”

What was all this about? But before I could ponder, Myullias was quick to add on to Nive’s explanation.

“If I may say so, I was most likely brought along as a means of utilizing the radiance of the Church of Lobelia. To a merchant, the church is... It is a little difficult for me to say, but it is almost impossible to defy the church, if I could put it that way. While the Church of Lobelia does not have much influence here in Yaaran, it is a large religious organization, with roots all across the lands. There are many within the ranks of the church’s followers. If certain maneuvers are carried out, it would surely be difficult for a merchant involved in business between kingdoms, such as Mister Sharl. It wouldn’t be difficult for the church to bring about such events if it so desired.”

Nive seemed genuinely impressed at Myullias’ explanation.

“To think Lady Myullias would provide such an explanation, hmm-hmm! I thought you were the type who lived and died by the teachings of Lobelia...”

Nive then quickly turned to me. “So, that’s how it is, see? Don’t blame Mister Sharl too much. He had actually did a ton to prevent me from meeting you, Rentt! When I had made the request, he had this explanation and that explanation. He’d skirt the issue at any chance. I was at my wit’s end... So I called in some favors at the Church of Lobelia, see? Asked them for help and all that. I also promised him that I wouldn’t do anything to put you in danger, or hurt you. On top of that, I actually really did wanna meet with you, Mister



Rentt. It's true! If you really were a Vampire, I would have eliminated you quietly, in some place where no eyes would reach, see.

"Well, since I've explained all this, I may as well let you in on this little secret. Mister Sharl here actually did feel that something was off, you know? I'm famous, after all. As such, he wouldn't allow just me to meet with you, Rentt. That's why he's here too, yes? In other words, Sharl, as the head of the Stheno Trading Company, wanted to be here to protect his client, even if it meant he may be exposed to danger, as well. Quite the nice guy, no? Unlike how he looks."

How...unexpected.

Sharl had quite the strict, severe look about him. Even so, he seemed accommodating, and empathetic expressions frequently showed upon his face. I'd thought this was all a front, and that he was actually a scheming, plotting merchant, but reality was somewhat different. If anything, Sharl was a good and just merchant.

Was that why his company did so well?

Come to think of it, the sales floors below did feature a wide range of goods, of respectable quality no less. Stores that just wanted to earn a quick sum of coin would most likely have a smaller inventory. The fact that the Stheno Trading Company didn't do this suggested it was instead built off hard work and honest trade.

I glanced at Sharl. While he looked like a merchant with ulterior motives, said face of his was now apologetic, even remorseful.

"...Is what this person says true?" I asked.

"...It is. I... There was nothing more I could do. If it were just an affair involving me, maybe I could have come up with something. But to use the store as a shield... I... I have staff members! And they all have families! I have a duty to protect this store, this company of ours. However, we have a duty to protect our customers, as well. That...is why I am here," Sharl replied, affirming the situation at hand.

There were no problems so long as I wasn't perceived to be a Vampire. There

was no reason for Sharl to go this far, was what I felt. It seemed he had his pride as a merchant, hence his actions.

Faced with those choices, I was offered up as a sacrifice of sorts. That was one way to put it. While we both ended up on the proverbial chopping block, it seemed he felt bad for dragging me into all this, which was most likely why he'd offered me all those concessions at the start of our meeting...

All that investigating into my background, as well. Did Sharl notice that something was off about my origins, and had done so with the intent of preparing himself for what may occur after the meeting...?

Ah, but it'd be quite funny if he were making plans for a culturally-accurate funeral. I *was* already dead.

...Not a very good joke, Rentt Faina...

Perhaps Sharl was concerned about the possibility of me having a family, and had intended to inform them of my fate should anything occur. Nothing more than a deduction of mine, of course, but looking at Sharl as he was now, I wouldn't be surprised if he did such a thing.

Then I considered that the merchant himself could have very well lost his life had he taken a single wrong step... I had a feeling that Nive didn't have a shred of forgiveness in her for Vampire sympathizers, not even for a moment. I could feel the intensity of her hatred from the way she'd been directing these questions, and how she'd gone about the entire affair.

But to think she would go and tell me all this...

I looked straight at Nive, and questioned her bluntly.

"I think I have a grasp of the situation. For some reason, you had severe suspicions of me, that I was a Vampire of some sort. Although I didn't exactly cooperate with you, my innocence has been proven. Now, may I ask if there was some reason for, well, all this?"

That was what her method of discerning Vampires claimed. It was wrong, of course.

Although the situation ended with an outcome that was in my favor, I wanted

to know the reasons for Nive's suspicions, if there were any. If I didn't discover that here and now, something else might happen further down the road.

Then there was the issue of my bad luck knowing no bounds... I wouldn't want to make any fatal mistakes just because I'd forgotten to affirm even one detail.

"Oh, sure. I suppose you have a right to know. In addition, I also have a little request of my own. You remember how Mister Sharl said I sought adventurers of certain capabilities, yes? That, you see, wasn't entirely a lie..."



"So...I'm sure you've heard the stories recently? Of adventurers disappearing in labyrinths, yeah?"

Nive's explanation began with such a statement.

Where had I heard this before, I wondered. Ah, yes. There was that incident, quite some time ago...

"Is this perhaps about the newly registered adventurers who had gone missing? Quite a few of them at that."

Nive nodded. "Yes, that. Exactly that. From what I can tell, this is clearly the work...of Vampires."

A sudden declaration of the culprit. As far as I understood, the guild was searching for the perpetrator even now...but had had no luck so far. That was what Sheila told me...but what if the guild had made some discoveries?

Were Vampires truly the cause? Even if that were true, I was by no means a criminal.

"Would that not be too broad of an assumption, Lady Nive? After all, no desiccated adventurer corpses were found. How did you come to such a conclusion?"

An impossible, implausible conclusion, I wanted to say. Nive, however, withdrew a map from a magical pouch on her belt, before spreading it open on a table near us. Various bits of information were jotted down on the map, details here and there sporadically.

Upon closer inspection, I realized all these notations had something to do with Vampires. Details on the year, month, and day of encounters, the types of Vampire, the amount, if they'd been slain...or are still alive. Countless notations filled the parchment.

To think she would possess so much information... She'd done a good job gathering it, at least.

A single look at the map was enough to convince me of one thing: Nive's passion toward exterminating Vampires.

Even so, I still wasn't very fond of the woman...but it was worth hearing her out.

Nive pointed out a certain kingdom in the west, and continued her explanation.

"This place... A town by the name of Ruguella. In this very town, about half a year ago, a certain incident occurred, you see. Newly registered adventurers went missing."

"What about it?"

While not exactly a common occurrence, it wasn't unheard of either. If anything, new adventurers often lost their lives due to their recklessness and lack of knowledge. As such, no matter where these events occurred, they were never anything to pay too much heed to.

Nive, however, pressed on, moving her finger slightly to the east.

"Next is this place. A town called Oradoras. Adventurers went missing there too. New ones, yeah?"

Continuing on with her explanation, Nive moved her finger east again and again, tracing a path through about roughly 30 towns and cities, all having faced the same issue. Lastly, her finger stopped on a familiar place: Maalt.

The string of adventurer disappearances traced a neat line east, straight from Ruguella to Maalt.

*This...*

Nive was already aware that I had picked up on the pattern.

“As you can see, these disappearances, for some strange reason, keep going east. And then, at last, it made its way to Maalt...and that much was fine.”

“Right...”

“But of course, you’re probably thinking that just this alone wasn’t enough to claim that the entire affair was the work of Vampires. To begin with, of these 30 incidents, 11 towns and cities had chosen not to announce or make the public aware of them. Perhaps that isn’t an accurate way of putting it... Adventurers die, right? In labyrinths and all that, so them disappearing was simply seen as that. I’d affirmed all these missing persons cases myself, and can attest to their validity. Looking at all this, I sensed something was amiss. I had a gut feeling that Vampires were involved. There was no mistaking it.”

That... What was I to make of that? Perhaps those adventurers really did lose their lives in the labyrinth.

To begin with, people dying in labyrinths was sad and unfortunate, yes, but nothing to write home about. This applied doubly to newer adventurers, as their fatality rate and frequency was somewhat higher. Even if there was a slightly higher number of fatalities, one could reasonably assume they’d simply delved too deep, overestimating their prowess.

Realistically speaking, such was possible enough. As such, I queried Nive on this point.

“The adventurer’s guild often sees this as a regular occurrence, however. The guild doesn’t see it as a big issue, no?”

“There is that, yes. However, I discovered that the guilds have found out certain things, you see. They simply kept these discoveries a secret. In fact, a certain number of Thralls were found in those towns, and were hunted and destroyed, of course. Once you get to Gold-class, there are certain records you can access in the adventurer guild’s documents, you see? So, here’s the thing... While there are some records on slain Vampires in those ledgers, strangely enough, no records of those slain Thralls could be found. As you know, Thralls are the familiars, underlings, of Vampires. If Vampires didn’t exist, Thralls wouldn’t either. To add on to all that, here’s the kicker. See, the appearance of those Thralls and their equipment, right? None other than the newly registered

adventurers who had gone missing. And that's that."

I felt that the adventurer's guild had gravely sinned for keeping all this information secret... But then again, I supposed that was what they would do.

Nive, as if reading my mind, continued on. "Yeah... If you know that much, then you'd understand why the guild said nothing too. After all, if the existence of Thralls was affirmed, tons of adventurers would gather at those towns. For a time, the town would have a boom in business, but this influx of adventurers would only take jobs away from the local ones, and they'd just be left sitting around, even though they were the ones usually offering their services to the guild. So of course the guilds would've said nothing."

Quite the terrible affair, that, but then again, the adventurer's guild was by no means a noble or entirely morally upright organization. Maalt's guild operated on somewhat cleaner ethics, yes, but such wasn't necessarily true for other towns. The guilds of those towns decided their own culture.

Guilds that were disliked, those who abused their power, guilds that had little to no influence and power at all... There were all sorts. adventurer's guilds were more or less gatherings of ruffians and the like, so I supposed that could hardly be avoided. Even so, the fact that all guilds maintained some capability to offer a service was something quite admirable...or was it?

*Please go about your tasks properly, adventurer's guilds of the world...*

But from what Nive had said, Thralls created from newly registered adventurers had been witnessed by multiple individuals. If that were indeed true...

Nive went on, pacing around as she did so.

"I'm sure you can tell from everything you've seen up until this point, but I'm always searching for Vampires, see. If I ever see anything strange, I often go and check out the situation myself. There were many duds of course... But this time, I'm right on the mark. As such, I've been advancing east as well, keeping an eye out for any Thralls in each of these towns and cities. As fate would have it, I found them in many of these places. Eliminated the moment I found them, yeah? And so, at the end of the trail, I'm here for their head. The big boss. I came all the way here, but I can't find them. Nothing, not even now. But they

must be in here, somewhere, so...”

“Is there not the possibility that this Vampire has already left Maalt?”

It was, after all, a vampire that continuously headed east. There was a possibility it was no longer in this town at all.

Nive nodded.

“Yes, but I can’t be sure of it. However, in my experience, a Vampire who has hunted this many humans won’t just stop. No, it can’t stop. Given the cases of newly registered adventurers strangely disappearing, it should still be here, in this town. If it’s not, then missing persons cases should be popping up all over the place. Somewhere else, that is.

According to my sources, these incidents haven’t occurred in surrounding towns yet, so, it must still be here.”

It seemed Nive had quite a fair amount of sources. As for her means, well... I’ve heard that Gold-class adventurers were able to use part of the guilds’ information network, so it was probably something along those lines. Or perhaps it was Nive’s personal network...

I didn’t really know if this was true, but I had a feeling that Nive’s claims were most likely correct.

However...

“Well, then...why suspect me?” I asked.

Was I that strange?

“I came to this town searching for a Vampire,” Nive answered me swiftly. “Well. You know, people in this town are all kinda weird, but among them, see, there’s this one person who’s really weird. It’s none other than you, Mister Rentt. You came to this town recently, got promoted to Bronze-class in a short amount of time, and put down a Tarasque all by yourself. I think you get what I’m saying, don’t you? It’s not impossible, yes, but new adventurers who are capable of such a thing? Very rare. However, if you were a Vampire, then such feats would hardly be beyond you. On top of that, you’re only active during hours where there is little activity in the town, in the streets. A common

behavior among vampires, no? They avoid coming into contact with humans and hardly venture out during the day. Your mask, robe, the paleness of your skin... If you think of how your mask may be used to hide the fangs in your mouth... So. The more I looked at you, the stranger you became... But it would seem I was mistaken, so I'll have to apologize."

Well, I was convinced. Nive was right. All of it! She really had done her research and had specifically targeted me. I now understood why she carried the title of Vampire Hunter.

Myullias and Sharl, too, seemed convinced at the explanation Nive offered.

But now I had the affirmation that I wasn't a Vampire—to Nive, at least. With all that had happened, I had a good mind to ask for a fair amount of compensation on my part.

Which is why I said, "I apologize for my strange appearance, but to think you would suspect me of such because of it..."

"Ah, yeah. There's that. Terrible, isn't it? Terrible affair. I understand. Not something I say often, but I understand. But see, that was also sorta why I offered to purchase the Tarasque materials at such a high price, you see. As a kind of apology for all this, you know? And then there's this. You probably don't need it, but..."

Nive detached something from the detailed map that she had unfurled on the table, turning and handing the mystery item to me. Some sort of paper...? On it was written a registration number. Judging from the format, it was one of the guild's.

If I had this document, I'd be able to hand it over to guild staff, who'd most likely put me in touch with Nive. It was a strange means of communication, as the speed of contact depended on where the individual was, and how long it took to find them... This was especially true for individuals like Nive, who seemed everywhere but nowhere at once. Contacting her would be extremely difficult.

"Come on, don't make such a face! Maybe you'll need it one day."

"I think such a possibility would be quite low..."



If possible, I didn't want anything more to do with this woman.

"See, Mister Rentt. I really like investigating things and all that... But more importantly, my gut feeling is...important? You know. I feel that way pretty often. So by my gut feeling, I'd say... Mister Rentt. Someday. You'll need. To contact me. With. This," Nive replied ominously.

I could almost feel a violent, blunt force behind each of her uttered words.  
*Please, Vampire hunter. Leave me be already...*

Though Nive's gut feeling was quite accurate, if I could say so myself. After all, she'd correctly discerned my identity as a Vampire based on that alone.

But saying I'd need to contact her in the future? How ominous...

Whatever the case, I should take it with me. I made a mental note to ask Lorraine to give the piece of paper a once over, in the event that there was any kind of magic or enchantment inscribed within...



"Well, then. Should we get to the actual topic for today?" Nive said.

Momentarily, I couldn't help but question myself: what was the topic again...?

*Ah, yes, I remember. The sale of the Tarasque ingredients.*

The sale had come with many additional conditions and clauses. I wondered just how much it would all fetch.

With all these new objects of desire appearing recently, I found myself hungering for coin. One could never have too much coin. For instance, there was the equipment that could be forged from the Earth-Dragon-tinged Mana Iron, a larger magical pouch than the one I had now...

"So you did wish to purchase the items after all? Surprising."

The sale of the items could have all been a ruse for calling me to this place. But it seemed I was mistaken.

"Sure, sure, I'll buy it all right. A normal transaction and all that." Nive was quick to respond. "Tarasque parts are worth their weight in some precious metal or other, you know? Especially the poison glands, see. It works especially

well against Vampires.”

“Tarasque poison is effective against Vampires...?”

“It’s not a well-known fact, yeah? Vampires have a high resistance to poisons and everything, but a Tarasque’s is surprisingly effective. In fact, the poison in question is enough to paralyze Lesser Vampires. As for the Greater ones, well... It’s less of an effect, sure, but if I had a choice, I’d much rather have them plastered with it. So, the poison glands of a Tarasque. A necessity for Vampire hunters like me, really.”

But the poison had no effect on me. If the Holy Fire incident a few moments ago was anything to go by, I was significantly different from the typical Vampire. I even had doubts about what I was from the very start, Vampire or not.

Though my current state defied most forms of classification. In the end, Lorraine and I could only come to our best conclusions given what data we had. That was why I had been classified as a type of Vampire in the first place. We probably had no other means of furthering this research...

We *could* always ask for the favor of the gods, for one, but that would be difficult in many ways to say the least. To go to a temple of any kind with this body of mine, a certain degree of courage was needed. Not that I had that right now, but I suppose I’d eventually have to go regardless...

Well, that was that. Nothing could be done about it now, and this was hardly something I should be thinking about at this point in time.

More importantly: the value of the Tarasque parts.

“For an adventurer such as yourself, Lady Nive, surely hunting a Tarasque or two wouldn’t be much of an issue.”

The materials were expensive, but surely that wouldn’t be the case if one were as strong as Nive. That, in turn, could lower the perceived value of the materials, hence my question, partially asked out of worry.

But Nive...

“I could hunt it if I wanted to, I suppose. But see, when it comes to Tarasques, no matter where they live, really. They all live in those swamps, yeah? The

preparations take forever, and if I had the time to be doing that I should be hunting Vampires instead. Fortunately, some adventurers who do hunt them come by every now and then... If anything, Mister Rentt, looks like you go there pretty often, huh?"

She asked this.

While Tarasques lived in a variety of locations across the lands, the poisons they secreted would eventually end up turning their habitat into a noxious pit of poison, much like the Swamp of Tarasque itself. As such, no matter where one searched for the beasts, it was almost a given that one would have to cross such terrain. It wasn't difficult to see why Nive would find that troublesome.

I suppose even an adventurer like Nive strongly preferred to not get mired in mud, poison, and grime.

As for me... I didn't go about doing it just because I liked to.

However...

"A few reasons compel me to return to the swamp... A certain material I must harvest, you see. So..."

"Hmm..." Nive paused momentarily, giving my words some thought. "A material you have to harvest in the Swamp, you say...? So this material would most likely be...Dragon-Blood Blossoms, the Noxious Swamp-Bird, or...the Tarasque's Poison Gem. One of these, I suppose. I see..."

I was careful not to spill any more hints than necessary, but, for some reason, Nive was already able to pick up on all that. Myullias, too, seemed surprised.

"Your expressions and demeanor haven't changed in the slightest, however...."

Such was Myullias' analysis of the situation. But it was no good. Nive had already extracted the information she needed... I still had a long ways to go.

"Well, then! Pleasantries and other kinds of gossip aside, guess we should talk business. Mister Sharl, if you would be so kind. How much was the Tarasque going for at the auction again?"

"Yes," Sharl nodded, before recounting the information. "On that matter,

Tarasque parts usually differ in price, depending on the region of the monster. I could give an approximation... On average, the parts would cost anywhere between 60 gold pieces, to perhaps 200. However, the carcass has been well-preserved this time around due to how it was slain. All the relevant parts are in good condition. At the very least, the auction would have started from a hundred gold pieces. The rest would be luck, and how far the bidders go. Judging by the individuals present at the slated auction, however, the price should rise above 300 gold pieces or more. That is my humble estimate.”

Hmm... The more I listened to Sharl go on, the more I realized such monetary values were far beyond the reach of normal citizens such as myself. Yes, a Tarasque was a large creature, and many materials could be collected from its carcass, and the individual components could be easily priced, but... I supposed this particular product didn’t enter the market very often, circumstances being what they were...

“I see. In that case, the original agreement was for me to pay twice the final bidding price. So let’s start from the assumption doubling that would amount to about 600 gold pieces, yeah? Well, there’s always the possibility of auction maniacs driving up the price. So it may very well go to four, say, five hundred gold pieces before it goes under the hammer,” Nive declared.

Sharl, however, responded with a somewhat troubled expression.

“Yes... Yes, I suppose you could say that. It is a rare occurrence, but buyers can often misread the competition. Sometimes someone raises the bid by ten gold pieces, and another does so by a hundred, only to regret it immediately after. But something like that would only happen once. As such, I guess it is realistic to say that the final auction price would not exceed 400 gold pieces.”

“Well, then. Twice that is 800 pieces, yeah? And then...a token of goodwill from me, if I may say so. Under normal circumstances, how much compensation would be paid to a common citizen if their life were endangered for no good reason?”

“I would say...ten to fifty gold pieces. Such is the case with most of these scenarios. There is the consideration of occupation, as well. But even if, say, I were to be killed, the compensation would most likely not exceed 50 gold

pieces.”

What Sharl had spoken of was something known even to me. The lives of common citizenry were cheap to say the least.

But so long as one had ten gold pieces, they’d surely be able to live a relatively stable life, even if they lost the breadwinner of the family. It was a reasonably functional sum.

However, in the township of Maalt, even the life of Sharl, the head of a large trading company, would only be worth 50 gold pieces. In my case...the amount would be much lower. I was just a nameless adventurer; I couldn’t even be certain about my tomorrows. My life may even be cheaper than that of the common citizenry.

Despite that, the price of a life is usually determined by the local ruling lords and ladies of a region. Under normal circumstances, so long as two individuals were of similar standing in society, even their professions wouldn’t serve to alter this sum by much.

But of course, the social impact of deaths could differ. If Sharl were to lose his life, and myself soon after, I suppose the difference would be quite large. But I never gave the matter much thought. This would all change if the one who’d passed on was a noble of some kind, but I suppose that was a topic for another time.

“Now, then,” Nive continued on. “Let us set the compensation for Mister Rentt’s hypothetical loss of life to 50 gold pieces. I did try to do something like that, after all. Even if it all ended without incident, the fact I lied and did my fair bit of cheating probably doesn’t change much, yeah? So let’s add that to the whole compensation affair as well...”

In other words, Nive was proposing she would give me a hundred gold pieces for my trouble.

That was...expensive! However, if I thought about it another way, I could kill any amount of Tarasques from here on out, yet each attempt may very well end with me losing my life. The possibility was there, so I suppose that was...fair. In its own way.

Again, this was all up to the ruling nobles of the region. While there were some unexpected situations thrown into the mix, it seemed part of it was the work of Nive's conscience.

"Would the total be 900 gold pieces then?"

Hmm... If I really did get that much, I'd be able to obtain everything I wanted. A bigger magical pouch would cause half of that to vanish, of course, while the rest could go into equipment, weapons, and the like...

Magical pouches were unreasonably expensive...

Even if I should spend such a sum, all I'd be able to afford was a bag with three times the capacity of my current one.

As for a pouch or bag that could contain a Tarasque... I did see one at an auction prior, but the asking price was a 1,800 gold pieces, maybe a little more. That was double what I'd be receiving, so purchasing that was all but impossible.

I wasn't dissatisfied at Nive's offer by any means. If anything, I was troubled by what to do with all this coin. Should I save for another bag? Or use what I had been offered to purchase a smaller pouch, and some other items on the side? My silent hesitation plunged the room into an awkward silence. Nive, apparently misunderstanding my intent...

"Not enough, huh? Well...yeah. I suppose you'd feel that way... I must have caused you to feel some terrible things indeed! Well then, let's do this. A cleaner, more rounded figure. A thousand gold pieces. How's that sound?"

And suddenly there were a hundred more pieces of gold thrown onto the stack. Just how much coin did this adventurer before me have...?

Then again, Vampire hunting was quite the lucrative business. Considering hunting Vampires was what Nive did with most of her time, having this much gold wasn't necessarily strange. But then, was it really okay for me to accept such a sum?

I hesitated once more.

I didn't dislike money by any means. In fact, I had quite a fondness for gold

and coin. But that wasn't the issue here. Just, to accept that much gold from Nive... It was almost like an invisible string of fate, one I couldn't perceive. Tie us together, and I'd become unable to avoid her in the future...

I'd already taken her little contact scroll. It was far too late to be worrying about anything like that...

But. But then...no. There was that other...

As I continued pondering, wrapped up in my mental debates and troubles, Nive's misunderstanding of the situation simply grew. She threw up her hands, laughing as she did so.

"Mister Rentt! You are really something else when it comes to negotiation, aren't you? Yeah, all right, I get it. I'll double it again. Two thousand gold pieces! No matter how much more you ruminate, Mister Rentt, I don't have anymore to give. After all, even I must continue living this life of mine after our little interaction here, you know?"

Saying so, Nive neatly placed 20 platinum pieces on the table.

Platinum...pieces...

S-So many too... The first time I had seen that many...in one place...

I was surprised, stunned, overwhelmed. Deep in my heart and soul.

But I remained outwardly stoic. On this occasion, of all times, I steeled myself. I forbade any external reactions from showing on my features, arming myself with an iron will. Though Nive still didn't seem to understand what I was doing.

"To think you're Bronze-class... Not many people can keep their calm and retain their composure upon seeing this many platinum pieces, you know? Well, maybe if you were a Vampire, but you aren't, Mister Rentt. As I thought, you're a suitably rare individual, huh..." Nive said, in a strangely appreciative fashion.

Myullias, who was now next to Nive, was staring at the table herself, her mouth magnificently agape.

Sharl, on the other hand, was simply sighing and shaking his head, the exasperation more than evident in his actions. Perhaps that exasperation was

directed at me, the adventurer, who, despite being exposed to the stunning extent of Nive's wealth, merely stood there in relative silence...



"...Still not enough, Mister Rentt?" Nive inquired.

But of course that wasn't the case. Twenty platinum pieces... How could that possibly be insufficient? Any more would be a blatant attempt at fraud. Considering that my life had been endangered, I supposed you couldn't put a monetary value on it, not really. I could go on about this for a while, but it was important to think about things realistically. We adventurers often placed our lives on the line, and more often than not for trivial sums. For me to bring up how priceless one's life could be, it wouldn't be very convincing, coming from me. Maybe those who had unreasonably risked their lives could say something to that effect. However, when it came to the value of our lives, we, as adventurers, never did give it much value.

So I replied, trying to illustrate my thoughts, "No, this is enough. There's a magical pouch I've been wanting, you see. With this much, I could probably purchase that."

Myullias reacted with surprise. "You do not have a magical pouch, yet you transported the carcass of the Tarasque all the way into Maalt...?"

Her response revealed she knew little of the ways of the world. A priestess-saint like herself would hardly know of the intricacies of adventurer's guilds.

Nive and Sharl, on the other hand, didn't seem surprised in the slightest. Of course they would know of the magical pouch rental services.

Nive turned to her companion. "The adventurer's guild rents out high-capacity magical pouches to adventurers for short periods, see? That was what Mister Rentt used to transport the Tarasque carcass, Lady Myullias. Not really caught up with worldly stuff, are you?"

Nive turned to me after explaining. I nodded in affirmation.

"There is such a service...? I see. But what would happen if such an item were stolen...?" Myullias started, only to be interrupted unceremoniously by Nive. Short on time perhaps.



“I’ll explain all to you later, Lady Myullias, so hold your questions for now, yeah?” Nive said, in a somewhat strict tone of voice.

I could see the defiance on Myullias’s features for a second, but she soon nodded, as if convinced.

“But then, Mister Rentt.” Nive turned to me once more. “Magical pouches are kinda rare, yeah? Even if you really do want one right now, it’s not possible to just go and get one, no?”

I nodded calmly. “Yes. But with the funds I have on hand, I can swiftly attend any auction where one is put up for sale. A while ago, a much smaller pouch went under the hammer, but I missed that opportunity, and I’ve regretted it since.”

I wasn’t even joking—I remembered that day very clearly.

It was a pouch with about half as much spare capacity as my current one, and it had sold for a similar price. I would have been able to afford that, but it was a little too late for such thoughts.

As I pondered upon the issue, Nive broke the silence with a suggestion.

“Magical pouches and bags are important to an adventurer, yes indeed... Well, then, Mister Rentt! Here’s a convenient suggestion for you. Despite your impressions of me and all that, I can be very helpful, see? Just tell me what size bag you’re seeking, and I’ll spread the word to my contacts. That way, you’ll be able to get your pouch soon enough, I think.”

Hmm... Not a bad suggestion at all. Magical pouches and the like were incredibly rare. Well, something like my current bag could be easily arranged for, but one large enough to contain a Tarasque...

Even that 1,800-gold bag a while ago was a rarity in and of itself. Given that I was in a town like Maalt, the process would take, say, half a year? No, perhaps even an entire year itself. Magical bags only appeared very rarely in labyrinths, so while they could be crafted by craftsmen who specialized in magical tools, their numbers were few, and their methods suitably obscured by the various crafting guilds of the land.

Each production run had a limit to it as well, of course. If they were sold at

their suggested price, they'd instantly sell out. As such, purchasing these bags through regular channels was all but impossible. All I could do was wait for an existing owner to relinquish their item, offering it up for auction, or retrieve one from the depths of a labyrinth. However, the chances of me actually finding one lying around in a labyrinth were close to zero. The more normal way of procuring such bags was, unfortunately, none other than the auction.

Taking all that into consideration, and the fact that the exact way to produce these bags remained a secret, known only to a few craftsmen and artisans...

Someone could attempt to copy the product, but up until now no one had actually done it. Or perhaps it was just because the methodology that went into making these bags was top secret. Either way, it was difficult to pinpoint the exact reason.

Though, if I had to guess, the technology by which these bags were created was probably from times of old. Stories tell of an ancient kingdom from times long since past, created by a culture and people that were incredibly advanced. Although they've since ceased to be, the theory was that part of their technologies were passed down. One of these technologies was the magical pouch.

Quite the romantic tale.

...There was also the possibility that it was all nothing more than a delusion. No one really knew who came up with the theory to begin with. And here Nive was saying that all she needed was to spread word and a magical pouch would fall into her hands, then into mine. From those words alone, I understood just how useful her network was.

Honestly speaking, I really did want to take her up on her offer. But at the same time, I didn't want anything more to do with Nive.

Perhaps it was because he noticed my reservations, or simply because he saw an opportunity as a merchant, but Sharl leaned in subtly, whispering into my ear.

"If working with Lady Nive is unsettling to you, I can assist you in your search, as well. Our establishment may take a little longer than Lady Nive's network, but we are merchants with many contacts. And if you find that you cannot trust

me, Sir Rentt, I would be happy to introduce you to another store. Yes, even the Witta Trading Company.”

I hadn’t spoken to Sharl about the Witta Trading Company at all. Perhaps he heard about it from his employee.

To the Stheno Trading Company, Witta was a rival, a competitor, and almost a thorn in their side—yet he was willing to introduce me? Was it a means of earning a favor from their competitor? For bringing a deal worth a few thousand pieces of gold to their doorstep?

No. In such a case, it’d be much more advantageous for his own company to conduct the deal. Even so, Sharl was willing to introduce me to another company, in which case, this must have been a sincere gesture on his part.

Thinking about everything that had happened here, I’d been deceived, time and time again, but he must have had unique circumstances of his own as well. Then there was the fact that he was dealing with Nive here, who hardly listened to what anyone else had to say unless it had something to do with Vampires... Sharl didn’t have much of a choice in the matter, and yet he still offered to do everything he possibly could, even introducing me to a competitor. I felt like he’d already gone above and beyond.

I could leave the task to them then, if it was just procuring a magical pouch of the right capacity. If they were unable to do it, then I’d just have to use the platinum pieces I received in some way or other.

Ah... Coin disappears much like sea foam—in the blink of an eye. Losing wealth was painful. I’d prefer I didn’t lose any amount of coin to begin with, if possible. I was quite the miser myself. Being broke was certainly better than losing one’s life—was how I felt about it.

The hushed whispers between Sharl and myself caught the attention of Nive.

“Well, that’s fine too, yeah? I’ll go look either way. If Mister Sharl here can’t get it done even if he tries his darndest, then contacting me is okay too. How about that?”

We’d taken care to be secretive about it, with lowered voices and all that, but there was Nive, casually listening in on everything again. Did she possess an

unreasonably acute sense of hearing?

“...I suppose we could, yes.”

“Hah. I guess you really hate having anything to do with me, huh? No choice, I suppose. But...just one more thing. One last request.”

Ah, yes. Nive’s request. She did say something to that effect.

I nervously listened on, wondering what more it was she could possibly want...



“If you find a Vampire, do send a report along, yeah? That’s what I’d like to say, but you’re pretty good yourself, Mister Rentt. You’re blessed with divinity, so maybe it’d be faster for you to defeat the monsters yourself. In that case, I’ll hold off on that one request of mine,” Nive said.

I assumed she was going to give me a speech about how all Vampires were her prey and hers only, but it seemed that wasn’t the case.

I grew curious.

“You don’t mind? If I slay them instead, I mean.”

Nive nodded. “Nope. To me, slaying Vampires as I do is a job, but...honestly? It’s more of a time-wasting activity. A hobby. Something I do because I’m free, you know? That’s a more honest assessment. So it really doesn’t matter to me who slays them in the end.”

A surprising declaration from Nive. So much devotion and dedication, for a time-wasting hobby? Even Myullias, priestess-saint of the Church of Lobelia, seemed surprised. Sharl was no exception either. I supposed even Sharl hadn’t heard of this through his merchant information networks.

This quirk of Nive’s could prove to be valuable information. I wasn’t quite sure how many individuals Nive dealt with regularly, but such information could be used by those who didn’t want to run into her at all.

“So,” Nive continued on, “if you do find any Vampires, Mister Rentt, slay them! That’s all fine and good, but...”

*There it is...*

What was it this time? To inform her if I did run across one? I couldn't possibly think of anything else. It didn't seem like she had any more need for coin. Was it power? Influence? No, she already had personal connections and networks that dwarfed even a Platinum-class adventurer's.

Alcohol, then? She certainly seemed like she could drink. Though, she didn't look like the type who drank at all, or even gambled. If she did, she'd likely bankrupt the house.

What was left then...? Women? Nive herself was a woman, so...men? No... It was impossible for me to envision Nive wanting to be spoiled and pampered by a bevy of men. The individual before me didn't seem to have such needs.

It was no good. I didn't know. I didn't have the slightest inkling.

Thoughts raced through my mind, eventually interrupted by Nive's voice.

"Well, Mister Rentt. If you ever come across a Vampire you don't think you could win against, then contact me. That is all I ask of you."

"What do you mean by that, exactly...?"

I couldn't understand Nive's motivations. I understood what she wanted, but why would she want me to do such a thing to begin with? In the end it must have all boiled down to her merely wanting to slay Vampires...

Was she anticipating I wouldn't win, and would just let the monster escape? I'd certainly run if I saw no chance of victory, but in such a case, I'd do my due diligence and inform someone who could slay it. That went without saying.

No matter how much I wanted to have absolutely nothing more to do with Nive, this person was undoubtedly skilled in her field of Vampire slaying. It made more sense for me to contact her even if I didn't want to. It certainly beat informing the average adventurer. The casualties would simply increase with the latter. Even Nive could read that much into the situation.

Considering this entire series of events, I understood Nive hated Vampires, enough to orchestrate this grand deception. That was the type of person Nive Maris was. She of all people would be able to read and predict the movements

of others. What a certain individual would do when confronted with a certain situation, and other small details like that.

Even the nature of her request was the same. For her to bring it up only after the price of the Tarasque parts had been settled... She really was good at her game. My impression of her prior had been mostly negative, and I wouldn't have agreed even if she begged me to do it. If anything, I would've simply ignored her, or refused to cooperate. But now...

She'd already paid me so much in coin. I felt I should at least listen to her simple request. It was just a request, after all. To think it would be so simple...

But behind that request was a huge risk. It was a mere outline of an ominous shadow that I could barely see. It made me want to avoid her at all costs.

Nive, however, was much like a wild beast, in the sense that she didn't seem like the type to let go once she had latched onto something. My interactions with her thus far affirmed this. It didn't matter who it was or what it was about. If Nive Maris wanted to get involved in something, she was going to get involved one way or another.

As such, it finally occurred to me that avoiding her was pointless. In that case, I could just hear her out...

Nive immediately took me up on my offer. "There's not much to it, see. But yeah, you won't believe me even if I say it that way, would you? Allow me to explain then, Mister Rentt."

The way she said it, almost like she'd misunderstood me once again and was giving me more credit than I deserved. But that wasn't the case. Come to think of it, what happened just now was most likely not a misunderstanding either. If anything, I had a feeling Nive had already decided on the final figure from the very beginning and was just increasing it slowly to string me along.

While that in and of itself wasn't a bad thing to me, everything that had happened up until now didn't serve to paint a very favorable image of Nive, I felt.

Yet I was already here. I no longer had much of a choice in the matter...

"Why so tense?" Nive continued. "It's not that important of a topic, yeah?"

Nive smiled. That did little to dispel the almost-visible tension hanging in the air. Myullias, Sharl, and I were all blanketed by a feeling of unease, unsure of what Nive would say next.

I had my mask on, doing my best to suppress my emotions. My body was also still that of an Undead, so I didn't sweat much, and didn't subconsciously do so when I was unsettled either.

A quick glance at the other two, however, was enough to perceive the small beads of sweat on their foreheads. We were all about to become privy to a certain secret of Nive Maris, Vampire hunter. If one thought about it that way, their reactions made sense.

"You see, I've always been chasing this one specific Vampire. All this time."

"Just the one...? Why so?"

An adventurer pursuing a specific Vampire wasn't entirely unheard of. If an adventurer's relative, friend, or acquaintance had their blood drained by a Vampire, eventually dying and turning into a Thrall, then surely said adventurer would be consumed by hate. They'd pursue the beast, seeking revenge. It wasn't unheard of by any means.

This wasn't limited to Vampires, of course. It could be a monster, another human being—the result would be the same. It would just be an individual chasing something or someone else in their quest for vengeance.

If there was one thing I could ask... Would they have acted in the same way Nive did? Judging by how she treated others, Nive didn't seem capable of harboring much hatred. If anything, she hardly cared about those around her, and simply did whatever she pleased. It wouldn't be an exaggeration for me to say she'd hardly care if her friends and family lost their lives.

Perhaps I was being biased, but the way she acted and carried herself strongly suggested such a character and personality. But all this did little to change the reality that Nive was pursuing a certain Vampire.

The reason...

"Hmm. What is it, indeed? It's kinda romantic, yeah? Think about it this way, Mister Rentt. Surely you've dreamt of crawling through ancient ruins and

labyrinths and locating equally ancient objects of power, right? Powerful magical tools and the like.”

Just like that, the conversation took a strange turn.

I nodded slowly, answering, “Yes, well, I do enjoy old and strange magical tools.”

Like the little airship. There was no need for me to be that specific though. I really didn’t want to provide Nive with any sort of information at all. If I said anything about liking the little airship, she’d surely follow up with yet another unreasonable request, like getting one for herself as a souvenir. Terrible.

“I’m the same way, yeah?”

“Meaning...?”

“You see, the Vampire I’m after, right? It’s an old, no, *ancient* existence. It is tremendously feared—the one Vampire standing at the very apex of Vampires...

“The Twilight Vampire, you see.”

A smile crept on Nive’s lips...



“That’s absurd! Twilight Vampires don’t exist. They are nothing more than a contemporary fairy tale, for the express purposes of scaring children,” Lady Myullias, priestess-saint of the Church of Lobelia, muttered, shaking her head as she did so.

Nive snorted at her reaction. “Oh, you think that, yeah? Or were you taught that? By the church, I mean. But no, I get it. Oh, I get it. The higher-ups at the church would love it if that were true, no?”

“What are you—”

Myullias had only started half her retort. Before she could finish, however, Nive interrupted her once more.



“Oh, my apologies. It’s not like I’m making fun of the church, you know? But Lady Myullias, give it some thought, yeah? I bet my entire life chasing this Twilight Vampire around, all over the place. You can see as much, no? From everything I’ve said and done up till now. And yet, you would dismiss its existence as some fairy tale without any sort of evidence or compelling argument? Anyone would get slightly annoyed, yeah?”

Nive’s reasoning made perfect sense. What she was saying was indeed correct. Anyone who had their dream made fun of would be sure to lose their temper.

But despite that, I still held my suspicions about Nive. She wasn’t really angry at all, was she? She was most likely just saying all this to provoke Myullias. That was how it looked to me.

As for which of these were correct, I had no idea. Maybe they were both correct. It was impossible for me to tell from Nive’s demeanor alone. Perhaps that much was to be expected. There was no way she was saying this just so Myullias could understand her point of view.

This woman had a terrible personality...

What did Myullias believe to be true then? Perhaps it was because she realized that Nive’s words had some truth to them that she responded with, “Yes. I suppose that is the case. I apologize for my insensitive words.”

She apologized somewhat honestly. But she still had more to add.

“I must ask, however, that you refrain from criticizing the teachings and thoughts of the Church of Lobelia any further. The church’s teachings are always right.”

While it seemed that Nive still had quite many opinions to state on the matter, she seemingly held her tongue, as if to avoid adding any more tension to the now relatively calmer situation.

“...Yeah, I guess. Everyone is free to believe in what they want, no?”

Nive instead contended with these vague, ambiguous words. Although that seemed like another provocation in and of itself, Myullias didn’t seem to mind, or probably just let it slide.

Myullias was a little late on the uptake, but it was the wisest choice in this situation, considering we were dealing with Nive.

Immediately after, Nive turned to me. “I’m sure you’ve heard of Twilight Vampires, Mister Rentt?”

Oh, but of course. They were featured prominently in fairy tales told to me when I was a child, and in various myths and legends too. I’d also looked into the matter after becoming a vampire myself, hoping to find some sort of hint. As for the fruits of my investigation, I didn’t discover much, other than some nostalgia about the tales I’d heard in my childhood. Even so, it was a relatively good read.

The Twilight Vampire was quite a famous villain in children’s picture books, plays, performances, and the like. When we used to play-act as heroes and knights back at the village, the weakest, smallest child usually had to play the role of the Twilight Vampire. This usually led to them being dogpiled and beaten, so it was a most terrifying role.

While the hero responsible for slaying the Twilight Vampire varied greatly depending on the location and age of the audience, they were most often some sort of holy knight, or some practitioner of divinity. This image of the hero had endured the test of time because the Vampire in question had been framed as an evil existence. Even so, no one really knew who really slew the Twilight Vampire, and when it actually happened, so such heroes may well be the result of wildly speculative storytelling.

In that case, it meant the Twilight Vampire had been defeated long, long ago. However, there were quite a few holes in that general line of reasoning. If said Vampire truly was slain, its corpse, or ashes, would be interred in some grave somewhere in the lands. The fact that Nive continued chasing this being meant she viewed this grave as nothing more than a fake—a red herring of sorts.

“Yes, I’ve heard of it countless times. We play-acted as heroes and knights as children...although I was always the one who ended up playing the Twilight Vampire.”

“I see... But looking at you now, you really don’t look like the type to get bullied when you were younger, yeah?”

Nive had seen through my non-committal answer almost immediately. I had more to add.

“About that... According to what I heard from a friend at the time, I was seen as quite the odd child. But I’ve long since mended ties with those who bullied me back then. We get along well enough to talk when I return to my hometown, at least.”

“How rare indeed,” Sharl piped up with an observation of his own. “Most of the time, if a child who was the victim of bullying returned to their hometown after becoming an adventurer, it would mostly be for revenge. I, for one, would definitely give them a few good knocks. Have you not thought of doing such things, Sir Rentt?”

I thought for a while before giving my answer.

“Well...yes. I suppose. It’s been so long, though, so why now? Besides, there are other things I wanted to do. I hadn’t even given the hypothetical situation of me seeking revenge much thought.”

“‘Other things’...?”

“Yes. To one day become a Mithril-class adventurer.”

I’d thought Sharl wouldn’t take my statement so seriously. This was the first time I’d spoken of my dream to someone else ever since becoming a Vampire. It was a strange feeling.

Of course, I had said the exact same thing when I was still alive, and quite often at that. But I felt like I was just stubbornly saying it, with no basis whatsoever. Now... Now, I felt a hope in me. As if my wish could, *would* actually come true. I was no longer saying it out of stubbornness or spite. It was now a goal I calmly stated.

Honestly, if I continued growing stronger and stronger at my current pace, then one day...

Of course, no one in this room would understand my circumstances. Not Nive, not Myullias, not Sharl. They were probably laughing at me silently, thinking I was a fool.

That was what happened when I was still alive. I was laughed at quite often. While fewer people mocked me as time went by, it was hard to take a new adventurer fresh out the gates seriously if they had declared such a thing.

But Nive here...

“Ho... Is that right? In that case, it’s a competition to see who gets there first, yeah? I mean, I’m Gold-class now and all, and I’m moving at a good pace, but the goal is far, see.”

“You are, after all, an adventurer who slew a Tarasque all alone,” Myullias offered her observations next. “I wouldn’t be surprised if that really did come to pass one day.”

“If you do ever get there, Sir Rentt,” Sharl chimed in, “please support our humble shop. We would be able to charge a premium then!”

He said this, most likely half in jest, as one would normally be invited to use a certain shop’s wares upon becoming Mithril-class, be it equipment or tools. This wasn’t an altruistic thing to do by any means, seeing as tools a Mithril-class adventurer used often made for good sales. Their patronage, in turn, would bring the shop a great deal of business. The shops would practically be using the Mithril-class adventurer to a certain extent.

There was only one problem: said adventurers were exceedingly rare. In fact, many of these adventurers disliked the social obligations that came with their status and often kept to themselves. Adventurers were made up of many people like that.

As for me, if I ever did become Mithril-class, what would I do? Thinking about it, I preferred to choose my own equipment. The same applied for tools and the like. I wouldn’t have much use for a shop offering me free wares then...

Whatever the case, the three people before me didn’t scoff at or mock my dream. It was a strange feeling.

Back when I yet lived, at least one of the three would have brushed me off, laughing all the while. Was it because they were good people, then? No, I couldn’t really say that. At the very least, they didn’t seem like the type to belittle other’s beliefs.

“Perhaps, someday. I don’t yet know when. Though I would respectfully refrain from any competition or endorsements,” I continued on, addressing the three people before me. “More importantly, we should return to the topic at hand, of the Twilight Vampire. Do you really believe it still lives on, Lady Nive...?”

With that, the conversation was back on its proper railings.



“Oh, I believe it. That’s why I’m a Vampire hunter now, see?” Nive said, her eyes filled with a myriad of emotions—emotions I couldn’t really read.

Was it admiration? Anger? Rage? Duty...? Did she have that look in her eyes when I spoke of becoming a Mithril-class adventurer? Or was it something else altogether...?

“Is that so... may I ask why then? Perhaps it’d be rude of me to ask, but from what I understand, the Twilight Vampire had already been slain long ago. That’s the common take on it anyway.”

“Yes, indeed,” Myullias agreed. “It had been slain by a priest of the Church of Lobelia, with a stake driven through its heart.”

“...Well.” Sharl, too, had something to say about the legend. “The Church of Lobelia may claim that, but other religions and churches also claim it was one of their own who had slain the beast. There are quite a few Twilight Vampire graves scattered across the lands, as I’m sure you are aware.”

The merchant spoke with a vaguely unreadable expression.

While Myullias seemed a little put off by this, Sharl did have a point. For now, the priestess-saint held her tongue. There was no way Sharl would openly criticize the Church of Lobelia in front of Myullias, but he could hardly be faulted for a general statement that had some degree of truth in it.

It was as Sharl said, however. I could clearly recall similar information from the tomes I’d read about the matter when it came to the Vampire’s graves. The most famous grave was the one claimed and advertised by the Church of Lobelia. This was, without a doubt, the true grave of the Twilight Vampire, they would say. However, the truth of it was...

Nive, as if having similar thoughts, soon interjected.

“It’s as you say, Mister Charl. Weird, yeah? That there are so many graves here and there. To begin with, there are no clear records of who exactly it was that slayed the Twilight Vampire. So isn’t it natural to assume it hasn’t been slain at all?”

Given what had occurred thus far and the evidence at hand, Nive’s argument was convincing to a certain degree. But there was still one issue...

“According to the legends, Twilight Vampires bask in acts of terrible violence. They desire blood, destruction, and the massacre of innocents. If one really existed, here and now, wouldn’t it be strange for us to not at least hear of such events?”

They were beings of legend, possessing immense power and capable of swallowing and placing an entire kingdom under its reign. The veracity of such a claim is up in the air, of course, but it was safe to assume Twilight Vampires usually brought with them a fair amount of destruction. Evil Vampires of legend often brought about disasters and such simply by existing.

But there had been no records for the past few centuries of any Vampire-related incidents, or anything resembling such. If this Twilight Vampire really were alive, then disasters were sure to have happened, no? That would be the greatest evidence disproving the existence of the Twilight Vampire thus far.

“Well, they aren’t mindless beasts, you know? It’s normal to assume they could’ve very well faked their own death, then went into hiding. When it comes to Vampires, Lesser Vampires aside, Greater Vampires don’t really need that much blood if they were only seeking to maintain their existence, see? If a Vampire wants to live quietly, unseen, then a Greater Vampire would do much better in that regard. Consider, then, how a Twilight Vampire would fare...”

That was something I didn’t know. Greater Vampires weren’t observed often, so much of their ecology and habits remained a mystery. Nive, on the other hand, would know much more about this, seeing as to how she was a Vampire hunter in the first place.

But then... Hmm. So a Greater Vampire doesn’t require as much blood to survive...?

I personally only needed three drops or so a day. Was that a great amount? Or was it not very much at all? If I had to say, I'd be on the Lesser side of the scale, no?

Curious, I posed a question to Nive.

"Since we're on the topic, how much blood does a Lesser Vampire usually require?"

"Hmm... Depends on the individual, see? I can't give you exact numbers, but say an estimate of, uh, two whole humans per month? Somewhere around there, yeah? For an estimate...around ten full fills of that flower vase over there, I think," Nive said, pointing to an ornamental vase on display. "A Middle Vampire would need about half that, and a Greater Vampire, probably half of the previous. Something along those lines. If they went any higher than that, then they'd need even less... It's hard to describe these things in words, yeah?"

The vase wasn't terribly large. If one were to fill it and pour water out of it, it would fill five cups or so at most. And...ten vases worth of blood was needed? That was a terrifyingly huge amount.

No... Maybe I simply required too little? Was I a Greater Vampire then? The thought crossed my mind, but it was most likely just me overthinking things. After all, Nive did mention that appetites varied by the individual. I had a strong hunch my lessened appetite was more of a quirk.

Would there ever be a day where I would be sure of what exactly I was...? A difficult task, to say the least. Whatever the case, I should return to the conversation at hand.

"I see. I understand. Well, then, was your request for me to contact you should I ever discover a Twilight Vampire, Lady Nive? Nothing else?"

A final verification of her request. Was this all she wanted, in the end?

Nive nodded, then...

"Yeah, that's fine. But Mister Rentt. You won't be able to tell just by looking at them, right?"

"That... Yes, it's as you say. What do Twilight Vampires even look like?"

If I didn't know even that, there was no way I could search for anything.

Nive shook her head, speaking without a single second of hesitation or doubt: "I have absolutely no idea."

*...Were you joking, lady? You don't know, yet you would ask this of me...?* That was what I wanted to say. But I couldn't raise my protests in the face of Nive's serious expression.

"Yes, yes," she continued on. "I know it's kinda ridiculous for me to ask something like that of you. That was why I said that just now, yeah? That if you ever meet a Vampire you can't win against, Mister Rentt, you contact me."

So that was all this was about...?

"So you mean to say, Lady Nive, that I cannot win against a Twilight Vampire?"

Of course the conversation would head in that direction. At least, Nive clearly didn't think I was capable.

But...she was right. I wouldn't be able to win. It was impossible. Even I knew that. I just thought I should ask...

Nive quickly offered a response. "Didn't mean to snub you, yeah? I can apologize for that... But see, a Twilight Vampire is a monster that destroys entire kingdoms and whatnot. If you could do the same, Mister Rentt, then I'd have no complaints whatsoever..."

*Of course I can't do that!* ...and that was what Nive implied.

I could do no such thing. Not me. If I could, I'd already be a Mithril-class adventurer.

But did this mean Nive was capable of such a thing? That was a little too terrifying to imagine...

Even so, adventurers were quite perceptive to the strengths of others around them, and also often interested in such.

So I asked Nive, "And you claim to be able to do this yourself, Lady Nive?"

A fair amount of laughter accompanied her response.



“Hah! Of course not! I’m just saying I can put up quite the fight if the opponent is a Vampire, see? Even if the enemy was insanely strong, there would at least be a chance of victory for me. In other words, bridging the gap with skills and know-how, technique, and experience, and you get someone like me.”

Her response was more realistic and grounded than I thought it would be.

I see. So this was why I wouldn’t be able to do it—I lacked all those things. I was wholly convinced.

Well, there was that, and also the fact that Nive was much stronger than me to begin with...

In any case, I now had a better understanding of the situation, and nodded at Nive to signal as such.

“I understand. In that case, if I ever come across a Vampire like that, I will be sure to contact you.”

Saying so, I extended my hand. A handshake, for appearances.

Maybe it was a bit of a friendly gesture, or just something to settle our differences, given everything that had transpired.

Nive’s eyes seemed to widen ever so slightly upon seeing my hand.

“...Yeah. Hope we can work together from here on out,” Nive replied, grasping my hand. The smile on her face was a little softer. It was a smile I hadn’t seen up until now.

## Epilogue

“Oh, you are back, I see. How was it then?”

Lorraine’s voice was the first thing I heard as I opened the doors to her abode, finally having returned from the Stheno Trading Company.

Lorraine’s voice... I was finally back home. Such was the emotion that had welled up from the bottom of my heart.

I’d crossed a rather precarious bridge this time; even I understood that. Perhaps I’d been a little careless, but it was simply not possible to imagine such a chain of events. I was only heading off to sell some materials. It was as rare as a meteor falling on my head as I walked on the open streets of Maalt.

Even if nothing had happened to me this time, that woman, Nive, had quite the intuition when it came to sniffing out Vampires. We would surely cross paths again someday.

“Quite a few...unexpected things happened. But I’m fine.”

“What...? Have you gotten yourself embroiled in some strange affair again?” Lorraine said, an expression of mild irritation on her face. She did, however, seem willing to listen to what I had to say.

“In any case, come sit down, and speak your mind.”



“...Nive Maris, and a priestess-saint of the Church of Lobelia... Easily individuals you would not want to cross paths with, Rentt, no matter how you think about it.” Lorraine sighed as I finished explaining most of the situation.

I nodded in response. “Honestly. It’s as you say... But Nive had a special technique to detect Vampires, or so she claims. It had no effect on me whatsoever. Perhaps I could say I was lucky this time.”

“Ah, yes. That Holy Fire you had mentioned, no? I have seen a practitioner of it, back in my hometown. At the time, it was seen as a very rare technique,

zealously guarded by the churches. As such, the details were hazy to say that least, but it was quite interesting when I set about investigating it. Alas, no one would tell me a thing, even if I did inquire. To begin with, it is said that those who do not have any blessings of divinity are unable to see it, yes? That would mean the practitioner back at my hometown had made it so their flames would be visible... Hmm. I had requested that it be shown to me so I may understand the underlying mechanics of it better, but they would not cooperate, you see.

“On another note, Rentt... That detection technique had no effect on you? Even if you are indeed some sort of Vampire, no?”

Even I couldn't really answer that question. Nive had confidently claimed she was able to detect and discover Vampires without fail. If I were to accept that truth for what it was, and expand on that train of thought...

“...Maybe I'm not a Vampire at all...?” I muttered, more to myself than to anyone else. Lorraine pondered upon this for a while, too, before offering her opinion.

“Not impossible, I would say. To begin with, Rentt, there is no way for us to affirm that you really are a Vampire. Skeleton, Ghoul, Thrall, Vampire... Visually, you have been evolving from one Undead monster to the next, yes? All we did was assume that you may be some sort of Vampire. You were not very much of a standard Skeleton even back when you were a pile of walking bones. Taking all that into consideration, Rentt, it is hardly impossible.”

Lorraine did have a point, albeit a pointed, difficult one.

As she said, I didn't know very much about my existence as I was right now, and that was how I'd honestly put it. Was I a monster? Was I not? The lines were vague and ambiguous at best. I really had no idea.

But based on what we'd observed thus far, the likelihood of me being a monster was indeed high. If anything, I was a monster of some kind, if the current line of reasoning was to be believed.

If I were to turn that around and consider what Lorraine had said, though, was I simply a Skeleton-like being, but not actually a Skeleton, since the very beginning? At that rate, no explanations would prove satisfactory. In that case, my predictions for the future would hinge on the progress I'd made up until this

point.

Regardless of all that, I'd been evolving this entire time, much like the Existential Evolution of monsters. That much was fine—it would be a reference of sorts, if nothing else.

Lorraine had spent far more time pondering upon that topic as opposed to me.

“It may be a little late for this particular commentary, Rentt, but we already knew from the beginning that you were different than the average monster. You mentioned it just now, no? That divinity has no effect on you. That would be because you are special, Rentt. That is the obvious conclusion. Knowing that much may just be enough at this point. The next most obvious possibility would be the fact that you were blessed with reserves of divinity, unlike the typical Undead. Could that not be the cause?”

“Divinity, huh...”

According to Nive, Vampires were weak to divinity. There was simply no way a Vampire that utilized divine powers existed.

I, however, was able to wield my divinity just fine. As to why I was still able to use it even after becoming a Vampire-like creature, I had no idea. Perhaps it was a trait carried over as I had used it in life?

At the very least, the sensations and feelings I experienced while using divinity hadn't changed one bit. Of that I could be sure. Was Lorraine suggesting that merely possessing divinity within oneself made one impervious to it, even if it was used on me by others?

Holy Fire supposedly caused great pain to Vampires, if Nive's words were to be believed. I hardly felt that way about divinity at all. Was that why it didn't work...? Because I was some special Vampire-like existence, but not quite a Vampire at all? That did seem easier to believe...

Lorraine continued: “It is the same way for poisons, magic, and the like, no? If an individual has a resistance of some kind, said attacks would be ineffective or nullified. That much is to be understood. Simple, yes? Rentt, from what I recall, your divinity came from you repairing an old shrine back in your hometown,

no?”

I’d described to Lorraine a while ago about why I was blessed with divinity in the first place. It wasn’t a big deal, so I had no reason to hide it.

Among the friends I had in life, few individuals knew I was blessed with all three powers. It was incredibly rare, but I was unable to develop my potential. Or perhaps I was simply a jack-of-all-trades. Such was the case in the past.

It was, by all means, quite the accurate description...

“Yes. It was quite run-down... In fact, it had been mostly swallowed up by the trees in the forest. Its existence wasn’t even known to the greater half of the villagers in my hometown. It was a bit of a pity, I thought... So I somehow got rid of the shrubbery around it, cleaned it up, and mended whatever parts that were broken. It took me a while, but this was before I had become an adventurer. I had a great amount of free time.”

“You say it so simply, Rentt. That you fixed a shrine and that was that. Quite some skill was required for that despite what you say, no?”

“A carpenter from the village taught me what I needed to know. I had an eye for detail and precision. I had learned the basics relatively quickly, and the rest was just trial and error. It was good training, to say the least.”

“Capable as ever, I see... Even so, you lacked the capacity to progress as an adventurer, of all things. The gods are cruel, no?”

“I wouldn’t really say so, no. After all, I’m now more than capable of aiming for the top. Perhaps the gods were actually relatively merciful in my case.”

“You are far too positive, Rentt. But alas, that is indeed one of your good traits. But you said it was a shrine, yes? What god was it built in dedication to?”

“Well...” I didn’t really have a concrete answer. “I don’t know. It was a shrine no one visited, after all. Perhaps the village elders would know something about it...”

“Is that right... Well, then, Rentt. Should we make a trip to this village of yours?” Lorraine said, suddenly and without warning.





“Make a trip, you say...? But why, Lorraine?”

“To understand you better, everything that can be investigated should be investigated.” Lorraine’s answer was swift. “That is how I feel about it. Your divinity is especially important with regards to this. It is a crucial element when it comes to understanding what you currently are. At the very least, Rentt, should we not investigate the gods or spirits that bestowed their blessing upon you?”

As usual, Lorraine had a point. However, the possibility of anyone in the village knowing of the shrine was slim. If they did, would they not have sought to repair it themselves? That seemed obvious to me.

“It may be a fruitless trip.”

“Then so be it, if that is indeed the case. But you yourself said it, Rentt, did you not? That the elder may know something about this shrine of yours, yes?”

I did indeed said that, yes...but the possibility was slight. It wasn’t something I’d said out of certainty. Even so, we could just ask.

“I suppose, yes.”

“There is a possibility, no?” Lorraine continued pressing her point. “Then there would be some worth in going. Do you not think so, Rentt?”

“Even then, it’s by no means close to where we are, Lorraine. A return trip would take us about two weeks, in terms of distance...”

My hometown was a rural village. Maalt was a rural township on the border of the Kingdom of Yaaran, but my village, Hathara, was even more rural than that. It was so far that I’d only returned a few times ever since coming to Maalt.

My income before had been precarious. I simply didn’t have enough coin to stop adventuring for two weeks and pay my hometown a visit. I did try to save, with the aim of returning once every year, but...

“You say that, Rentt, but surely it is not as removed from civilization as the Great Forest of Ramuze? Or the Floating Ruins of Hohel?”

Lorraine's questions were exasperating. I sighed, responding in an adequately annoyed fashion.

"Of all the things to say, Lorraine. Such comparisons are a little too extreme, no? It is a rural village, but traveling merchants do visit from time to time. We have roads, you know."

The two examples Lorraine had raised were places of mystery. People couldn't get to them even if they wished to do so, and they really shouldn't be going there in the first place. So severe were the restrictions that licenses and permits were required to enter, depending on the season and range of exploration.

My hometown, Hathara, was nothing like that. At the very least, anyone could enter freely. It was a response made in frustration. But Lorraine...

"See? Then it is fine, is it not? In addition, Rentt, you have not returned for several years now. It is a good time. There are no longer any financial restrictions either, yes? At the very least, you would not have to limit your expenses terribly and live off wild flora that you find naturally growing around these parts, like you did in the past."

When she put it that way...

For some reason, I felt like this had all gone according to Lorraine's plan. No...it wasn't just a feeling. Lorraine had most likely wanted to lead me to this point from the start.

The way we thought was simply too different. Perhaps I never really had a say in the direction of the conversation to begin with.

"Well...I guess so..."

"And there is the fact that Nive Maris is currently in Maalt. Some distance between you and her is not exactly a bad thing, no?"

That was a point I could readily agree on. Nive was most likely here in search of a Vampire that wasn't me, and she'd most likely continue her search. That, in turn, may cause my identity to be revealed.

I'd been bathed in Holy Fire and wasn't worse for wear, hence I wasn't a



Vampire. That much was fine, but Nive didn't seem like the type to completely let her guard down just because of that. So long as I stayed in this town, I'd surely cross paths with her at some point.

With that in mind, I could easily use this chance to leave Maalt, and eventually return when things were a little calmer. While it may seem suspicious of me to leave the town after being questioned by Nive, all I had to do was inform someone of the date of my return. There'd be little incentive for Nive to simply leave Maalt behind to chase after me, especially if she still thought there may be a Vampire lurking in the town.

But there was still one problem.

"It's not a bad suggestion, Lorraine. But I do have an ongoing request. Unless my client agrees with what I have to say, this trip will be impossible."

The ongoing request in question came from none other than Laura, in which I had to regularly pick Dragon-Blood Blossoms.

"Yes, I am aware." Lorraine seemed to have already anticipated this... "You would have to discuss this with your client, Rentt. If it really is impossible, I will set out on this trip alone. There is one more thing I—well, you, too, Rentt—would have to put on hold: Alize's training. We would have to inform her that she would be taking a short break, yes?"

Ah, there was that, as well.

Alize's training periods were irregular. She had quite a few duties at the orphanage, after all, and she only attended sessions when her schedule permitted it. Plus, the goal wasn't to have Alize become an adventurer right away. Lorraine and I thought about in the long term. When Alize came of age to register as an adventurer, she would already have some degree of knowledge and capability. She had the time to train slowly, so a break or two wouldn't be too bad.

"There are some other matters here and there, nothing difficult to settle by any means. More importantly, Rentt, who exactly would you be going as?"

Lorraine was most likely asking if I would be going as Rentt Vivie or Rentt Faina. That was a troublesome question. However, considering I had to speak at

length with the elders and reveal the fact that I was the one who'd repaired that shrine, I had no choice but to go as myself in this particular case.

There was the ever-present worry that I may inadvertently cause my false identity to unravel, but at this point, I no longer cared if my false identity was uncovered. I now looked the same as I did in life. I had a mask on now, but a single look at the top or bottom half of my face would surely allow them to remember.

As for me registering twice at the guild... If the guild really wanted to nitpick, yes, it would be a violation of the rules. Even so, the punishment, if any, would most likely not be severe. The most severe punishment doled out by the guild would be removing an adventurer's name from its ranks, in addition to a worldwide ban at all the guilds across the lands. Such punishments were only delivered when an adventurer had caused great harm to the guild, committed genocide or other serious crimes, or had plotted against their kingdom or country. Punishment for registering twice would be light by comparison. In the worst-case scenario, it would be a fine of a few gold coins.

Thinking about it, there were quite a few people who registered twice. If anything, the guild may simply overlook my transgressions. Most adventurers were people with a checkered past, with certain individuals unable to reveal any details about their previous lives. Some individuals simply didn't wish to operate under the name they'd used before. Taking all these factors into consideration, registering twice wasn't a rare occurrence.

The guild, of course, knew about all this, it just chose to keep quiet about it in most cases. As a result, I could hardly imagine that I would be dealt with harshly.

I would cross that bridge when I came to it, but even then there would surely be avenues for negotiation. The guild was neither a strictly good nor bad organization, so it should be fine.

Shelving my thoughts, I looked straight at Lorraine before finally answering her question.

"I will go as Rentt Faina. I could simply change my equipment and change the look of my mask. It should work out...I think."



“Ah, Mister Rentt! What brings you here today?”

The person who called out to me was none other than the Latuule family’s gate guard. His name was... Ah. I’d never asked. It seemed Laura or Isaac had informed him of my name in my stead.

“I have certain matters to discuss in regards to a request. Could you please ask for Isaac?”

“Of course... Hmm? Mister Rentt... You seem to be speaking much smoother today,” the man said, nodding as he manipulated some sort of magical tool he’d withdrawn from his pocket.

I nodded in response. “Yes. I was injured before and couldn’t speak properly. But I’ve since recovered, as you can hear.”

The man seemed convinced. “Haha, know a good healer or two, Mister Rentt? Whatever the case, that’s good to hear. Master Isaac will be here soon. Please wait for a little while.”

The man looked at the magical tool in his hands, then back up at me.



Soon enough, the living hedges of the Latuule family’s magical maze reshaped and parted, revealing Isaac coming our way.

It was always a strange sight—plants that had been still just before rustling here and there, rearranging themselves until a door-like passageway was formed. The spectacle before me almost made me feel like Jyulapus Ents weren’t all that mysterious. Maybe that wasn’t a fair comparison, since Ents were monsters. Monsters were somewhat removed from the normal ecology of normal flora and fauna to begin with. It really did seem pointless to think too much about them at times.

Despite this, it was true that monsters obeyed certain basic tenets and laws that governed their existence. That was precisely what scholars like Lorraine investigated. The fruits of their labor greatly benefited adventurers such as ourselves. One should really be grateful to these scholars and their research.

“Well met, Mister Rentt. I see you are not here to deliver Dragon-Blood Blossoms today. Are you perhaps here to address another matter...?”

Isaac looked the same as ever, with his silver hair and pale skin.

“Yes,” I answered his query. “In truth, recent events require me to undertake a journey of sorts. There is the matter of our agreement that I’d like to discuss, if possible...”

“I see. Perhaps it would be best to speak with my master directly then. Please. This way.”

With that, Isaac began walking. I’d surely become lost in this garden if I lost sight of him, so I quickly followed after.



“Mister Rentt, did you have something to discuss?” Laura asked after we exchanged the relevant pleasantries.

I was now in the guest parlor of the Latuule manor, having been led here by Isaac earlier. Laura’s dress today was different than the one she’d worn before. It was pure-white, for starters. The amount of fanciful frills on her being remained the same, though. Did Laura have multiple dresses like this one...? I felt the wealth of the Latuule family just by gazing at the garment.

“Yes. It has come to be that I must make a journey of sorts. It is, however, somewhat far away. If I had to place an estimate on the period of my absence, it would be about two weeks.”

“I see. So you wish to terminate the request then? In that case, we could simply suspend it instead. There will be no problems on our end once you continue doing as you have done after returning to Maalt.”

Laura’s response was unexpected, to say the least. It was a scenario I’d thought of, but more often than not, a terminated request would lead to the client simply searching for another adventurer to take the previous one’s place. But Laura did no such thing, and was instead suggesting that I resume my duties once I returned to Maalt. It was something to be appreciative of.

Perhaps Laura had picked up on my feelings on the matter, saying, “Of course,

I do trust you, Mister Rentt. Adventurers willing to go to the Swamp of Tarasque once every week are relatively rare. In addition, even fewer of such adventurers capable enough to do so know how to properly harvest Dragon-Blood Blossoms. As such, I do not have much of a choice other than to rely on you, Mister Rentt.”

Laura finished.

She did have a point. It was under these circumstances that I was hired to deal with this request in the first place. But Laura could probably find a Gold-class adventurer somewhere for her needs. The fact she didn’t do this, and instead selected me for the venture, was indeed something to be grateful for.

“I appreciate your kind understanding. I will immediately contact you upon my return. On another note, perhaps I am simply being nosy, but what will you do in my absence...?”

“I will leave it to Isaac, just like I had before. As such, it would be highly appreciated if you could return at your earliest convenience... Of course, you do not have to expedite your journey on my account. Come to think of it, where are you travelling to? Hmm... No. If you would not like to mention it, I have no intentions of forcing you to tell me,” Laura said, suddenly aware of my undisclosed destination.

“I am headed to Hathara village.”

A village in the middle of nowhere—a rural village. I assumed Laura wouldn’t even know of its existence, but her appearance belied her wisdom and knowledge.

She immediately nodded.

“I see you are going quite far away indeed. Why are you visiting, if I may ask?”

I hesitated at her question. Should I answer her honestly? If I did answer, just how much should I reveal? It was a difficult decision.

Laura would immediately see through a shoddy, half-baked lie. That wouldn’t be good for the relationship of trust built between client and adventurer.

With those thoughts in mind, I decided not to reveal the entire truth to Laura,

but instead give her a limited, but reasonably truthful explanation.

“To tell the truth, there is a small shrine in that village. I am traveling with the intent of visiting it.”

“Shrine...? Why though?”

“I have been blessed with great reserves of divinity, you see. That blessing had been granted to me by whatever gods or spirits that inhabit the shrine. As to what sort of gods or spirits they may be...I’m not certain. That is why I am travelling there, to discover the identity of my divine patron, so to speak.”

Laura nodded plainly at this, without the slightest hint of surprise. I’d told Isaac I possessed divinity when I first crossed paths with him in the swamp, so it wouldn’t be strange that Laura, being his employer and master, would know of this as well.

“Divinity... I see. A somewhat rare talent you have, especially since you are an adventurer. But... Hmm. I see... So that is what this is about. I understand. It is said that the blessing of gods and spirits intensifies in power once the blessed individual becomes aware of the identity of their patron.”

This was the first time I’d ever heard of that.

“Is that true? I am but a mere amateur when it comes to the applications of divinity. I don’t know very much at all when it comes to the more intricate details.”

“Most individuals gain an understanding of the basic applications of divinity the moment they are blessed. Of those who are blessed with divinity, over half would stop at this point of mastery. It is, however, one of the three great powers, alongside mana and spirit. As such, the proper use of divinity does have quite the long history behind it, along with many techniques to utilize it, most of which are kept secret by the numerous churches and religious bodies across the land.”

That did seem true. I had no idea how to reproduce the Holy Fire I’d recently observed. Even if one were to not go to such extreme applications, divinity probably had many other uses beyond strengthening one’s equipment, body, or basic healing and cleansing.

But there were no avenues of learning when it came to divinity. It'd be absurd for me to go knocking on some religious organization's doors as I was now and undergo training to become some sort of priest. I wanted to become a Mithril-class adventurer, not the priest of fertilizers.

Laura continued, having even more good news for me.

"If you are going to investigate the origins of your divinity, Mister Rentt, why not take some tomes from the Latuule family's collection? Tomes on divinity, of course. Recorded within are several techniques and methodologies for mastering certain applications of divinity, collected from a few churches here and there."

...And just how did she come into possession of such tomes to begin with? Were they not zealously guarded secrets by churches and the like? Inquisitors would surely come knocking if such a thing was brought to light.

But I couldn't deny that it'd be unmistakably helpful in a variety of ways. Not to mention that if I refused on the grounds of fearing a hypothetical inquisition, Lorraine would surely lose her temper at the wasted opportunity.

*"Why did you not simply accept it?"* she would ask.

So I said, "If I may borrow them, that would be a great help indeed..."

Laura smiled at my response, nodding. "Oh, but of course."

# Side Story: The Princess-Saint of Healing

My name is Myullias Raiza, and I am a priestess-saint of the Church of Lobelia.

Ever since a young age, I had received a blessing of divinity from the Goddess Lobelia herself. Once my divinity manifested and began budding, I was whisked away to the church, and I underwent priestess-saint training on a daily basis.

Today was no different.

We came from the Holy Empire of Ars, far, far away. We were here to shine the grace and light of the church to these rural borderlands. With my powers, I would heal a great deal of people, and show them the righteousness of the church. Such was why I was here, in the township of Maalt.

...At least, that was how it was supposed to be.



The only chapel of Lobelia present in Maalt was small, to say the least. It was nothing when compared to the grand cathedrals in the holy capital of Ars. It was tiny. In the holy capital of the Holy Empire of Ars, the cathedrals were massive, like castles and forts. You could say the building in the middle was no castle, but more like a gigantic cathedral.

This Maalt place, however...

Well, I didn't mind small; not really. What surprised me was the behavior of the locals. Not one of them even glanced at the small chapel here. That concerned me somewhat.

Some people did visit the chapel occasionally, but they weren't there for prayers or sermons. Instead, they only wished to purchase the high-quality holy water made by the church, or the soap that had been made from said water. They were just there to purchase.

Well, yes, they did walk up and offer some tithes, contributions, and the like, then offer a prayer or two. No matter how I looked at it, however, they merely



*looked* like they were praying. Their hearts weren't in it; I could see that much.

"What would the Great Church-Father say if he saw all this...?"

Even if I were to overlook the blatant sale of the church's "products," this place was nothing more than a shop, no matter how I viewed it. As soon as I had muttered that, a sharp-eyed man who had been standing next to me immediately had something to say.

"The Great Church-Father knows. This is just how it is in rural towns."

"Then..."

*Why would he just let it sit?* That was what I wanted to say.

But the man, Gilly was his name, shook his head.

"No. It is exactly because the Great Church-Father himself feels sorrow over this situation that he had you dispatched here, Lady Myullias. Your responsibility is a heavy one to bear indeed," he said with that serious face while spouting his words.

Was that really true? I was indeed a priestess-saint, but I didn't have much experience at all. I had healed and cleansed some towns before, sure, even given a sermon once or twice... But there were many more Priests and priestess-saints who were more experienced, more talented, or had bigger reserves of divinity than me.

Maybe it was because this was a small border town. Maybe they thought I could do the same thing even if they didn't send out any of their more accomplished members. Even if Maalt was a rural border town, it was quite the large place.

My burdens seemed to grow heavier the more I pondered them. This was why I decided to just speak my mind.

"If the goal were to truly increase the influence of the church, then I wouldn't have been sent. It would have been Sir Aaruz, or Lady Millia."

Both of these individuals were skilled, and possessed large reserves of divinity. Even a hundred copies of myself couldn't hope to catch up to them. They were truly the most prominent Priest and priestess-saint of our

generation.

If the church really did want to expand its influence at the border, then someone of their level should have been dispatched instead. Even though I was a priestess-saint myself, my ranking was somewhat low. I was on the fringes of the church's ranks at best. Sending someone like me here had the effect of, say, a single drop of water in an ocean.

I had no idea if Gilly knew what was going through my mind.

"Those two are always the most occupied individuals in the Church of Lobelia. It's difficult to tell which one is busier. With that said, surely you can see it would be all but impossible to send them to faraway lands such as this," he replied, with yet another obvious answer.

I knew that. Those two were much busier than the average noble or royal. It was incomparable. It was said they lived every day by the minute, without any breaks or much time to rest. Of course it'd be impossible for them to come to a faraway place like this.

"So, you mean to say I was sent because I had more free time."

"But of course not, Lady Myullias. It's nothing like that at all..."

He droned on. I thought about listening, but quickly changed my mind. I probably wouldn't have been pleased with whatever I heard anyway.

Not to mention, even if I was sent here simply because I was otherwise unoccupied, it didn't change what I had set out to do. My job was to demonstrate to the people living here the righteous grace of the Church of Lobelia.

Well, I'd do my best, I guessed.

I decided to be more optimistic about it, taking whatever might come...

"The sermon has been scheduled for a week from now, no?" I asked.

"Yes." Gilly was always fast with his responses. "There will be quite some preparations to make until then. We must greet the appropriate influencers and individuals of power in this town as well. Some relatives of these individuals have injuries and illnesses that cannot be cured by conventional healing magics,

you see.”

I already knew what we had to do then. In exchange for tithes, contributions, and donations, I would heal them, and they would gladly pay their fair share. After all, they were considerably wealthy, and healing of that nature couldn’t simply be bought off the street.

With that, the believers in the Church of Lobelia would slowly increase.

In truth, few of this kingdom’s common folk believed in the church. The church’s influence, however, had spread among noble and merchant families—families with power and resources. These relations, in turn, were formed and reinforced by such activities.

When it came to the common folk, however, blessings weren’t given unless they had contributed a fair amount of donations. Needless to say, this didn’t help much when it came to increasing the amount of followers in the region.

To make things worse, the dominant religion in this kingdom, the Church of the Eastern Sky, didn’t ask for any tithes, nor did they discriminate among social classes. It simply lent its power to all it could reach. As a result, there were cases where the needs of noble and wealthy families weren’t prioritized. The Church of Lobelia, prioritizing the rich over the poor, saw an increase in followers among these social castes.

As for which of the churches was correct... If one were to go by their heart, the Church of the Eastern Sky was a clear winner. However, if I were to think about it realistically, it was hard to say.

Suppose a member of one’s family had fallen gravely ill, and urgently needed treatment. Because it took a while for them to be checked, they had lost their life. No one would want to be in such a situation, which was why they would pay to be healed first. When it came to the Church of the Eastern Sky, the more severely ill were treated before the mildly ill, but some would be inadvertently left behind as a result. The Church of Lobelia focused its efforts on individuals who were left out and would intervene, slowly increasing its sphere of influence. That was how it worked, anyway.

If one were to look at the big picture, it could be said that both churches had their niches, and coexisted relatively well, to some degree. The Church of

Lobelia wouldn't be satisfied with this alone, of course.

Then there was the consideration that it was an individual's freedom to believe, or not, in a certain religion. From that angle, this kingdom was quite the ideal place.

Now I had to do something about this situation. It was a complicated thing to think about.

As I continued thinking, Gilly began reading a missive that had arrived from the church, turning to me.

"And then...hmm. This is..." He tilted his head slightly to one side.

"What is it...?"

"A direct order from the Great Church-Father himself, you see. But you are instructed to accompany...Gold-class adventurer, Nive Maris? What does this mean...?" he muttered, a troubled expression creeping onto his features.



Who was this Gold-class adventurer, Nive Maris, in the first place? That was my first thought on the matter.

During my time as a priestess-saint, I had always gathered the knowledge, skills, and techniques required of me. Information and knowledge on adventurers, much less following them around, was hardly part of my curriculum. Of course, depending on the situation, the church had received such requests from kings, important nobles, and the like, so even I would know of them if they were a famous Mithril-class adventurer.

But...the name of a mere Gold-class adventurer?

I knew of certain quirky individuals who had their fair share of achievements, or adventurers who might soon make it into the rank of Mithril-class. While these individuals often had many pairs of eyes scrutinizing them, there was no news that I particularly had to pay attention to.

Gilly, however, didn't seem to share my opinion.

"Gold-class adventurer Nive Maris is a famous Vampire hunter. As the title suggests, she specializes in hunting Vampires."

“A Vampire hunter?”

“Yes. More often than not, adventurers choose whatever prey or request that suits their fancy at the time. However, there are occasionally adventurers who, in the name of efficiency or personal preference, hunt a specific monster. This is especially the case when it comes to Vampire hunting. They are a difficult monster to hunt, but the returns are proportionally large. While there is no meaning to capturing a mere Thrall, capturing the ‘lord’ of a flock would easily reap quite the fortune. A thousand gold pieces? Perhaps more? It is a...romantic profession to say the least.”

Gilly was seemingly worked up for some reason. How rare. If anything, this was quite odd. He usually never had much in the way of emotions in his attitudes and mannerisms.

“You seem to be having fun. Did you wish to become an adventurer at some point?”

“Ah. Please excuse me. Before I became a member of the cloth, there was indeed a time when I was little when I had thought of such. I was simply reminiscing.”

This man had a somewhat unexpected past. Simply looking at his face made me assume he’d been cold and rigid even as a child, with only a one-track mind and path.

Dreams, hm... Having put it that way, I supposed I could see it to a certain extent. Of course, even this man before me must have had a time when he was a cute and lovable child. For a child like that to have such thoughts was hardly strange.

For some reason, I had thought Gilly was the same as a child as he was now.

“I see... So even someone like you had a relatively normal childhood,” I said in an obviously provocative manner. Gilly paid my words no heed.

“But of course. Even I wasn’t simply born this way from the start,” he replied, as if seeing through my intent from the very beginning. “In any case. About these orders... priestess-saint Myullias Raiza is to accompany Nive Maris, whereupon she would enter a series of negotiations with a certain adventurer.

That's what the missive says."

"Negotiations with an adventurer? Why me...?"

I didn't dislike it by any means, but it was mysterious. I did have similar experiences; it was very common for nobles to summon priests and priestess-saints to their fancy negotiations, out of fear of poison having been slipped into their drink for example. With a priest or priestess-saint on hand, poisons could be easily cleansed, and I had been to a few of these events myself.

It seemed my task this time was something similar. Though it wasn't exactly easy to summon a priestess-saint of the Church of Lobelia. At the very least, the individual would require privilege, power, and coin. Even a Gold-class adventurer wouldn't be capable of such a thing...or so I thought.

Gilly, as if reading my mind, continued on.

"I do not know. However, this is a direct order from the Great Church-Father himself. It would be safe to assume that Nive Maris is able to influence the upper echelons of the church in some way or another. If not, such an order would be all but impossible."

"Is she really that famous? How would a mere Gold-class adventurer have such powers...?"

This was something not even highly ranked nobles were capable of doing.

While the Church of Lobelia didn't have much influence in the Kingdom of Yaaran, one would be hard-pressed to find a bigger, more established and powerful religious body if they were to scour the lands of the world.

It went without saying that the church had a large degree of influence on the nobles and ruling governments of various countries and kingdoms. To be able to make a direct request of the Great Church-Father himself, the one individual who was the highest authority and power in the Church of Lobelia...

"I do not know what to make of that." Even Gilly seemed perplexed.  
"However, Lady Myullias, I am afraid it is not within your rights to refuse."

I knew that. I knew that much, but...

"Nive Maris will arrive at this chapel tomorrow," he continued on. "You would

do well to ask her for the specifics and details then.”

I felt a foreboding sense of unease, but I couldn’t go against a direct order. All I could do was nod and allow my mind to drift to thoughts of tomorrow...



“Well, hello there, priestess-saint Myullias Raiza. I’m Nive Maris. Just your average, boring, Gold-class adventurer. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

The person spoke as they entered the room I was waiting in. She was nothing like any of the individuals I had dealt with up until this point. I didn’t know what to do with her.

Her aura was very similar to that of Sir Aaruz’s.

What was different was that twinkle in her eyes. It was almost like she was licking her lips in anticipation of the hunt, as if she were standing before her prey. Such was the unease I felt as I stood before this person.

“Yes. The pleasure is all mine. If I may ask...I’ve been summoned to accompany you to a negotiation with a certain adventurer...?”

I wanted to be rid of her as soon as possible, getting right into the topic at hand.

“Ah, yeah. Lady Myullias, you’re a practitioner of cleansing divinity, yes? I’m not all that great with that, see. They can be pretty cunning and all that, you know? I don’t think I’ve been found out, yeah? But we have to be careful if any food or drink is spiked, you know? Can’t be too careful, see.”

I couldn’t understand a single word. I tilted my head to one side in confusion.

“They...? Who is this ‘they’? And spiking? Poison? I assumed you were simply going to purchase materials from this adventurer...”

At the very least, that was what was written in the missive from the Great Church-Father. Nive however...

“Ah, yeah. Well. That’s one of my aims, yes, but the most important thing is hunting Vampires, see. I have my suspicions, wondering if that adventurer is a vampire, yeah? I did quite a bit of research, and I’m pretty sure about my hunch. So we should just be prepared in general. That’s how I’d like you to think

of it, yes.”

A most surprising thing to say.

“Vampires are in this town...?”

There was no better feeding ground for a monster like that. But Nive quickly shook her head, almost in a panic.

“It’s nothing to get so surprised about, yeah? Happens often, see. As I said just now, they’re cunning. It takes them little to no effort to simply blend in with the townsfolk on the streets. So, now that you know all that, I’m gonna have you help me with my Vampire hunting, Lady Myullias. After all, the Church of Lobelia has its share of monster hunters, yeah? You people have specialized hunters, too, so you can think of this as part of your job, see.”

The hunters she spoke of were none other than the honored Order of Inquisitor-Eradicators. They were a gathering of hunter-killers specialized in the eradication of Vampires, Loup Garous, possessive demons, and all other manner of monster who blended into and fed off human society. I had never once dealt with them, and didn’t really know what they did on a daily basis or how they conducted their missions. Nive might be more familiar with such affairs, seeing as she was able to speak of them so plainly.

Even so...a Vampire? If this were indeed true, it would be quite the undertaking.

While I had my suspicions and doubts about the Church of Lobelia, I was, for all intents and purposes, still a priestess-saint. I had to do good for the common people, and I couldn’t hesitate on matters such as this. It wasn’t unreasonable to assist if Nive’s goal was to exterminate Vampires. I supposed the Great Church-Father himself had approved of Nive’s activities, and had issued the command for me to group up with Nive to expedite the process.

That was why I nodded.

“I don’t know exactly how much of a help I’d be, but I understand. I will be in your care.”





“Be very, very careful. They have mystic eyes of charm, you see. Makes anyone of the opposite sex irresistibly attracted to them with a single gaze. Even if you are a priestess-saint, there’s no guarantee you’d be immune...or be able to resist it. Don’t depend too much on that, yeah...?” Nive said, as we stood before the venue of the negotiations—the Stheno Trading Company’s main building.

“Mystic eyes of charm, you say...”

I did know of several people who possessed these mystic eyes. I’d even met them.

But these eyes... Not everyone who had them was a Vampire. Some humans were born with them, as well. As soon as such individuals were found, however, they would surely be restrained and have their powers sealed.

As the name suggested, such eyes were able to charm members of the opposite sex, making them fall head over heels for the user. That wasn’t all they could do, of course. History had quite a few cases of such powers going much further than that. To be precise, charmed individuals were often willing to do anything for their newfound infatuation. They are unable to resist doing so.

If such an individual ended up in an organization or group, then infiltrated its inner circles, doing as they pleased... It was difficult to imagine the impact, other than the fact that it would be nothing short of catastrophic.

There had been an individual who had done such a thing: Adone the Courtesan. She set her eyes a certain king, driving him wild for her. His kingdom, in turn, fell into disarray. Many people were killed, and much wealth was possessed by the crown. In the end, the kingdom fell into ruin and was no more. To prevent another one of these incidents, anyone with these mystic eyes would be immediately captured and their powers sealed.

As for the sealing...the older methods of the past were terribly inhumane. Their eyes would either be crushed in or plucked out entirely. There was, unfortunately, no other way. As such, parents whose children had been born with such eyes often didn’t report this to the authorities, and this, of course, led to no shortage of problems down the road...

Contemporary methods were much more humane, utilizing magecraft to seal

an individual's mystic eyes, possibly for eternity. This also wouldn't lead to blindness of any kind.

While people who underwent the process could occasionally become slightly short-sighted, that was about the worst that would happen. If required, the kingdom or country in question would usually provide magical tools designed to assist with one's sight. As a result, most individuals born with such eyes commonly had them sealed willingly.

There were some escapees here and there, but their numbers were few. Perhaps one individual every decade or so, which couldn't be ruled out.

In other words, individuals who wielded the mystic eyes of charm were exceedingly rare. Vampires, on the other hand...

"Do vampires all have mystic eyes of charm?" I inquired.

"Can't say for sure. All I know is that many have them, and their gaze is often much more powerful than that of a human's. That's why they're dangerous, yeah? Be very, very careful."

With that, Nive entered through the Stheno Trading Company's doors abruptly, and I hurriedly followed after her.



"This way."

We were escorted by a company employee and soon found ourselves in a room with Sharl Stheno, head of the Stheno Trading Company, along with a single man who looked like an adventurer.

Sharl was one of the individuals I had to make my rounds and pay my respects to. He was a man of power in this town. The other person, however...

Honestly speaking, he was eccentric in his appearance to say the least. I looked at his face, its lower half concealed by an intricate, well-detailed mask. It was a skull of some kind, I think. It was quite unsettling. His body was draped in a flowy, pitch-black robe. The way he was standing showed no openings, and he was looking straight in our direction.

...I just remembered that I shouldn't look directly into his eyes, but it may

have already been too late. If those eyes were too powerful to resist, I'd already be...

"It's fine, for now. Make sure you don't look into his eyes, yeah? If you really have to look at his face, then only look at his chin," Nive whispered, slapping me on the back as she did so.

It seemed Nive had a good understanding of how those mystic eyes of charm worked. Nive's words were reassuring.

We moved on to the casual greetings, and after doing so, I placed a divine blessing on him. Rentt Vivie, he said? That was his name.

This was why Nive had taken me along to begin with. As my cleansing powers washed over and seeped into him, I felt a sparkle of divinity from within his body.

Was it even possible for Vampires to have divinity in them? I'd heard Vampires were weak to divinity, so it was impossible for a Vampire to be using divinity itself. Wasn't that enough to clear him of the suspicions then? This man was most likely not a Vampire.

That was what I thought, but Nive still hadn't let down her guard.

Why, though...? I didn't understand.

I'd heard Nive herself was a practitioner of divinity. If that really were the case, she should have sensed the reaction just now... Even so, Nive continued treating Rentt as if he were a vampire, asking him numerous questions, before forcibly diagnosing him with a high-level application of divinity: Holy Fire.

On our way here, Nive had informed me she was an amateur at the applications of divinity. To think she was capable of using Holy Fire of all things... I was quite surprised. I supposed this was why she was known as a capable Vampire hunter.

On another note, Nive did eventually explain herself with regards to the intense suspicions she had of Rentt. I couldn't tell from her casual and somewhat flippant attitude before, but it did seem like she had worthy explanations for her behavior. I found myself a little deflated at the realization.

Essentially, Rentt had displayed quite a few suspicious mannerisms, but in the end, he stepped out of the Holy Fire unharmed. Which was to say, the man wasn't a Vampire at all.

However, while Nive herself seemed convinced at Rentt's explanation, I felt that something was amiss. I couldn't quite put my finger on the exact thing as to why that was the case. If I really had to put it into words, it would just be my gut feeling.

What a silly line of thought. Rentt had already been cleared of all suspicions. Nive herself said as much, so I supposed this was enough.

After this, Nive offered a huge sum of coin as an apologetic gesture. Nive was quick to ride on that sentiment, however, and soon got Rentt to agree to a request he otherwise wouldn't have.

But this Rentt Vivie seemed like quite the kind and soft-hearted adventurer. He was nothing like what his appearance had suggested, maintaining a cordial and affable attitude throughout the negotiations with Nive, in addition to agreeing to her extra request. This really went to show that one shouldn't judge a book by its cover. On top of that, the man wasn't even a Vampire.

With that, Nive and Rentt's negotiations at the Stheno Trading Company ended, and we soon stepped out of the building.

"So, I suppose we came for nothing, huh," Nive said, sighing as she shook her head.

"Why is it that you suspected Rentt so much...?"

"Hmm... I could say many things, see, but in the end it comes down to gut feeling, you know? When searching for Vampires, one must have a certain sense of things, you see. The gut feeling I was talking about. And my relatively rare intuition with regards to these things told me that he was a Vampire. But I guess my sense has dulled, too, in reality. I'd always been accurate up until now—a 100% chance of success! I guess that percentage has fallen to 99% now, huh."

Did Nive really mean what she said? I didn't really know. But what she said about sense and intuition seemed sincere. That was how I felt about it, for

some reason.

For a while, I held my peace, not saying a word. Nive continued.

“Well, I guess doing the footwork is important, too, yeah? As for the incident this time...we can summarize it as Rentt not being a Vampire and leave it as that, no? But this doesn't mean the Vampire that has established itself in this town has disappeared. I'll keep looking. Will you help me out tomorrow, too, Lady Myullias?” Nive smiled faintly as she asked me.

Was I going to keep helping this person? From now on, too...? I thought my assignment would end after accompanying her to this one event...

Thinking back on the Great Church-Father's letter, I didn't recall seeing any time periods noted, nor did it limit my activities to only following Nive around. I did, however, recall seeing a certain statement at the end of the missive: “...to accommodate her needs as much as possible.”

I wouldn't be able to carry out my official duties as a priestess-saint at all. I held my head at the thought. I could already feel a sense of mental exhaustion at the mere image of following this strange Gold-class adventurer around for quite a while longer...

## Afterword

Thank you very much for purchasing *The Unwanted Undead Adventurer* Volume 4.

This is the author, Yu Okano.

It's been a while since the previous volume, so I was a little worried. But with the fourth volume safely published, I find myself relieved.

The manga of the series has begun as well, and chapters have already been published. I have been told that it's been well-received, and I am very glad to hear that.

When writing a novel, the story is only a series of mental scenes and images. But it has now become a book, with illustrations, and is now in the process of being fully drawn out. I really started to wonder at times if the story I had written, if a single episode, would really translate well into a manga.

Looking at the beautiful illustrations, with a high level of finish and detail, the drawings greatly exceeded my expectations. I often find myself filled with a deep respect for illustrators and mangaka.

I never had much talent in the way of art since I was young. In fact, I was always the type who cruised by with relatively low results. I really wonder how a human being can create such intricate, detailed drawings. It's really surprising.

While it won't happen right away, or even in the next year, I would like to be able to draw one day. I would like to draw something, show it to someone, and have them go, "Ah, okay, it's something like that, I get it." At the very least, I'd like to be able to draw easily understandable pictures like that. Maybe I should practice sometime.

More importantly, however, properly writing my novels is really my calling and duty. Such days are perhaps a little far in the future.

A life with many goals is a happy life indeed, and for these past few years, I feel like I have really been living life to the fullest.

Well, then, I intend to continue writing light novels from here on out. I will give it my all, and intend to do my best. I hope you will continue enjoying my work.

If possible, I hope we will meet again in the next volume.

# Bonus Short Stories

## A Prideful Hound

“Oh...?”

*Thud, thud, thud.*

The fruit rolled down the sidewalk. It was a fruit from one citrus family or other, one that Lorraine had purchased earlier at the market. She'd been feeling a certain lack of sugar as of late. The call of slumber was intensifying, and this type of fruit would be just the thing to ward it off.

There were also quite a few other grocery items in her bag; food for the next few days in fact. The fruit, having lost its balance one way or another, had been jostled out of the bag. Lorraine did have a magical pouch, but it was currently full due to certain circumstances. As a result, she was unable to use it. Inconvenient as it was, Lorraine had no choice but to use a normal bag.

There was, however, something that caught the fruit as it continued bouncing this way and that, bringing it to a stop. That “thing” being...

“...A dog, huh.”

The township of Maalt was a border town with a little bit of everything in it. Humans walked its streets, yes, but animals did so as well. While there were occasionally monsters walking about here, Lorraine knew very well that they were Rentt's familiars. This dog was probably no such thing though. It was merely a natural occurrence.

Lorraine slowly approached the dog. “Ho, not running away, I see. You must be someone's pet dog, then...? Hm, not quite, it would seem...”

The dog regarded Lorraine with slightly narrowed eyes. It breathed regularly, panting like a dog would, but a certain spark of intellect and wisdom dwelt in its eyes. It then slowly approached her, the fruit in its snout, as if to hand it over. Lorraine, in turn, extended her hand, and, sure enough, the fruit was placed on



it without incident.

“My apologies. Hmm... I could not possibly ignore what you just did, simply because you are an animal. Let’s see here...”

With a few swift actions, Lorraine peeled the skin off the fruit and tossed half of the freshly peeled slice to the dog. Catching it mid-air, the dog gave it a few good chomps before swallowing it altogether. A bit of a meal for the dog, if nothing else.

“And with that, the formality is done. I could take you home if you liked...” Lorraine said. But the dog turned around as soon as it heard the words, walking away.

“...Not interested in being a mere pet, eh? Quite the prideful one, no? I do not dislike that, not at all... Hey! If you are ever in need, come to my abode! The smell should inform you, yes?” Lorraine called out, her voice slightly raised as the dog continued walking away. She thought she’d make an offer, but the dog simply barked once in response, then disappeared into a corner of the street.



It was a few days after this event, when Lorraine paid a rare visit to the local Adventurer’s Guild, that it happened.

“Ah, Miss Lorraine!”

“Hmm. Sheila.”

Sheila, a staff member of the guild, called out to Lorraine from behind the counter. But she didn’t seem like her usual self. This piqued Lorraine’s interest.

“Searching for someone, I suppose?”

“Ah, yes... I was wondering if Rentt was...”

“Hah. Has he gone and done something again?”

“No, nothing like that, Miss Lorraine. I actually wanted to ask if he’d take on a certain request for me... A child got lost in the sewers, and still hasn’t been

found...”

“I see... And no one else seems interested in taking up the request, I assume?”

“Well, no... Those who were free to assist have already done so, given the nature of the incident. It’s just that...the sewers of this town are quite complicated. I recall Rentt being most familiar with them, so...”

“Hmm. Yes, I suppose he would be.”

Sheila was referring to the sewers under these streets; the long and winding path under the cobblestones of Maalt. The sewers and aqueducts had been built in times of old; it didn’t help that they were built in a most haphazard, confusing, and chaotic manner. It was said there was no one alive who understood their entirety...

Other than a certain Rentt Faina.

Rentt had a habit of sewer-spelunking when he was still a human, mainly on expeditions to clear blocked waterways and the like. Due to the frequency of these requests, he’d become very familiar with the sewers. If anything, the most complete and detailed map of the sewers would be in Rentt’s mind.

However...

“He is currently outside Maalt’s walls. Rentt did say he would be back by night, yes. He had left to fulfill a certain request of mine, you see.”

“Eh? Is that so... it is most regrettable, then, but I suppose nothing can be done...” Sheila’s expression was one of visible, almost tangible shock.

It was understandable, given that the child would most likely be instantly found with Rentt’s assistance. Nothing could be done about it now, given that Rentt wasn’t even in Maalt at this point in time.

Lorraine, however, felt a certain sense of responsibility about the situation, given that Rentt had set off on her accord in the first place. She momentarily paused, then turned to Sheila.

“I shall set off on this search then. Though you called it a request, Sheila...I presume the reward is middling, at best?”

“Yes... I regret to say that that is indeed the case. Even so...would you still be interested?”

“I did inadvertently get in the way of all this. The child would be easily found if Rentt were here, yes? In that case, do you have anything that belonged to the child perhaps? I do have some divination skills that should help with the search.”

While Lorraine did have magical tools that assisted in divination, it was common knowledge that a personal possession would be more precise when it came to searching for missing individuals. A relatively open, unobstructed space would be one thing, but searching for a child in a complicated network of winding tunnels would be a little difficult to do manually.

“Ah... Please wait, I’ll be back shortly.” Sheila ran off, soon returning with something in her hands. “Would this do?”

“A shoe, huh... I see.”

“Yes. The mother of the child claims to have found this at a sewer entrance, so...”

Lorraine realized that the child’s mother was most likely in one of the guild’s waiting rooms. She’d most likely been prohibited from going into the tunnels herself to prevent another missing persons case.

Although the typical adventurer could most likely do something about the situation at hand, trouble would surely befall a concerned, less-than-adventurous parent.

“I will be borrowing this then. There is nothing to worry about. The child will soon be found, so do tell the madam to try to relax, yes?”

“Of course, Miss Lorraine.”



Lorraine returned home after the exchange, retrieving a magical tool designed to locate missing persons with divination techniques. Since there were

quite a few entrances to the sewers beneath the streets of Maalt, Lorraine headed toward the one closest to her abode...

“Ho... We meet often, no?”

Something unexpected stood at the entrance. It was none other than the dog Lorraine had encountered sometime earlier. It panted somewhat quicker this time, seeming a little better since their last encounter.

“I take it you live here then? Hmm... In that case, dog, would you happen to know who dropped this?”

Lorraine had asked for the sake of it, extending her hand—with the shoe—toward the dog’s nose. With a few quick sniffs, the dog looked up at Lorraine momentarily, then unexpectedly bolted off. It was like the dog was motioning for her to follow. Lorraine could do little but do so in a panic.

“Quite the speed! Hardly what I would expect from such a thin dog!”

Even though Lorraine was somewhat surprised, she was, for all intents and purposes, a mage. It didn’t take her long to channel mana through her body to quicken her step. With her enhanced speed, she ran after her canine companion. The two soon found themselves...

“Ah... I see. Yes, yes. Hardly possible for the child to return, in this case...”

What appeared to be a gigantic Slime had consumed the child. From where Lorraine stood, the child hadn’t been completely submerged yet. Their head was visible, still bobbing above the Slime’s gelatinous mass.

The digestive process had apparently not begun yet. It occurred to Lorraine that the situation was still somewhat salvageable in that case.

“I must crush the core!”

Lorraine knew just how dangerous it’d be to recklessly rain magic down on the entire Slime. If only the core was destroyed, the Slime would lose its form, so Lorraine set about doing just that, weaving a spell under her breath.

Then...

*Shick!*

A projectile flew toward the Slime at an astounding speed. In the very next moment, a discernible hole could be seen in the Slime's quivering core. The child was unhurt, and was now lying unconscious among the spreading fluids. Lorraine immediately ran toward them, checking for the presence of a pulse.

"...The child yet lives, I see. There will be no problems then."

Lorraine heaved a sigh of relief. It seemed the situation had resolved itself safely.

"Hmm. So you were a monster all along, huh? A Wind Wolf...you did pretty well, finding your way into Maalt."

The one responsible for the Slime's timely demise was none other than the dog, the Wind Wolf before her. It was by no means a weak monster; Wind Wolves were relatively capable creatures. It was, however, loose on the streets of Maalt...

Yet it wasn't a harmful presence. It did just lend aid to a human child, and chose to starve instead of attacking Maalt's townsfolk. Thus Lorraine came to a conclusion:

"I am an adventurer after all, yes? As such, I could not possibly let you run free. In any case...come along, now."

The Wind Wolf, as if understanding Lorraine's words, followed silently behind her.



"Hmm... Ah. Here it is," Lorraine said, digging around the mess that was her room for a certain item. She eventually found it, holding a collar of sorts in her hands. Holding it, she turned to the Wind Wolf.

"If you put this on, I will know where you are at all times. I will, of course, also know if you ever turn your fangs upon the people of this town. In exchange, so long as you do not harm any of Maalt's denizens, I shall allow your presence on these streets. How about it? Not a bad trade, no?"

Upon hearing those words, the Wind Wolf slowly approached Lorraine, lowering its head.

“As I thought, you are quite intelligent. Well then...”

Immediately after Lorraine had collared the Wind Wolf, it made a quick turn, and was out the door.

“You are welcome to stay in this house if it ever strikes your fancy!” Lorraine called out, her words trailing after the running pup. The Wind Wolf didn’t stop or look back, and soon, it was gone. “Well. I guess I could just pay you a visit or two sometime. I will also know of your whereabouts after all.”

With all that said and done, Lorraine brought the child to the Adventurer’s Guild as quickly as she could. The child’s mother was very pleased and offered her a reward.

Though there were questions about how the child was ultimately found, Lorraine chose to hold her peace on the matter...

## **Memories of Sacrifice**

“Go home!”

The voice was clearly angry—infuriated even—and was soon accompanied by the loud bang of a door slammed in one’s face. Standing outside the door with her mouth wide open was none other than Rina Rupaage, a new adventurer with a somewhat ambivalent expression on her face.

“No luck today as well, girlie?”

The one who called out to the voice was a kind old lady—one of the villagers who had passed by.

Rina was currently in a place a little removed from Maalt, a small place known as Ett Village. She was, of course, here on a request, but the request in question wasn’t going very well at all.

“Yes, I’m afraid so... I wonder why Mister Jeoff refuses to listen to anything I have to say...” Rina dejectedly said to the old lady.

“Well you see, dearie...Jeoff has retired from adventuring, you know? That’s why he became a bit of a hermit in our village. He doesn’t like adventurers very much. But he is a bit of a hunter, and sometimes he does take care of any monsters... To me, it’s not all that different, girlie.”

“Right... I suppose so...”

Jeoff, however, didn’t listen to a single thing Rina had to say. All she wanted to do was hand over a parcel to Jeoff. She felt silly for beginning her sentence with, “I’m an adventurer...” In that very instant, the door was slammed in her face, then bolted shut.

“Well, keep at it, girlie. Resolve and determination are important in any sort of work, you know?”

“Yes... Yes, you’re right. In that case, should I simply help with everyone’s work today, as well?”

Rina was referring to this village’s specialty export: woven baskets. She’d been taught how to help by the villagers, and she’d spent her days doing just that. She had quite a great deal of spare time on her hand; she was basically free once Jeoff slammed his door shut in her face for the day.

The next day, however, Rina didn’t quite understand why his door was left open...

The old woman turned to her. “You are most welcome to join us! You seem to have gotten the hang of weaving, and you’re quite helpful to have around, you know. Ah, girlie. If only you became someone’s bride in our village! Now wouldn’t that be nice?”

Rina had become so familiar with the villagers that she was able to keep up with their jokes. It had been five days since she arrived at Ett Village, but there was nothing she could do.

*Maybe this is what it means to show one’s resolve,* Rina thought.



“It’s terrible! Goblins! *Goblins!*”

Rina had spent almost a week in the village when those cries reached her ears. Rina was an adventurer by trade, slaying monsters being a large part of her job.

She immediately drew her sword. “Where!?” she inquired, turning to the panicking villager.

“There! Over there! Old Man Jeoff is currently doing something about it... Please help!”

“I’ll go right away! Everyone, keep a weapon on hand and hide in your homes!”

With that, Rina took off.



*There!*

Rina soon caught sight of the man’s back. Old as he was, the man’s musculature could easily be seen on his bare back.

It was none other than Old Man Jeoff. Before him were five Goblins, each of them equipped with crude armor and weapons. They hardly seemed weak.

“I’ll help!”

“Don’t need it!” he shouted back. “I’ll deal with this myself...”

Rina noticed he was wounded with a slash across his abdomen. It was by no means deep, but Jeoff didn’t seem to be in shape to defeat all these Goblins by himself.

Rina ignored Jeoff’s claims, instead flying headfirst into the crowd of Goblins. She drew their attention, swinging her sword this way and that. Jeoff understood Rina’s intentions, and as soon as the Goblins let down their guard, he cut deep into them, slaying them one by one.

The last Goblin was faced head-on by Rina. Dodging the swing of its axe, Rina



decisively landed a blow, and its head was soon sent flying.

“All right! So this is everything...right?” Rina asked.

“Yeah, seems that way. But you’re pretty good, little lady. You look so young...I thought you were really a beginner. But you sure got them basics down...”

“Eh? Really?! I’m happy to hear! It’s the first time anyone’s said anything like that since I became an adventurer!”

Perhaps it was because of the sincere way Rina had responded, but Jeoff’s expression eventually softened.

“Hah, all right, I get it. I’ll listen to what you have to say. You did save me, after all, and you’re pretty persistent, little lady... Let’s head back for now.”



The villagers were elated at what they heard, that the Goblins had all been slain. They immediately suggested for a feast to be prepared.

Monsters didn’t commonly appear in these parts, which was why a village had been built here in the first place. If a monster did appear, only to be slain without any deaths in the village, it was customary to organize a celebratory feast.

“Hmph. Look at them, that happy bunch,” Jeoff said, smiling somewhat bitterly. His words seemed somewhat sarcastic, but his smile betrayed his actual emotions.

“Everyone’s fine and all’s well that ends well. Isn’t that all right?” Rina replied.

Jeoff nodded in response. “Yeah, it’s as you say, little lady. What brings you to a rural corner of the world like this, anyway?”

Rina withdrew a small stone from a pocket. It was a transparent, somewhat ornamental-looking rock, set in a decorative filigree.

“I was told to hand this to you, Mr Jeoff. It’s apparently called a ‘Memory

Stone.’ It’s a type of magical tool that has a series of images sealed into it. Not too many though... Ah! It’d be much easier to understand if you experience it rather than me ramble on... Hmm. You press this here...”

Rina placed the stone on the table, and as she pressed a horizontal protrusion on the rock, an image sprang forth. It was of a half-translucent person, who immediately began talking to Jeoff.

“Been a while, Jeoff. Doing well?”

“Toora?! You’re alive?!”

Rina did not know much about the two’s relationship. From what she could gather of the half-translucent Toora’s speech, the two had apparently been grouped together in a party quite some time ago. Although the requests they both took had gone relatively well, Jeoff messed up one day and Toora fell victim to a particularly nasty curse, in addition to sustaining heavy injuries. Quite some coin was required to heal her, and there was the possibility that healing her would be impossible. Jeoff, of course, couldn’t afford any of those treatments.

Somewhere in the middle of it all, however, word of Toora’s injury traveled to her parents, who promptly offered to pay her treatment fees. Toora’s parents were wealthy, and as such could easily afford said fees. In exchange, they demanded that Jeoff never meet Toora ever again.

In the end, Jeoff had no choice but to agree, retiring from adventuring and hiding himself away in a rural village. True to his word, Jeoff had never met Toora, not even once, ever since.

But Jeoff wasn’t aware of the second half of that story, mainly of Toora’s miraculous recovery, and how she was searching for Jeoff. Jeoff hadn’t mentioned anything about his hometown back then, and even if he did return, he’d made no mention of doing so. As a result, Toora had no luck in her search. Recently, however, Toora had finally managed to locate her friend and wanted to meet him. This was why the memory stone was sent, as a means of contact.

“Jeoff, I know you feel responsible for my injuries...but really, that was my fault. You did well, you know? I told my parents that, too, at the time, but they were too stubborn. You were also really stubborn... That’s why it took so long

for me to say this to you.”

“You’re the stubborn one here...”

“Well...I don’t really care about that injury anymore, you know? More importantly, a performing troupe I particularly like is coming to Maalt. Let’s go see the show together. I’ve told Rina of the dates, so ask her about it later, yeah? I’ll even pay for your travel fees and all that, so don’t worry about it. Hope to see you then!”

“Hah...? What are you—hey! Wait!”

With that, the image from the Memory Stone faded.

Toora seemed like quite a strong-willed woman. She most likely understood it’d be impossible to meet Jeoff unless she did something like this.

For a few seconds, Jeoff stared at the stone with a gaze most intense, as if he were about to shatter it to pieces. Soon after, however, he turned to Rina.

“Well then, when is it?”

“So you’re going after all...?” Rina asked, before she could stop herself. Jeoff’s response revealed his panic.

“W-Well... See, if I were to turn her down, I ‘d have to do it to her face, right? Ugh... In any case, just tell me the dates.”

“Ah, yes, of course. So you see...”

As she issued the correct dates to Jeoff, Rina thought Jeoff would enjoy watching the show with Toora after all. If he really wanted to turn his friend down, he’d have just asked Rina to pass on his decision for him.

While humans seemed to fall apart at the slightest notion, an equally small gesture was often enough to bring them back together. Perhaps it’d be the same with her own family as well...

## **A Latuule Family Production**

“...Isaac.”

On the outskirts of Maalt, in the sprawling gardens of a relatively large manor,

a young girl was elegantly drinking her red tea. Her name was Laura Latuule. Although she looked like a young girl, Laura was actually the head of the manor.

However...

“Yes, Mistress. I am present.”

The response was muted, like an almost inaudible whisper, and it came from the young man kneeling at her feet. He was Laura’s subordinate, Isaac, one of the many servants working at the Latuule manor. Although he appeared young, and only seemed to be in his early twenties, he had a certain refinement to how he moved. He gave off the aura of a seasoned veteran.

Laura turned her eyes to him, and, for a while, was silent. Then...

“...As of late, Isaac, I sense that the atmosphere in the streets of Maalt has grown...dark.”

Isaac had sworn an oath of absolute loyalty to his mistress. But what exactly was Laura going on about...? Isaac didn’t understand, but he held his tongue, waiting in silence. Laura soon after posed a question to her loyal servant.

“Why do you think that is?”

“If I had to guess, it would be because winter is coming. The flow of adventurers in Maalt, and their activities, would naturally slow down. This, in turn, could lead to the pulse of the town stagnating. That is my humble assumption.”

Isaac’s assumptions were accurate. The people of Maalt were preparing to face a harsh winter. As a result, their consumption of goods decreased, taking away a certain sense of vibrance from the streets.

But this was by no means a bad thing. It was a seasonal phenomenon one could expect to see in any town or city. It was hardly something to be overly concerned about. The liveliness would return to Maalt once spring rolled around.

But Laura still had her reservations.

“I would personally like for that feeling of liveliness to return to the streets of Maalt during this season.”

“...Yes. Of course.”

It was a sudden, unprecedented suggestion, but Isaac would never disobey the wishes of his mistress.

As if drawing some strength from Isaac’s nod, Laura smiled in return before continuing on with her statement.

“However, I am at a loss as to what could be done to achieve such an effect. Isaac, Look into this, if you would. Please head out to Maalt and collect some opinions from the townspeople.”

“By your command.”

Isaac understood Laura’s requests, up until this point. This was yet another one of his mistress’s flights of fancy.

Laura was often very free. She would often seek one thing or other to alleviate her boredom, and the theme for this particular request was to “bring the liveliness back to the townsfolk of Maalt.”

Isaac understood this phenomenon well enough. His mistress would never change her mind until her request was fulfilled, and it was with that knowledge that he set off to the cold streets of Maalt.



“...Liveliness? Hmm... If I have something nice to drink, that’s enough for me, ya see?” all the middle-aged adventurers said as they burst into a collective peal of laughter at the local tavern.

“Well, well. If only there’d be many more handsome young men like yourself! Good for the eyes, I’d say.” Such was the opinion of an older lady who’d been making preserved foods for sale in the marketplace, giving Isaac a few hearty slaps on his shoulder for emphasis.

“I’d love to see a really strong monster!”

“I wanna see a parade! Like the one they have in the capital!”

“How about street performers?”

“Cheerful music is the best!”

“Oh, I’d really like to see a nice performance or two.”

Isaac had thought to ask some children as well, only for them to laugh and provide him with a deluge of ideas. Though, the children’s wishes were more honest than their adult counterparts’, and Isaac personally found that easier to understand. He thought they made for a good point of reference.

“I suppose this is the gist of it. I should return to the mansion and report on my findings.”

With that, Isaac ran all the way back to the Latuule manor.



“Hmm... I see. I see...”

Laura nodded as she listened to Isaac’s findings. It seemed like the butler had adequately performed his task.

But Laura’s goal had yet to be fulfilled. They were merely at the information gathering phase. It was still a bit of a mystery as to how one would have the streets become lively.

Laura abruptly stood up, as if suddenly struck by an idea. She immediately turned to Isaac.

“So you see, Isaac, clearly the solution would be to do all those things!”

*Whatever does she mean...?*

While Isaac did have the thought in his mind, he didn’t ask his mistress such a thing. Instead, Isaac began issuing orders to every single servant in the Latuule manor at an astounding speed. It was almost as if the somewhat stagnant atmosphere moments ago had never existed.



“What’s that...?”

The first one to notice was a child. From an unseen point far away, faint notes of seemingly cheerful music could be heard. The child looked up, gazing into the distance. He pulled on his mother’s clothes. She, too, looked in the same direction. Upon doing so, however, the two noticed a giant monster plodding along.

“Aaaaiieee?! O-Oh...? Hmm? No, it’s... It’s man-made, isn’t it?”

It looked almost like the real thing—a most intricately sculpted, dragon-like figure was moving down the central roadway, powered by mysterious, unseen forces. The dragon’s artificial nature was made clear by a flamboyantly dressed individual riding on its head. The figure waved to the wide-eyed mother and child, as well other equally surprised individuals on the street. It wasn’t possible for a real dragon to be so docile otherwise. There had been rumors of similar puppets in the capital.

“Man-made? I see! It’s really impressive. There are so many people!”

A closer look revealed a parade of people following after the dragon, each of them dressed equally as stylish. As well, each of them seemed to have a different talent to showcase. Jugglers, mimes, acrobats—there were even some clowns who amused the onlookers with their interesting and silly movements.

Following the performers’ parade was an elevated, float-like vehicle, on which seemed to be hosting a play inspired by an old legend, but clearly with its own twists and turns.

The children running happily beside the parade were in turn surprised by the clowns, although they were offered a treat of honey after their tricks.

“It’s amazing...” the child’s mother said, despite herself. Many of Maalt’s townsfolk thought the very same.

Soon, more townsfolk showed up as word of the performing troupe spread. It didn’t take long for the township of Maalt to feel like it was in the middle of a

festival.

Somewhere along the way, a spacious platform had been set up in the plaza, along with various merchants and hawkers offering various street snacks and alcohol. And so it came to be that the crowds went wild, the townsfolk almost shoving each other out of the way as they rushed toward the stalls...

After this event, the townsfolk of Maalt all found themselves with a singular question:

*“Was it all just a dream?”*

Although attempts were made to figure out just how, for whom, and why this event was hosted, not a single one managed to uncover the truth...



“Was that to your satisfaction, Mistress?” Isaac asked, as the two arrived back at the manor after the festivities.

Even though they were still dressed as clowns, and hardly fit the sombre décor of the Latuule manor, neither of them seemed to mind.

Laura turned to Isaac, saying, “Very much so. The townsfolk enjoyed themselves, no? We should really do this again sometime, Isaac.”

The entire parade had been a Latuule Family Production. Although Isaac had doubts about appearing in public with such attire again, he’d never dream of going against his mistress’s wishes.

“But of course.”

## **The Old Adventurer**

The jaws of a huge monster were closing in...

On who, you ask? A youth, about twenty years of age...

There was nothing I could have done as I was fighting another monster. I did



what I could to rush to his side, to help him, but...I soon heard him shouting.

“Father!”

I...



“Hey. Hey, gramps!”

I slowly woke up, thanks to all that shouting next to my ear. I found a young adventurer before me as I finally opened my eyes. He was supposedly over twenty, but he had quite the youthful face.

His adventurer rank was Bronze-class. He was by no means a newbie. In fact, he was a veteran of several years, but was unable to advance beyond his current rank. Quite the common type, you know.

His name was Rentt Faina. It was then that I remembered I’d made a request of Rentt. As such, I opened my mouth to speak.

“Ah... My bad. I’m old now, as you can see. Sometimes I just feel the desire to sleep.”

“Gramps... I mean, I’m keeping a lookout, so that’s fine, but do be careful,” Rentt said with an exasperated look.

It was midnight. A fire was burning on the side of the road. Rentt was the one who’d lit it. He wasn’t much of a fighter, but he was a great adventurer in so many ways.

The request I’d made of him was to escort me to a certain village. Even so, I did intend to fight myself, but it was difficult to do everything on my own.

I turned to look at him. “My bad, Rentt...”

“It’s fine, don’t worry about it. More importantly...the village is near, right?”

“Yes, that’s right.” I nodded in response. “Maybe only about two hours more on foot. But I should really apologize, Rentt... I imagine you’d want a better-paying job...”

“It’s okay, really. It’s your last adventure, gramps. Weren’t you somewhat famous in Maalt during your youth, Lazaat the adventurer?”

Did he really believe all those tales? Well, he did ask...

Lazaat the adventurer, who’d been adventuring all these years—that was indeed me. But this time, I was truly going to give it all up.

“I wonder, huh...? I don’t really think I was anything special, you know? You were the only one willing to accept this request of mine after all.”

In truth, I’d thought some of my old friends from back then would take the request, but, in reality, only Rentt was up to it. They’d turned me away even if I went to them personally. The admiration of others is an easy thing to lose...

Rentt, however, had this to say to me:

“Everyone was probably busy with their own requests, right? In any case, we have to be up early tomorrow. Another thirty minutes until you hand over the lookout shift to me, gramps. Don’t fall asleep on me now.”

“Ah... Perhaps it is as you say then.”

It didn’t take long to feel sleepy, and I almost doze off again in... What was it? Five minutes? It was never like this back then.

As I thought...now was a good time...to retire.



The very next day, Rentt and Lazaat reached their destination: the village Lazaat had lived in previously...

“Is it really here, gramps?”

“Yeah, it is. Well, that’s what I want to say... See. Right here. This was where my house used to be.”

Lazaat approached what appeared to be a completely collapsed ruin. They were the remains of what was once a house. Similar sights greeted them as they turned this way and that; the surrounding houses had all been destroyed.

This village had been all but abandoned quite some time ago. No one lived in its ruins now.

The reason Lazaat made this trip...

“I couldn’t care less about the house. More importantly...”

Lazaat plodded through the ruins of the village and kept walking forward for a while. Rentt followed closely after.

The path eventually opened up into a small clearing, revealing ten earthen mounds, each marked with simple wooden symbols.

“Graves, huh...”

“Yeah. As you can see, my wife and son both rest here. I...couldn’t protect them.”

Lazaat reminisced about the days back when he used to live in this village. About the days when he, the strongest and most capable swordsman, drove back monsters on a daily basis. As well as about the horde of monsters that had passed through one day, trampling and destroying the village. About his guilt as the only survivor of that incident...

Lazaat’s son, too, had been helping, doing his part to protect the village. There were simply too many monsters. There was nothing he could do.

Although he slayed and destroyed every single monster that had nested here after the incident, that didn’t make things any better... All Lazaat could do was kneel before each and every grave, offering his heartfelt apologies.

“It isn’t your fault...” Rentt called out to Lazaat as he went about his rounds. But his voice trailed off—the younger adventurer didn’t finish his sentence.

He, too, was one who fought. Perhaps he understood well enough that those words weren’t always a form of salvation.

“Hmm... Kept you waiting, Rentt?”

Lazaat, done with his last prayers, stood up and turned around, only to see a large monster looming behind Rentt.

A Sylph Drake.

Slowly, it opened its jaws, as if to swallow Rentt whole. Rentt seemed unaware.

Sylph Drakes were a draconic subspecies of monster that lived in the forests. They were very skilled at concealing their presence. Even Lazaat wouldn't have noticed it had he not turned around and come almost face-to-face with it.

It was obvious a warning to Rentt at this moment in time would do little. What could he do then?

In that instant, Lazaat saw an image of his son flash through his mind. More vibrant than anything else was that one image, seared in his memory, of how he'd made an error in judgment and failed to save his son.

Would he apologize again? Offer prayers again? No. He'd do nothing like that. He couldn't allow himself to do anything like that.

Lazaat was filled with a single desire. This time, he'd undoubtedly save his son!

The very moment Lazaat steeled himself and his resolve, he drew his blade faster than the eye could see. With mana running through his body, he darted past Rentt, his posture low. Rentt's eyes widened, unable to comprehend what had just happened. Lazaat, however, had already sprinted past Rentt at this point, and swung his blade down decisively on the creature's neck, its jaws still wide open. With a smooth motion, Lazaat's blade sliced cleanly through its prey, and soon enough, the head of the Sylph Drake was on the ground. The beast's body soon crumbled, falling onto the ground with a deafening rumble. It was then Rentt realized what had come to pass.

"...Gramps... You really saved me..."

"Ah, it's nothing... Don't worry about it. I, too, felt like I'd tidied up some loose ends from my past. Thank you, Rentt..."



And so it came to be that Rentt and Lazaat's short trip had ended. They came

here to pay their respects, and that they did.

After harvesting the Sylph Drake's materials and magic crystal, the pair returned to Maalt.

"Well then, Rentt. As of today, Lazaat the adventurer is officially retired. Have to return my adventurer's card too... But do come have some tea with me sometime."

Rentt seemed a little panicked at Lazaat's statement.

"Ah, no. Wait just a while, gramps. Just a bit..."

Lazaat didn't understand what Rentt was going on about. He tilted his head in confusion slightly, unsure about the strange wait. In the next instant, an audible "pop!" rang through the air, as if a small explosive had gone off. Following that, the sound of musical instruments could be heard. Then...

"Mister Lazaat! Thank you for all your hard work as an adventurer up till now!"

That statement seemed to be spoken by many voices at once.

Confused, he turned, looking around him, realizing he was surrounded by adventurers, many of them with familiar faces. They all had cups and steins in their hands, their faces all smiles.

"Gramps." Rentt approached the old adventurer. "As you can see, we're officially holding your retirement ceremony today. You'll be attending, right?"

"You for real, Rentt?"

"Of course. Everyone felt really bad for turning down your request, but their hands were tied, you see! They were all preparing for today! So they asked me to help..."

"I-Is that right. I see, I see..."

Surprised, but somewhat moved, the many adventurers soon approached Lazaat, each one greeting him, offering words of thanks or praise for how Lazaat had lived his life as an adventurer up till now. Everyone had been helped by Lazaat at some point. He'd done good work in this township of Maalt. Those words warmed up old Lazaat's heart.

After losing his wife and son, he'd continued adventuring, thinking he was good for nothing else. But perhaps... Perhaps there was some meaning to it after all.

"...Rentt."

"Hmm?"

"Maybe...adventuring isn't so bad after all."

"Yeah... I want a retirement ceremony and celebration of this scale when I go, too, you know?"

"That'll be up to you from now on, no? Work hard!"

"That's what I'll do, gramps. Make sure you're still alive by then!"

"Just how old are you hoping I'll get, Rentt?"

"Hahaha!"

## **The Love of Trees**

"A request? For me...?"

I, Rentt Faina, Bronze-class adventurer, had been casually looking at the request board at the Adventurer's Guild when an old lady suddenly spoke to me. From what I understood, she'd been waiting at the guild's cafeteria corner, inspecting adventurers as they went by.

While most clients chose not to interact too much with their clients, instead posting their requests up on the boards, there were occasionally those who preferred to do the opposite. To be precise, these clients preferred to choose adventurers, communicate, and trade in person.

In the end, however, it'd still be considered a guild contract.

"Yes... I would like you to find out more about how my son is doing."

A request much like the ones an information broker or detective agency would receive... It was a request somewhat different than what most adventurers were used to. That was why I kindly explained to the old lady...

“If your request is of that nature, would it not be best to head to an information broker instead?”

“I would have done so if he were still within these walls... But my son had gone outside of Maalt... He isn’t all that strong, so I think it may have been difficult for him...”

“...I see.”

While information brokers had many combat-capable agents at their disposal, someone unfamiliar with the trade wouldn’t know that... In which case, coming to an adventurer would be the next more sensible thing to do. If anything, it’d perhaps be the *most* sensible thing to do.

“You would like me to find out more about how he is doing? Has he perhaps committed a crime, or...?”

For instance, he could’ve been involved in smuggling illegal goods, and traces of that had been found... If that were the case, even the most concerned parent would probably be interested to know what was going on.

I explained my views to the old lady.

“Ah, no, it’s nothing quite like that...” she said before launching into an explanation.

To summarize, the old lady was apparently the current owner of a relatively large shop. Her son was the heir to the establishment. As a result, the old lady wanted her son to get married sometime soon, but there were no candidates available. So she’d brought up the subject of an arranged marriage, but her son didn’t seem too eager at the notion. Although a date had already been arranged, and he was to attend, her son wasn’t interested at all, even refusing to show up for basic negotiations.

But the old lady was flexible. She was willing to meet any other woman her son had been seeing if he did indeed have someone in mind. She just couldn’t understand why he wouldn’t say anything on the matter, or why he refused to engage with the process at all. Her husband told her to leave the son alone, but the old lady was worried.

That was all I understood about their mother-and-son relationship. From that,

I gathered that her son would leave Maalt at the exact same hour every week. Due to the fact that he was leaving Maalt, it wasn't possible to follow him. The old lady, however, suspected that he may be seeing a woman outside Maalt's walls. If that were the case, she very much wanted to know what type of person this mystery woman was, hence the request...

At least, that was what I made of it. It wasn't all that problematic. All I had to do was report what I saw to the old lady.

"I understand. I shall accept your request. However, I will not be giving your son any opinions about his activities. Is this all right?"

"Yes, of course. I leave it in your capable hands."

With that, I signed the appropriate contract documents with the old lady.



"...Oh, there he goes."

I'd been waiting in front of the old lady's abode. A youth soon exited the premises exactly at the time I'd been informed of. It must be the old lady's son, Evie.

Evie looked like quite the tough guy. He had this rough feel about him, which were charming in its own way, I supposed. Quite different from how I was, but that was another issue...

Upon confirming that Evie was indeed on the move, I slowly followed behind him. Unlike his appearance, Evie's mannerisms were careful, calculated. He kept a constant vigil of his surroundings as he advanced.

But he was an amateur. There was no way he'd be aware of me, given that I could even tail wild animals and escape detection.

I tailed him, as planned. It continued on without incident for a while.





“So he really made it outside Maalt. On top of that, this direction is...”

The direction Evie was headed in was a particularly populated part of the forest. Monsters roamed these grounds. Judging by how he had a weapon on his person, I supposed Evie himself understood this well enough.

His skill, however, was somewhat below that of an adventurer's, and this was all very dangerous for him. But for him to come all this way...was it really a woman he was seeing?

I continued tailing him, only to discover that Evie had stopped at a clearing. It was an open space, surrounded by tall camphor trees. Whatever was he doing here...?

Then, it happened.

“Sana. Come out. It's me, Evie...” he spoke, facing a certain tree on the side of the clearing.

At his words, something fell from the tree's branches, resembling a single drop of water. The droplet soon enlarged, taking on a humanoid shape.

“Evie...you've come.”

“Yes...I have.”

The existence known as Sana was, from what I could see, a most beautiful woman. But she was visibly different than the average human being. She was something between a monster and spirit: a Dryad.

So this was why Evie had refused to entertain any talks of marriage—he'd been charmed by this Dryad.

What could I do about all this? Even considering the circumstances, Dryads weren't entities that could co-exist with humans. They did whisper of things like love to humans, but that was all so they could drain their life force.

Of course, I couldn't possibly deny that there were instances of true love in certain cases, but from what I could see, the strength was obviously fading from Evie's body as he remained in Sana's embrace. It was obvious that his life energy was being siphoned away.

After a while...

“Well then, Sana. I’ll come again.”

“Yes, I’ll be waiting, Evie...”

And so the two parted, with Evie returning to Maalt. The Dryad hadn’t taken all of his energy, probably so she could keep him alive for as long as possible.

*It seems...I have no choice but to slay her.*

I waited for Evie’s presence to fade before approaching the camphor tree myself.

“Dryad. Show yourself. Do not concern yourself with that man any further.”

The tree’s surface twisted and turned, and Sana soon showed herself. Quite different than how it was with Evie, perhaps because the Dryad knew there was no need to put on a show for someone like me.

“You are an adventurer...?”

“Yes. But that’s none of your concern. If this goes on, Evie will surely lose his life sometime soon. We can’t have that happen, you see? I’m here at the request of Evie’s mother.”

Unexpectedly, Sana’s eyes widened at my words.

“Evie’s mother?! I... I see. But yes... Yes, I apologize. I will not meet with him anymore... However, I cannot move on my own, as you can see. Touching him is enough to steal his life away; I have no control over it. I don’t think I am in a position to ask anything of you, but...could you cut down this camphor tree? If you do so, I will disappear.”

“...You really love Evie, huh...?”

“Is that strange?”

“No, but...now that I know, this becomes difficult to do. Is there any other way?”

“No. Ah, but I do have a wish...”

Sana reached out with her branches, dropping something onto my hands.

“A sapling of mine. Could you please hand that to Evie? It will grow if planted. It would take a few centuries, perhaps, before it becomes a Dryad like me... But with this, we will be together forever.”

“You... All right. I understand. I shall respect your resolve, and I shall deliver this sapling. I’ll be cutting you down now...”

“Please do.”

And so I cut down the camphor tree. With enough mana, even a sword could have the cutting power of an axe. It was still difficult work, given my abilities.

Sana then disappeared, as expected. I supposed that was simply how Dryads were in the natural order of things.



“I see... Oh, I’ve done something terrible...” the old lady said, tears streaming down her face as I informed her of what had transpired.

Even if it were a monster, it had a heart, and now, the Dryad was dead. The Dryad was a being that loved her son, and her son, in turn, felt the same way. It made sense she would feel a deep sense of guilt at this entire series of events.

“I was the one who did it after all... Oh, and one more thing. This is the sapling I spoke of. She requested that it be handed to Evie.”

“Yes, I understand. Thank you very much.”

With that, the old lady paid the appropriate reward and left the guild. Not exactly a request that left a good taste in my mouth, but had I not intervened, Evie would have lost his life. There was nothing I could do other than tell myself that there was no other way...

Some time after the event, I heard that Evie had attended a few marriage proposal meetings, and eventually did get married. I also heard that Evie had planted a camphor sapling in his backyard. For some reason, I was sure of the fact that this tree would watch over Evie and his family forever, right until the end of his bloodline...

# Bonus Glossary

## Adventurer

An individual who engages in the act of adventuring. Typically belongs to an Adventurer's Guild (henceforth referred to as "the guild"), accepts requests, and battles strong monsters. Adventurers often cross paths with many mysteries of the land.

They are ranked according to power and capability. Listed here are the ranks, in ascending order: Iron-class, Bronze-class, Silver-class, Gold-class, Platinum-class, Mithril-class.

## Monster

Existences usually harmful to humans or hostile toward human life. They are typically found outside established towns/communities, or within labyrinths. There are many different types of monsters, such as Skeletons. Monsters in labyrinths naturally reappear after a period of time, in a phenomenon colloquially known as "repoping." Monsters that have gained considerable experience and/or lived for a particularly long period of time eventually become stronger, sometimes undergoing Existential Evolution, evolving into stronger versions of themselves.

## Mana

A resource and power necessary for magecraft, or the casting of any magical spells. It is considered a relatively uncommon power, and even fewer

individuals are born with it. In the case of humans, one in every fifty individuals is born with reserves of mana in their bodies. Only one in a thousand individuals successfully mature into proper mages.

## **Spirit**

Also known as chakra or prana, spirit is said to be the power of life (the life energy that resides in living beings). Since spirit is the origin of an organism's life energy, it is a power that anyone can possess, and similarly one that most people subconsciously use to continue living. As a result, it is somewhat difficult to become naturally aware of this power, and a certain degree of talent or training is required to utilize it properly.

Spirit can be used to strengthen one's physical abilities, or to even obtain stamina that would otherwise be unheard of in normal humans.

## **Divinity**

A special power granted to those who have been blessed by spirits or gods. The chance of an average human being ever wielding said powers are astronomically low. More often than not, divinity is wielded by certain practitioners of it, such as men and women of the cloth.

"Healing" divinity is often used to heal and cure illnesses and injury. "Cleansing" divinity, on the other hand, is commonly used to cleanse and destroy monsters of the Undead persuasion.

As one's divinity is usually the result of a blessing, the blessed individual usually finds themselves able to communicate with the spirit or god that bestowed the blessing.

## **Adventurer's Guild (The Guild)**

An organization with numerous branches and presences throughout the land. Each guild is headed by a guild master. The guild manages adventurers in addition to taking requests and dealing with other aspects of adventuring. The guilds are also responsible for administering rank progression tests. These tests take more than just combat capability into consideration, as one's behavior and etiquette as an adventurer are also scrutinized. As a result, these tests are not easily completed.

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by Yu Okano

Translated by Shirley Yeung Edited by Kris Swanson

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