

World 561

Chapter 561: Mysterious Stranger

"Who are you?" Jack called out to the hooded stranger. He tried using Inspect at the same time, but all he got were question marks. It should be the effect of that hooded coat, similar to his Concealment Coat.

The stranger didn't answer the question. He instead said, "You are impressive to be able to kill a special elite above your level. But still, your level is too low. You are too weak. I can't use you, I can only hope the others that are on their way here are more powerful. As for you, leave this place at once if you still value your life."

Jack had no idea what the dude was spouting. His voice also sounded masked. Jack could only tell that it was a man's voice, but couldn't be sure if it was the voice of an old man or a teenager.

"Are you behind the children kidnapping in this town?" Jack asked.

"Leave! If you still value your life," the hooded man repeated. His figure receded back into the fog.

Jack hurriedly chased after him, but he was nowhere to be seen. The fog soon cleared up and Jack could see the entire graveyard. It was still creepy but it didn't give him the chill as before.

He looked at his radar, it should be functioning normally now since he could see some white dots at the edge of his radar, those should be the natives in the town. Nothing nearby him though. Whoever the hooded person was, he was gone.

"The fog, ghouls, and banshee were his doing?" Jack asked no one in particular.

"If he was capable of that, that means he was rather powerful. Perhaps you should heed his warning and leave," Peniel said.

"I can't just leave missing children like that," Jack replied. He went to where the trail was before. The marking had disappeared.

"Aw, hell... Now we lost the only clue we have," Jack lamented.

"That was kind of you," Peniel said.

Jack turned to her and said, "Where did that come from? I am always kind."

"Well, I mean, since you have learned the natives of this world are simply what you people called NPCs. Something that your kind created. It was kind of you to still treat them so real."

"Didn't you hear what I said before? You all are as real as me and the other outworlders. My world has given its life to yours and now yours is as good as my past world. I forbid you to talk about real or fake things anymore."

"Aye, aye, captain!" Peniel said merrily and perched on Jack's head. "So, what will we do now?"

"Well, at least we know the kidnapped kids were brought here. Let's look around some more. See if we can gather any more clues," Jack said and started walking around the graveyard.

He couldn't find anything out of the ordinary. The graveyard ended on a cliff at one side. Multiple crypts were built into the cliff wall. One which was the largest was marked with the title of Count. That should be the crypt to the Count's father and the rest of his ancestors.

After spending more than an hour looking around, Jack finally gave up.

"What should we do now?" Peniel asked again.

"We rest. There is nothing else that can be done at the moment. Hopefully, tomorrow after receiving Brad's information, we have something to go on. Afterward, we will go meet the Count. Brad mentioned he had been the one spearheading the search all these years, he should have the most information."

"What about that mysterious hooded man?"

Jack shrugged. "If he decided to show up again, we will ask him. Otherwise, it would be a waste of time looking for him. We have even less clue about him."

Jack went back to the town. He was planning to ask for the location of the inn. But at night, the place was even more of a ghost town. No soul was seen on the street. He was the only one outside.

He thought about knocking on the door, but most of the house was boarded tight. He almost could not see any light from inside except the small gaps from the windows and doors. He doubted any of the owners would open them up for a stranger like him. Everyone here had been gripped by paranoia.

Jack then walked to where Brad's Tavern was. A tavern was usually lively at night, but he didn't expect the one here to be the same. As expected, it was shut tight and no light from inside at all. Brad must have gone back home. He must have only opened his tavern in the afternoon these days.

Seeing no alternative, he took out his Camouflage Tent and set it up beside the tavern. Actually, he doubted that there was even an inn in this town. This small town was too secluded, they must have very few visitors. An inn won't survive here.

He did his routine meditation again. After the meditation, he took out two magic staffs, one on each hand. Using his Hundred Synchronous Thoughts, he tried casting two spells simultaneously using both staffs. Only one spell formation appeared.

"Hey, why can't I dual-cast like Master or the Duke?" Jack asked.

"Outworlder was never meant to be able to dual-cast," Peniel answered. "I can't tell for sure about Master, but I suspect he can do it because he has more than one magic class. So it was like two magic classes were casting the spell simultaneously inside him."

"That's mean this is unique to him alone," Jack said.

"I suppose so."

"Hm, maybe I should have picked another magic class instead of Ranger. I could have dual cast then."

"Really? I thought you said you need speed to beat him?"

"I'm just joking. I won't be able to compete with him in terms of magic. That guy seemed to have the talent in that department. However, all the classes he chose are slowpokes, which means that is also the weakness I can exploit."

"Good. The Beastmaster elite class should be in line with that then. It was the third-fastest melee class just behind Assassin and Battle Monk. Additionally, once you get that class, I will take you to a special place where you can get a powerful shapeshifting form."

"Oh? Now I'm really looking forward to it. By the way, what about that combination spell Master exhibited when he dual-cast? Is that kind of spell not available to outworlder since we can't dual cast?"

"They can be done by outworlders. The difference was Master was the only one that can perform it by himself," Peniel answered. "A combination spell was supposed to be done by two magic-class outworlders. Two different spells can be fused into a more powerful one. For example, the one Master cast was the combination of Warlock's Hell Whip and Elementalist's Fireball. It creates a fused spell where the whip is thicker and stronger and is coated with the fire element, causing continuous flame damage to the one it catches."

"However, not everyone can do this combination spell. Aside from requiring two casters to be near one another, they also have to synchronize their casting. Too fast or too slow between their casting speed will cause each spell to be cast as a standard individual spell, they won't merge. Master can do it easily because his two spells came from one mind. For two different minds to synchronize their spells, that is a harder feat to achieve."

"Hm... I suppose you will need very good teamwork between the two casters to achieve that," Jack agreed.

"Aside from that, not all spells can be merged. There is a list for certain combinations," Peniel said.

"You know the list?"

"Are you not insulting me by asking that?"

"Great, you have to give the list to Jeanny or John when we return to Heavenly Citadel. The list is useless to me since I don't do well in teamwork. But this knowledge can help the other guild members to get stronger. Or have you informed them of this before?"

"No, they don't know about these combination spells yet. Okay, I will let them know when we meet them again," Peniel said.

Jack was about to call it a day and shut his eyes when Peniel asked him, "I have been wondering. You talked before with Wilted that there is a chance you will find out about Master's machine if you defeat him, right?"

"What about it?" Jack asked.

"If the machine can truly turn this world back to yours... Are you going to make the change?"

"That..."

"Never mind that! You don't need to answer. Good night!" Peniel uttered in a hurry before vanishing into her hidden dimension.

Jack could still talk with her psychically, but honestly, he didn't know what to answer. He knew what Peniel was getting at. If the world was changed back to the real world.. That meant all the natives of this game world would cease to exist, including her.

Chapter 562: Count Dante

The next morning after finishing his martial art training, Brad had still not yet appeared. The guy should be opening his tavern by afternoon. Even though the tavern no longer operated at night, no one was still coming to a tavern in the morning.

So Jack went out to the wilderness with Pandora to grind for exp. Thesylvania was built in an area with sparse and low-level monsters. Jack had to go further to find a decent leveling map. Thankfully, with Pandora's speed, getting to one in a short time was not a problem.

Jack was back again a couple of hours after noon. It was similar to the time when he arrived in this town yesterday, so Brad's tavern should be operational already.

When Jack arrived in the tavern, Brad was alone. There was no customer at all this time. Jack felt bad for the guy, but Brad seemed to have gotten used to it. He nodded at Jack with a grunt.

Jack sat in the bar counter chair opposite Brad as he poured a cup of wine. "Same as yesterday?" He asked.

"Same," Jack said. While in his mind, 'You are already pouring, won't it be awkward if I ask for a different drink?'

Brad put the cup in front of Jack, then said, "I've only managed to speak to some of the parents. Not everyone is eager to talk about their missing children considering how the fate of those children is still uncertain."

"I figure as much. Lay to me what you have learned. Anything helps," Jack said while sipping his wine.

"Open your map," Brad said.

Jack opened his Map. Brad interfaced with it, putting several custom markers on the map.

'A native can mark more than five markings on the map?' Jack asked Peniel through his mind.

'Yes. A native had no limitations. These markings are mostly related to a quest. Once the quest is completed, the markings will disappear by themselves,' Peniel answered.

After Brad was done, he said, "These are all the spots I have found out. The missing children were last seen there."

Jack studied the map. The town was not large. The markers were all over the place, but they were mostly near or average distance from the graveyard he came to yesterday. There was no marker at the farthest part of the town away from the graveyard.

It pointed to the graveyard again. Jack thought he might need to take another look at that place later, but he should talk to the Count first.

"Thank you for your help, Brad. I want to go see the Count now, he should be in his manor at this time, right?" Jack asked.

"He is there most of the time. He rarely comes out except when there are incidents, like another child goes missing for example."

"They only search for one day? I didn't see any large-scale search when I entered yesterday."

"They had given up on the search before noon. These incidents had happened so often that people almost didn't put hope in the search any longer. They just did it because they had to do something. Well, that's my reason anyway, I was also in that search. I had invited Ted and Mirian to come here to drink their sorrow away after that fruitless search."

"What about the two royal officers you said were stationed here?"

"Those two buffoons will just take action if a monster comes attacking the town. They were involved in the search in the first few years, but they aren't doing anything now."

"Where are they?"

"They should be in their station at the edge of this town. A bit further up on the hill where they could see the whole town and notice if any dangerous wilderness beast comes near. Open your map again, I will mark the place."

Jack opened the map for him and a new marker appeared.

"One last thing," Jack said to Brad. "Do you know of the oldest person still alive in this town? Preferably one who reached a hundred years of age."

"I know of no one that reached that age," Brad answered. "There is a granny I know who was over ninety years old though."

"Can you mark her address on my map as well?"

Brad gestured for him to open the map again. After Jack got this latest marker, he thanked the bartender and left.

"Why are you looking for the granny? Something to do with the children's case?" Peniel asked when they were outside.

"No, that one is for Aubelard. However, I have a gut feeling this children's case got something to do with this vampire we are looking for," Jack answered.

"What makes you say that?"

"Just a feeling," Jack said and shrugged.

"So, who are you going to visit first?"

"The Count first. He was more active on the missing cases after all this time. He should have more information, if any," Jack answered.

The Count's mansion was more impressive when viewed up-close. The mansion was built in gothic style using primarily black granite stone. It painted an intimidating presence with its scale. Only half of the building was visible, the other half was recessed into the cliff wall.

Jack had been knocking on the door a few times already. He was starting to wonder if anyone was home when the door opened. A skinny and rather hunchbacked old man in a butler attire greeted him, "May I know who you are and the purpose of your visit?"

"My name is Storm Wind," Jack introduced himself. "I am an adventurer on a quest to solve the missing children case. I believe your Count has been working on this incident for a long time. I would like to help. Can I ask for an audience with the Count?"

The butler scrutinized Jack from the top to bottom, before saying, "Wait here." And closed the door.

'Can't he ask me to wait inside?' Jack grumbled within.

He stood there waiting for several long minutes. So long that Jack wondered if the butler had perhaps forgotten about him. He was just about to knock on the door again when it opened. The same skinny hunchbacked butler was there. He said, "Please come in. The Count will meet you."

"Thank you," Jack said and went in. He followed the butler to the main hall. The hall was mainly dark due to the black stone material. Only a few artificial lights illuminated the large hall, giving it a gloomy atmosphere.

At one side of the hall was a very tall man, he was gazing at one of the paintings on the wall. The butler brought Jack to this person. Jack noticed the man was as skinny as the butler but was younger, Jack estimated from his appearance that the man was in his forties.

"Count Dante, this is the adventurer that wishes to speak with you," the butler announced with a bow.

The Count took his gaze away from the painting and looked at Jack. Jack made an inspect at the same time, the Count was registered as simply a civilian, same as any other common folks. Meaning he has no battle capacity.

"Greetings, Sir Count. My name is Storm Wind. I thank you for permitting me this audience," Jack said.

The Count made a gesture to the butler. The butler made another bow before going away.

"Do you like this painting?" The Count asked. Indicating the one he was viewing when Jack came in.

Jack took a look at the painting. It was some sort of unreal illustration depicting a close-up of a couple. The man was behind the woman kissing the neck from behind. The woman seemed to be in a trance from the kiss.

"It is... quite a romantic painting," Jack answered, which in his mind he actually didn't think that at all. Even though the painting seemed to be implying a gentle kiss, romantic was not the feeling Jack derive from the painting. He even felt as if the woman in the painting was unwilling. But Jack didn't know how

to describe the feeling. He was not an art critic, so he simply said what he thought the Count might want to listen to.

The Count simply smiled at Jack's words. He waved at Jack to follow as he brought Jack to sit on one of the sofas in the hall. Jack sat at the other one opposite the count. A small table was between them. There were already two cups of red wine on the table. The Count took one and sipped on it while he gestured for Jack to try his.

Jack didn't want to be rude so he gave the wine a taste. It was better than the one Brad served in his tavern. Being rich certainly had its perks.

"I heard that you are interested in the missing cases?" The Count finally talk on the topic Jack came for. "Might I ask why?"

"I have been presented a quest by one of the parents whose child had gone missing," Jack answered. "I don't know how much I can help, but I want to do what I can."

"I see... You are an outworlder, no?" The Count asked.

"Yes," Jack nodded.

"We did have rare visits by adventurers from time to time, but never an outworlder. I have heard of your kind, but this is the first time I lay eyes on one."

"We are not that special. We are similar to other native adventurers."

"That's not what I heard," The Count said. "There were already other native adventurers who tried to help in this case, without success. Perhaps an outworlder is what we need to finally solve it."

"I'm flattered by your confidence," Jack replied.

"However, I don't know how much you can learn from me. Honestly, I am as baffled as the rest of the town. For five years we searched for clues, tightened our security, enforcing curfews, but the children kept missing.. It seems all our efforts are in naught."

Chapter 563: Kingdom's Duty

"Anything will help, sir," Jack said. "Perhaps if you don't mind. Please recount the first case."

Count Dante gave a pondering expression. "The first case? Hm... It had happened so long ago. So many children had also gone missing throughout the year. Everything is a blur. You must excuse me for my bad memory."

"Was it started five years ago?" Jack asked, hoping that mentioning the time could jog the Count's memory.

"Five years ago...? Perhaps that's when we started taking the incident seriously," Count Dante said.

"What do you mean? It had happened even before?"

"I suspect so. There had been cases of people missing. Not just children. Before five years ago, we simply thought they probably wandered too far from the town and were taken by beast. Or they simply grew bored of this small town's quiet life and decided to move out to bigger towns without telling anyone. But when the frequency increased five years ago where children disappeared every few months, that's when everyone started to panic."

"So, there had always been people missing? Since how long ago?"

"I can't remember. Forgive me. There were always some, once in a while. I think even before my time."

Jack pondered about it for a bit. He then asked, "So, can you remember about the incident involving the first missing child from five years ago?"

"I'm sorry, my memory is hazy. It just happens too long ago and there were so many similar incidents already."

'Guess it can't be helped,' Jack thought, then said, "Well, at least we know the perpetrator had been in this town for a very long time."

"Perpetrator? Are you certain that we are dealing with the act of someone and not a beast?" Count Dante asked.

"If it is a beast, I doubt it can hide its presence for so long. You never found any clue throughout your search? Nothing at all?"

"Unfortunately, that is what truly happened. It was like the children had vanished into thin air."

"How thorough did you search? Do you search even the house of civilians?"

"We didn't at first. But when children continue to disappear, everyone finally agrees to drastic measures. Everyone's house has to be searched. We leave no stone unturned."

"Forgive me to ask, what about this mansion?" Jack asked.

The Count smiled upon Jack's question. "I volunteer to have mine as the first house to be searched."

"That was admirable. So, from all those searching, you still didn't find anything?"

The Count shook his head.

Jack thought for a bit. There was nothing much to go on. He then asked, "What do you know about the graveyard by the cliff-side?"

"What about it?" Count Dante asked, his eyebrows raised.

"What can you tell me about it?"

"It's a graveyard, where people bury their dead. What is there to tell?"

"Did you comb through that graveyard as well when you performed the search?"

"The townsfolk considered the place sacred. Many chose to not disturb that place, but yes, we did go through that place as well. However, there is nothing out of ordinary. It was just as fruitless as any other places."

"I see... How about the area outside the town? Is there any place that someone or something can use to live out of sight? Like a cave or something like that."

"We did think of that. At one time we expand our search to rather far away from the town. Of course, we have to ask the two soldiers stationed in this town to follow us for that. Otherwise, we will be in trouble when we run into monsters. I have to pay them to make them follow us, such useless soldiers. Anyway, we combed every place, but no suspicious person nor any possible hiding place."

Jack didn't think this case was the deed of a stranger hiding outside, anyway. He still didn't believe that a stranger can go around the town undetected for so long, but he just had to ask to make sure.

Jack sat back as he thought about what he learned. The Count, upon seeing Jack's serious expression, said, "You are truly committed to this, aren't you? I always hear that your kind is interested only in profits. I'm glad that you don't seem that way. I truly hope that you can help us solve this problem. This town is hurting due to this case. If this continues, I'm afraid everyone might decide to just leave this town. If that happens, it will just be me and my son left."

"Why can't you leave as well?" Jack asked.

"Go where? I'm nobody out there. All my belongings are here. My ancestors had lived in this place for several centuries. I can't just leave our ancestral home behind. I will live and die with this town."

Jack respected the man's determination and his honor to his ancestor. He was more determined to solve this case so that this town didn't turn into a real ghost town. "Is your son home?" Jack asked.

"He is... But he is not exactly a social type. I'm afraid he won't meet with you if you wish to talk to him. There is nothing he can tell you anyway. He rarely goes out and he never joins the search, so there is no point speaking with him."

"It's all right. I think I have taken enough of your time," Jack said. "If I have anything else to ask, do you mind if I come to visit again?"

"My house is always open to one who is willing to help this town," Count Dante said.

The Count summoned his hunchbacked butler to usher Jack to the exit. Coming out of the mansion, Jack looked to his left. The mansion was built on a slope. From up here, he could see the graveyard some distances away down there. He was thinking if he should go check that place again but decided he will do it later.

Jack headed next to the station where Brad informed was the place where he could find the two soldiers. The place was as Brad said, at the far edge of the town. As if the town wanted nothing to do with the soldiers or the other way around.

"By the way, I just remember I haven't established a teleportation link with this town's Zone Portal," Jack said. "I haven't seen the portal, maybe it is in the soldier's station there? Such portal usually is guarded, right?"

"There are some cases of secluded small towns and villages without any zone portal. Considering only two soldiers are stationed here, it is safe to assume this place is one such town," Peniel said.

"Oh? That means if I have to leave for an urgent matter, I can't teleport back here directly later?"

"Yes. You have to come back here the old-fashioned way."

"Hopefully, the guild doesn't encounter any urgent issue," Jack prayed.

The station was a simple wooden shack. When Jack arrived, he saw two soldiers laying down outside half-naked and sunbathing. This place was one of the rare parts of the town where sunlight still touch outside of midday. The two were surprised to find they had a visitor.

While they scrutinized Jack, Jack also used Inspect on the two.

Jonathan (Special Elite Human, Knight), level 50

HP: 220,000

Harker (Elite Human, Sergeant), level 48

HP: 95,000

The two were quite strong, Jack thought. He might be able to take Harker on, but Jonathan was still out of his league. This informed Jack that Jonathan was the senior of the two, the man also looked much older. so Jack walked toward him.

"An outworlder? Are you lost, boy?" Jonathan asked with an irritated tone. He was probably annoyed somebody disturbed their sunbathing moment.

Instead of answering, Jack said with a stern tone, "Aren't you the soldier of the kingdom? What are you doing lazing around here while the townspeople need your help?"

"What help? Is there any monster attacking this town?" Jonathan asked with a condescending tone.

Harker stood up and looked over at the town. "I don't see no monster, boss," he said with a ridiculing tone.

"Then there is nothing to do. Look, boy, you are trespassing into an army's station. I can catch and apprehend you. Give you a little whooping to teach you some manner. So why don't you do yourself a favor and get the hell out of here?"

"I've seen many Themisphere soldiers, but I have never seen such a dishonorable one like the two of you. You are a disgrace to the kingdom!" Jack uttered.

"Why you... How dare you! I will teach you what dishonorable is like!" Harker came over menacingly.

Jack took out his Themisphere nobility faction badge just as Harker about to grab him.

"Vi—Viscount...?!" Harker uttered with a gulp, he jumped back involuntarily.

"You want to try anything to me? Be prepared to face the consequences," Jack threatened.

Jonathan frowned seeing the badge. He sat up from his leisurely position. "What the hell is a Viscount doing here?" He asked.

"I'm investigating the missing children case in this town. I hope you two will do your kingdom's duty and assist me with it," Jack said.

Harker was nervous hearing Jack's request. He looked over to Jonathan, who scowled and said, "to hell with this kingdom's duty. I have nothing to do with it. Why do you think the two of us are stationed in this god-forsaken town? It is a punishment.. You go ahead and report us for not helping with the missing case, it's not like they can punish us any worse. Unless there is a monster attacking, don't expect us to lift a hand!"

Chapter 564: Getting Bodyguards

Jack was surprised. So these two were bitter for being stationed in this backwater town? No wonder they were so unhelpful. But still, Jack suspected it must be their own attitudes that caused them to receive such punishment.

"That is no excuse to not lend a helping hand to civilians when they needed it," Jack said. "You are dishonoring your status as the Themisphere soldier."

Jonathan spat. "I can dishonor them however I like. We won't do anything to you, but you can't make us do anything as well. You are not of the military, we have no obligation to listen to your command. Unless you are a Duke, piss the hell off, kid!"

"Yeah, what can our superior do anyway? Demote us? Go ahead, we don't care. No use for rankings in this shitty town anyway," Harker added.

Jack didn't go. He stood there and watched the place. It was indeed a pitiful place to live. The shack was too small. There was no facility to speak of.

The two soldiers who saw this young noble was not leaving simply ignored him. They laid back in their comfortable positions. Despite their tough talk, they still didn't dare to lay a hand on Jack, the punishment would not be a simple demotion.

Finally, Jack said, "How about this. I am a good friend to the third prince. I am also pretty tight with Commander Quintus. You help me solve this missing case, I will have a word with them about reinstating you back to the capital, or other main cities if you prefer. What do you say?"

"Hm?" Jonathan turned back to Jack. "You know them? A kid like you?"

"Third Prince? The last I heard of him was that he was just a cadet. He has no power to speak of," Harker said, sitting back up.

"He had now decided to fight for the throne against his two brothers. I am helping him on that," Jack answered.

"You? Haha. Two kids trying to fight a grown-up battle? Good luck with that! Haha," Jonathan laughed mockingly.

"Still, Commander Quintus is fair," Harker said to Jonathan. "I always like him better than our commander. If he can pull some strings..."

"How can we know it is true? This kid could just be spouting bullshit, for all we know," Jonathan replied.

"Well, I can't give you any proof other than my words," Jack said. "But how many chances do you think come your way. You let this one go and who knows how long someone else with the same offer comes rolling to this remote town? If you are not interested, then fine. Good day to you both."

Jack then turned around and made a show of leaving.

He was walking slowly, trying to give the two soldiers enough time to think. He was starting to think his ploy was not working when Jonathan called out, "Wait!"

Jack stopped but didn't look back. He called back, "What?"

"Come back here! We can talk," Jonathan said.

Jack walked back to them. When Jack was back in front of them again, Jonathan said to him, "We want to be in the capital and we want to be placed under Commander Quintus' camp."

"Okay, I will try my best and talk to the third prince and Commander Quintus to make that happen once I am back to Thereath. But being under Commander Quintus meant you will be under the third prince's camp. You don't have a good opinion about the third prince's chance just now, so why want to go to what you think is the losing side?"

"Because the other two sides are not appealing as well. We are originally under the second prince's camp. There are too many shady businesses there. Do you think the two of us are here because of our own deeds? We were being framed to take the fall for our superior's problem."

"What about the first prince?"

"Well, let's just say we have heard things about the soldiers under him. You make a mistake, it is not simply a slap on the wrist. The third prince might be a losing side, but at least we can enjoy our time in the capital first while he is fighting futilely for his ambition."

Jack was speechless. These two were just lazy bums. But he simply promised a talk to reinstate them, whether it happened or not, that was an entirely different thing. All that mattered now was getting their cooperation.

"All right, you have a deal," Jack said.

Jonathan nodded. "So, how can we help you?"

"What do you know about these missing children cases?"

"Nothing," Jonathan shrugged. "We were only involved the first few times when it started happening five years ago. We thought it was the deed of the beast. But after many futile searches, nothing turned up. It happened so many times that we think it was a waste of time anyway. So, we leave them to it. The townspeople will call us when a real monster shows up. That, we can help with. Chasing children who had vanished to God knows where? Nothing we can do."

'Very knightly,' Jack criticized inwardly. Outwardly, he said, "The Count said the missing cases might have happened before five years ago, not only to children. Do you know anything about that?"

"We only came here around six years ago," Harker said.

Jonathan confirmed, "That's right. One person was missing not long after we arrived, an adult though. Everyone thought he simply left to another city, so not much fuss about that incident."

Jack never expected much information from these soldiers, so he was not disappointed. He said, "All right. Now, for the real help I require from you two. I want you to accompany me as I investigate this case."

"You want us to be your bodyguards?" Jonathan asked, raising his eyebrows.

"Do you have any other better things to do?" Jack asked back.

The two soldiers looked at each other. Harker shrugged, implying that he would leave the decision to Jonathan. The senior soldier then said after some pondering, "Fine. So, we will just be following you around, right? But don't expect us to be your lapdog! We won't accept it if you order us to do this, or bring that, or any of that shit."

"Okay," Jack said. He just needed them for protection. The SS-difficulty indication was no joke. He suspected that at the end of this case would be a real powerful foe. Not to mention that mysterious hooded stranger he met at the graveyard. Jack was not sure if the person was an enemy. If he was, he would be a troublesome one as well.

"However, during a battle, you will need to follow my command," Jack said, this was so that he was considered party leader by the world system and granted exp for anything the two soldiers killed.

Jonathan thought for a second before saying, "Fine, but only if your orders make sense. If you ask us to sacrifice ourselves, don't expect us to listen!"

"Sure," Jack said. "All right, come on! Packed the weapons you need to bring."

"Now?" Harker asked.

'Damn! These lazy bums,' Jack complained in his mind. "Yes, now! The sooner we solve this case, the sooner I can go back to Thereath and put in a good word for the two of you. You want to get off this place as soon as possible, don't you?" Jack asked.

"Sure, sure!" Harker said, getting up and going inside the shack. Jonathan took his time to rise before walking slowly.

Not long after, the two came back out garbed in armor. Harker was carrying a pike while Jonathan had a halberd and a longsword by his waist. Now the two looked more like proper soldiers. With these two soldiers, Jack felt more secure.

Jack took the two of them back into town and headed directly to the graveyard. The sun had set by then. Not that it matters since the sunlight rarely reached the place. But still, Jack couldn't help but think why it just so happened that he had to visit the graveyard at night? Twice some more!

He half-expected the place to be covered by that mysterious fog again, but thankfully, it was not so.

"What the hell are we doing in this God-forsaken place?" Jonathan asked.

"The trail I followed the last time disappeared here," Jack explained. "Do you people examine this place when you still join the search?"

"I prefer to avoid burial ground," Jonathan said.

Harker supported with a strong nod.

Jack was spiritual but not superstitious, so he simply made prayer as respect before going ahead and checking the place out. He checked each tombstone, trying to see if there were anything out of place. Jonathan and Harker stood by the side and simply chat with each other. The deal was only for them to take action if Jack was in danger.

After more than an hour's search, Jack didn't pick up any clue. Not from his personal observation nor the magic of his God-eye monocle and Investigator talent.

When he was about to give up, he looked one more time at the largest crypt. It was the crypt of the Count's ancestors. He studied it. He felt that there was something out of place. After looking at it for a long time, he finally realized what had caught his attention.

The floor directly in front of the crypt doors was clean, as opposed to the others that were filled with leaves and dust.. It was as if someone cleaned the crypt, or the door was opened frequently.

Chapter 565: Secret Tunnel

Jack came to the floor in front of the Count's crypt. After closer inspection, there were curved scratch marks that only happened when the heavy crypt doors were opened. The mark was fresh, which meant that the doors were indeed being opened recently.

Ted mentioned the Count's father had passed away a long time ago. The Count had no relative other than his son who was still living. Then what was he doing opening the crypt's door? Did he have to go inside to pay his respect?

Jack looked at the crypt's door, there was a keyhole there. He thought for a while then made a decision. He looked around to make sure there were no other people present. He then called out to his two bodyguards, "You two, pay attention! If you see anyone is coming, let me know!"

"Huh?" The two were bewildered. Why did it sound like he was going to do something that he was not supposed to do?

The two then saw Jack take out a pair of lockpicks and were baffled to see him insert them into the keyhole of the crypt's door. Jack started to work with his lockpicks.

"Son of a...! Did you just ask two legally-appointed kingdom soldiers to stay watch while you illegally attempted breaking into private property? A sacred ground no less!" Jonathan exclaimed.

"Please don't talk so loud, I am concentrating," Jack said.

Jonathan was speechless at Jack's remark. He looked at his partner, to which Harker just shrugged. "He is a Viscount. I don't know, perhaps they are allowed some leniency?"

Jack was using his Enduring Lockpicks. The keyhole on the crypt's door was larger than usual, which meant it required a large key. However, due to this game world rule, the lockpicks magically adjusted themselves to still be able to work on this larger keyhole.

Jack was expecting to spend rather sometime lockpicking the door. He never experienced a time when lockpicking went smoothly. But as people said, there is the first time for everything. Before Jack exhausted all twelve counts of his Enduring Lockpicks, he had already heard the success notification.

Seeing Jack's astonished expression, Peniel said, "Probably this door's lockpicking difficulty is only equivalent to the bronze grade treasure chest."

The doors creaked as it opened outward. They only opened ajar. Jack inserted his hands into the small gap and pulled the doors to make them open wider. They were heavy, but his strength was just enough to do the task.

Once the opening was wide enough to allow entry, he said to the two soldiers, "Let's go."

"Hold on!" Jonathan uttered. "Not only did you ask us to stay watch while you lockpicked the door, but now you are also asking us to follow you in illegally trespassing that place?"

"Dude, you don't strike me as someone who follows the rules strictly. For goodness sake, you are lazing around sunbathing when you should be patrolling the street keeping order and security. Are you going to criticize me for this? If you feel uncomfortable, see it this way, we are doing an official investigation. I have a clue that points to this graveyard and this crypt. We are not trespassing, we are following a lead. Understand?"

The two soldiers looked at each other. Harker again shrugged.

"Let's go," Jack said again. He then slipped into the darkness of the crypt. The two soldiers reluctantly followed.

The inside was complete darkness.

"Uh, does anyone bring a torch?" Harker's voice was heard.

A glowing orb that illuminated their surroundings answered his question. Although Jack could see fine in the darkness, he cast the Illumination spell for his two companions. The walls were filled with indentations that housed an urn in some of them.

Jonathan and Harker showed some respect to these urns.

The Count's ancestors were cremated? He expected seeing mummified corpses actually, but this was better, less gross. The interior looked pretty much like a standard crypt. The inside was rather large, signifying the importance of the owner. Jack walked around, trying to find a clue.

He stopped when he was near the wall on the opposite side of the entrance. The reason he had stopped was because a marker had lit up on the wall.

Jack touched the marked wall. Any other time, he would have started hacking at the marked wall. But this was someone's property and he was not sure this marking on the wall got anything to do with the missing children case. So, he preferred to not demolish anything unless necessary.

He noticed a slightly protruded stone beside the marked wall. He touched the stone. It wobbled. He tried to pull the stone, it stuck. He then pushed it, the stone moved. Jack pushed it all the way until it was flat with the wall. A faint click was heard, then a rumble. The marked wall started to spin open.

'Oh... Tomb raiding style,' he thought as the wall opened. He then amusingly realized that he was indeed doing tomb raiding at the moment.

He peeked inside the opened wall, just darkness. Even his Dragon Eye only showed a long tunnel with darkness at the end.

He looked back to the two soldiers and nodded his head, gesturing for them to follow. The two were starting to regret making a deal with this outworlder viscount by now. But they were already here, might as well see it through. So the two followed Jack into the dark tunnel.

Jack's glowing orb continued to provide light to allow his two companions to see. The light did not reach too far, so the long dark tunnel got a truly eerie vibe. As if the darkness at the end of the tunnel could just spit out unknown nightmares at the three trespassers.

The tunnel got wider as they went deeper. It curved then had a sharp turn to the left, before going up in a slope.

It was heading towards the Count's mansion? Jack thought. Was this a secret passage that linked to the mansion? Some eccentric rich people sometimes built this kind of secret passage out of their residence.

Jack suddenly stopped. His two entourages also stopped when he did.

"Something's the matter?" Jonathan asked.

"Shh...!" Jack gestured to the two to be quiet.

"Do you hear that?" Jack asked after a while.

"Hear what?" Jonathan asked with slight annoyance. He was feeling rather vexed. They were relaxing at their place and this outworlder had to come and drag them into a gloomy and damp tunnel inside a tomb. He was about to ask this boy to just go ahead by himself when he did hear something.

It was a rapid tap-tap-tap sound. It sounded as if... footsteps? But very rapid and irregular. It's as if the one producing the sound moved swiftly then stopped, then moved again. It was also coming closer.

Jack was more sure because he saw the red dot on his radar. The reason he stopped was because of the red dot, the sound only came after.

"Ready your weapon!" Jack ordered as he took out Storm Breaker and Rapid Dazing Staff. The dot was red, meaning it was hostile from the start. He then scuffled to the two soldiers' backs.

"Hey, ready your weapon!" Jack exclaimed again when the two soldiers were just standing there looking at him. "You can't be my bodyguards if you are killed because of being careless."

The two thought Jack was overreacting. There was no strong monster in this area. This was probably just a stray weak monster that somehow got into the tunnel. But they still brandished their weapons when the sound was getting closer. That strange sound sent a chill down their spine.

The sound was close enough that they expected to see whatever making the sound to come into the light, but nothing did. Jack, on the other hand, saw on his radar that the red dot was now moving slowly towards them, as if creeping, maybe that's why they didn't hear the sound anymore.

'Strange, from my radar, whatever it is should have come into view already,' Jack thought.

While he was wondering, his eyes caught a slow movement from up there. He looked up at the ceiling and there it was. A grotesque being with a fully black body. It had a deformed humanoid shape, with very long but thin arms and legs. The four limbs bent in a way like a spider's legs. It had sharp claws that enabled it to crawl on the ceiling. The head was covered with disheveled hair, two tiny shining eyes peeked through the messy hair as if two bulbs. When it opened its mouth, it was full of sharp teeth.

"Above!" Jack yelled as he fired a Mana Bullet at the creature.

The creature jumped to the side evading the attack. It was fast and agile, its jump brought it to the sidewall before it kicked on it and propelled towards Jack. Harper was by Jack's left so stabbed his pike at the creature. It struck the creature and caused damage but the creature didn't retreat. It continued forward, used its long arm to swat Harper's pike. Its other arm swung at the same time and struck Harper's head, causing him to stumble to the side.

Jack used Inspect when the creature was tussling with Harper.

Deathless Draugr (Elite monster, undead), level 60

HP: 116,000

Chapter 566: Deathless

The level of this draugr was very high, higher than all three of them. However, Jonathan was one grade higher than it. The senior soldier immediately put himself in front of the monster. His long halberd matched the draugr's long arms which whipped around like whips.

Jack, who was at the most risk because of his low HP, retreated away. He cast Barrier before returning to shoot ranged attacks.

After regaining balance, Harper supported Jonathan's assault by flanking the draugr.

The draugr was fast, but Jonathan's halberd skill was not mediocre. Despite being a soldier exiled to this remote town, Jack could tell that he was above average than the other Themisphere soldiers at the same level.

Jonathan was not especially fast, but his halberd's attacking speed was. The weapon did not just stab, but swung around from different directions, preventing the draugr from jumping away. Harper stole opportunities to stab his pike from the side. The two's coordination was good. Jack surmised the two's relation must have gone a long way back.

The monster was not a pushover, though. Like most undead, it fought without any care to itself. It ignored defense and let the halberd and pike hit its body while its two arms lashed out relentlessly. Two sides suffered damages throughout the contest. But the monster's HP decreased at a faster rate, considering he endured assaults from three sources.

At one point when the draugr's HP fell below half, its eyes turned red as it uttered an ear-splitting screeching howl. The howl stunned the two soldiers for a second. Its body then spun around rapidly, the two arms spun like two deadly flails. The two soldiers were smashed aside by those make-shift flails.

Freed from the two soldier's repression, the draugr ran towards Jack.

"Shit! Why is it targeting me?" Jack uttered, at the same time, he fed ten mana cores to his Amulet of Summoning. A level 36 elite grade Rock Golem appeared.

The draugr's long arms smashed at the golem, who stumbled back. The golem was completely no match for the high-level draugr, but one thing the rock golem was good at, was its resistance against physical damage. So, Jack asserted control on the golem and had it forcefully slammed its body on the draugr, halting the undead's advance and pushing it back at the same time.

Jonathan and Harper had arrived from the back. The draugr was now confined by three opponents, with Jack shooting range attacks from a distance.

After some time, the draugr was at death's door. Jack summoned his Runestone of Luck as Jonathan made a final swipe of his halberd at the back of the monster's head. Its HP zeroed and it fell to the ground.

Jack breathed a relief. Could this monster be the perpetrator that took the children away? If it was so, then the case should be solved now. They just need to find this monster's lair inside here to search for the children or at least... their corpses.

"Hm?" Jack mumbled when he came forward to pick up the loots. He looked at the monster's body on the ground.

"Why is the body not vanish?" Jack asked. Peniel who was floating beside him shook her head. She didn't understand as well. Jack then realized another thing, he didn't receive any exp points when the monster died.

Jack then felt mana accumulating around the draugr. At the same time, an unbelievable thing happened before their eyes. The draugr's HP bar which was already zero swiftly filled back up to full. The draugr rose to life, it jumped up and shot its two long arms to opposite sides, slapping both Jonathan and Harper.

"Horse arse...!!" Jonathan cursed as he stumbled back after having his face punched by a strong fist.

Jack was already retreating when the draugr's HP bar started refilling. He had the rock golem held the draugr to keep it in place, but without Jonathan and Harker's interference, the golem was no match for the draugr. It was smashed three rapid times by the draugr's long arms. Even though the damages it suffered were diminished, the impacts still made it lose its hold on the draugr.

The draugr then circled around the golem and headed to Jack again.

"Still coming for me?" Jack uttered and cast Myriad Ensnaring Chains right in front of him. Twelve chains came out and grabbed at the draugr. The undead's reckless charge made an easy target for the chains.

"Hit him!" Jack said. The chains didn't attack any allies inside its area of effect, so Jonathan and Harker could come in and bully the trapped draugr.

With the draugr incapacitated, they had an even easier time than before. The Draugr's HP was soon depleted and it fell for the second time.

The draugr's body, however, still did not disintegrate. The three humans and one fairy looked at it with apprehension.

Not long after, as if adhering to their worries, the draugr came back to life again.

"F*ck! It was not kidding for being deathless!" Jack exclaimed. He hurriedly raced away again while having his rock golem hold the draugr down.

Jonathan and Harper were not as flustered as the first time anymore. They attacked once the HP bar was filling.

"How do we kill this thing?!" Jack asked Peniel.

"I don't know. I don't know that there is this kind of undying monster!" Peniel replied.

"You don't?" Does it have something to do with alien entity then? Jack thought, but then he heard Peniel say, "unless..."

"Unless what?" Jack asked.

"I can't be sure. But if my suspicion is correct. You won't be able to kill it no matter how many times. We have to flee!"

Harper, who heard it said, "No shit! We can't continue to fight this thing endlessly. My stamina reserve was getting low, I won't be able to perform skills anymore soon."

Natives were different from outworlders who had their stamina or MP recovered slowly during battle. Natives had a very large pool of stamina and MP, similar to their HP pool, but this stamina or MP only recovered when they left combat.

'My rock golem's duration was also ending soon,' Jack thought. He asked Peniel, "But what if this monster continued to chase after us?"

"If my suspicion is true, it won't be able to," Peniel answered.

Jack asked Peniel to cast Group Fast Heal first. The two rounds with the draugr were not without their toll. Both Jonathan and Harper had suffered damages.

After Peniel healed them, Jack said to the soldiers, "Let's fight while retreating to the crypt's exit! Hopefully, it will truly leave us alone once we are out of here."

Jack took the lead on leaving while continued sending range attacks. They managed to kill it for the third time just as Jack's rock golem's duration ended.

"Run!" Jack called out.

The three ran as fast as they could while the draugr was lying motionless on the ground.

Jack looked back. His Dragon Eye allowed him to see in a distance even in the darkness. He saw the draugr slowly rise again.

'F*ck this undying undead!' Jack cursed in his mind.

The three ran as fast as they could. Jack was still slightly faster in moving speed than the two soldiers despite his lower level, the two soldiers were not the speedy type. They were close to the exit already when they heard the tap-tap-tap rapid sound of the draugr. It was the sound of the draugr crawling with all four limbs at high speed.

When they were close, Jack was the first to be able to see the exit due to his eyes' ability. And because he could see, his heart sank. The secret opening on the wall which allowed them into this secret tunnel was now closed.

"F*ck!" Jack cursed out loud. He exclaimed to the two soldiers, "Try holding the monster again!"

"What do you mean?!" Jonathan asked while still running.

"The exit is closed! There should be a mechanism to open it from the inside. I need to search for it first."

By that time, they were close enough so the two soldiers could see the closed wall as well.

"Horse arse!" Jonathan cursed as he stopped and swiveled. "Harker, on me! You, viscount outworlder! Open the exit as fast as possible!"

"Working on it!" Jack uttered, he had arrived on the wall and was scanning it for any strange protrusions.

Nothing, the entire wall was flat.

"Probably it is using a different kind of mechanism from this side," Peniel offered her opinion.

"Try pushing every stone," Jack said and started pushing himself. Peniel flew to the other side and pushed as well. They could hear Jonathan and Harper already clashed with the draugr again.

Jack and Peniel tried pushing every inch of the wall, but none of the stones budged. Jack's monocle also didn't point out any marker. He tried to hit the part of the wall that could open, trying his luck. His sword bounced back, no damage number appeared.

"Look out!" Jack heard Jonathan yell. He also felt from his mana sense that something was coming fast at his back.

He used Ranger's Roll to escape, just as the draugr flailed its long arm and hit the wall instead.

When Jack finished his roll, he heard a voice in his head, "Top corner on your right, there is a square-shaped stone that can be pushed."

Chapter 567: Invitation To The Count's Mansion

Jack did not have the time to wonder about where the voice came from, because the draugr had jumped at him again. He used Shooting Dash to blitz away from the monster, before zooming back and using Flame Strike on it. The pushback force of the strike sent the monster back to the two soldiers.

"Try holding it for real this time!" Jack exclaimed.

"You open the door for real too!" Jonathan retorted back.

Jack turned to the spot where the voice had informed him. It was too high for him. He would need to climb the wall or find something to step on.

"Peniel, do you hear the voice as well?" Jack asked.

"I did," Peniel was already flying to the mentioned spot.

She looked for a while and finally found the square-shaped stone mentioned by the voice. She pushed at it. Luckily, it didn't require too much force so her small body still had enough strength to press.

A rumble was soon heard as the wall started to slowly open again.

When it had opened wide enough, Jack turned to the two soldiers who were still fighting. He cast Magic Bind, which held the draugr for a breath. Jonathan used the chance to execute a skill, his halberd turned into an earth hammer. He slammed this hammer into the draugr who flew away from the impact.

"Let's go!" Jack called out as he ran out through the opening with Peniel flying closely. Harper followed soon, while Jonathan stayed on their back to cover their escape. Luckily, the crypt door was still opened, so Jack didn't need to spend time using lockpicks again.

The four soon came back out into the graveyard. They looked back at the open crypt door and waited. The draugr didn't follow them. They exhaled relief breaths.

"What the hell was that thing?!" Harper exclaimed. "Why can't it die?"

"Never seen that kind of thing before," Jonathan said. "It's a good thing you managed to open that secret door. We can't fight that creature non-stop."

"Well, we have to thank our secret helper for that," Jack uttered.

"Secret helper?" Jonathan asked.

"You guys didn't hear the voice that told us how to open the secret door?" Jack asked.

"What voice?" Jonathan asked again.

Harper shook his head.

Jack looked at Peniel.

"Perhaps the voice was only directed at your mind. I heard it as well because I am linked to you," Peniel gave her opinion.

"Hey! I didn't notice this place is foggy when we entered," Harper mentioned.

The others looked around. Jack and Peniel were familiar with this foggy scene because it was the same as yesterday.

"Crap, get ready for battle again!" Jack exclaimed as he readied his weapon.

"What combat?" Jonathan asked, but he still got into a combat stance. "For the love of God, one day following you had more excitement than the entire year stationed here."

The three humans had their backs to each other, covering their blind spots. The two soldiers were not sure what manner of menaces they should expect jumping out of the fog, while Jack was expecting either the cemetery ghouls or the banshee to come out.

"There is no need for such an alert," Jack again heard the voice of that mysterious hooded stranger, the same one that had informed him how to activate the secret door to escape the draugr.

The hooded stranger then appeared out of the fog as mystically as yesterday.

Jonathan, who noticed the figure, immediately shouted "Harper, on me!" As he dashed to the stranger.

"Hold!" Jack hurriedly called out and grabbed the soldier to stop him.

"What? Wasn't you the one that says there will be a battle?" Jonathan asked.

"He is not an enemy," Jack replied. The stranger wouldn't have helped them escape, otherwise.

"Really? He looks like one to me," Harper commented.

"Let's talk to him first," Jack said. Then to the stranger, he said, "Are you the one who let me know how to open the secret door just now?"

"I did," the stranger replied.

"Why did you help us?"

"I originally didn't intend to. An adventurer who doesn't know his limit will just be a problem. I have given you a warning the last time. Any other day, I would have left you to your own fate, but I see that you have gained the assistance of the two useless soldiers stationed here. So, I guess you might have some use, after all."

"Hey! Who the hell did you call useless?!" Jonathan shouted.

The stranger acted as if he didn't hear, he continued to speak, "There is also another reason why I helped you. The situation is now turning to be more urgent than I expected. Although even the three of you are still not strong enough, another two who followed the rumors I spread had arrived. They should be at the tavern by now."

"Mister, I have no idea what the hell you are spouting about," Jack said.

"Go to the tavern, you should find the two outsiders there. Convince them to come to the Count's mansion tomorrow morning. Do pay attention that you have to arrive before noon! I'll explain further once all of you arrive."

With those last words, the hooded stranger receded into the fog just as he did yesterday.

"Hey, wait! I still have some questions," Jack yelled as he chased after, but the stranger had vanished again.

"Damn! Two times now! What is this guy with all the mysterious acts?" Jack uttered with vexation.

The fog soon disappeared after the hooded stranger vanished.

"You met the guy before?" Jonathan asked.

"Yeah, yesterday. At this place as well," Jack answered.

"So, what now?" Harper asked.

Jack gave the matter some thought, then said, "Let's do as he asks. He doesn't seem to mean us harm. We will go to the tavern, see if there are the people he mentioned. Then we go to the Count's mansion tomorrow."

"Is that guy the count?" Harper asked.

"His voice is different from the count," it was Jonathan who answered his partner.

"He could have masked it using some trick or spell, but I too don't think he is the count. Have the two of you ever met his son?" Jack asked the two soldiers.

"Yeah, very rarely though. But never heard him speak. The guy is a total loner," Jonathan replied. "You think the guy just now is the son?"

Jack shrugged, "we will find out tomorrow. Let's head over to the tavern first."

"But aren't the tavern closed already by night?" Peniel asked.

"Oh, right. It does, that's why we seldom hang around that place at night anymore," Harker said.

"Let's just go anyway. If there is no one there, then that hooded guy was only messing with us," Jack said, but then he remembered something.

"Oh, before I forget, we need to go to one other place first," Jack announced as he opened his map.

The town was not big so it just took a little time for him to go from one place to another. He arrived in front of a modest house with a porch. Artificial light brightened the porch, an ancient-looking woman was sitting on a wooden rocking chair on the porch.

'Lucky! The granny was at home and awake,' Jack thought to himself. This was the oldest person in town who Brad had informed him earlier.

There was still another problem Jack worried about, though. He went up the porch and greeted the woman politely, introducing himself. When the old woman replied to his greeting with a clear response, Jack breathed a relieved sigh. The woman was not senile despite her old age.

Jack first chatted with her about mundane stuff. Jonathan was getting annoyed standing outside seeing the two chatted. After a while, Jack asked the thing he wanted to ask. He asked if he knew of any stranger that came into town and started living in this town when she was little, or if she heard anything

from her parents about newcomers that settled into this town before or around the time she was born. This was a small town, so any newcomer should make quite a hot gossip.

The woman thought for a while, it was a lifetime ago, after all. After a while, she said, "there was indeed someone like that. He arrived here when I was still a baby. I didn't remember of course when that person came and started living in this town, I just heard my parent talk about it when I was slightly older."

"Who is that person?" Jack asked.

"That person died already of course. Almost anyone my age died already," the woman uttered, Jack felt the sadness in her voice. "But his descendant still live here till this day. He lived up there in that big house."

"The Count?" Jack asked.

"I believe that's what people call his descendant now," the woman replied.

"I thought the townsfolk said that the Count's ancestors had lived here since very long ago?"

"I think one hundred years can be considered long," the woman replied. "But yes, I also heard tales about the Count's ancestors being here since this town was built, which is untrue. That big house used to belong to a wealthy merchant. The count's grandfather bought that house and the merchant left. I don't know why a rumor spread about the count's ancestor living here since the beginning, but I don't really care about it. What I know is, the current Count's grandfather came here not long after I was born.. He stayed and died here, leaving his son, and now his grandson who is the current Count."

Chapter 568: Representatives Of The Other Princes

Jack thanked the old woman before heading for the tavern. When they arrived, the tavern was still opened and the light inside was still on. The four looked at each other before going in. So, the hooded stranger didn't just spout nonsense.

Inside, they found two tables were occupied, one was by a man in armor, the other was by a woman in magician robe. Jack used inspect on the two.

Ephiltres (Special Elite Human, Knight-Captain), level 55

HP: 250,000

Sidney (Special Elite Human, Knight-Captain), level 60

HP: 262,000

While Jack was observing the two new arrivals, Jonathan and Harper had already taken an empty table. Brad came to their table and took their orders. Jack joined them at the table and asked Brad, "I thought you don't open at night."

"I don't. There are rarely any people who come again after sundown. But see those two people there? They arrived this afternoon not long after you left, asking all sorts of questions. Doesn't seem to have

any intention to leave anytime soon, so I just keep the place open. They keep ordering drinks, after all, so I'm good for extra coins."

"What did they ask about?" Jack asked.

"Remember the picture of a man you showed me before? They showed me the same picture."

Jack was surprised. 'They were both looking for Aubelard as well?' He thought as he looked over to the two. But why were they sitting separately, they weren't together?

When Brad came back bringing the drinks, Jack asked him if the two came together or arrived separately. Brad said the female mage arrived first, the armored man came just before sundown.

"Are you going to go to talk to them?" Peniel asked.

"Yes, but I have a feeling those two are from a different camp from us."

"Different camp?"

"They were looking for Aubelard as well. I doubt the third prince sent multiple representatives for a simple diplomatic mission. My guess is this Horatio received representatives from the other princes as well, which were then given the same task as us for finding Aubelard. Tsk, that Horatio is truly slick, and here I thought the guy was serious about wanting to be an ally to the third prince."

"So, he gave all the representatives a competition, to see who can finish the task first," Peniel summarized.

"Yes," Jack nodded. "Those two must have been the representative of the first and second prince."

"Second prince?" Jonathan uttered after hearing Jack, he followed Jack's line of vision and looked at the two newcomers. He didn't pay attention when he entered, he was eager to get some drinks because it had been some time since he had some.

When he saw the man in armor, he spat loudly, "Ephiltres?! What in heaven's name is a worm like you doing in this place?!"

The man in armor, hearing his name being mentioned, looked over. The man's face turned ugly upon seeing Jonathan, but then it swiftly turned into a ridiculing expression.

"I was wondering who has such an ugly voice, it turned out it was a failure who has been expelled to the countryside. So, this is the dump where you have been sent to?"

"Who the hell do you call a failure?!" Jonathan stood up and banged on the table.

Ephiltres chuckled with disdain, "Heh, you might have been a hotshot in the past, but you are nothing now. While you rot here, I have been climbing in speed. I'm now even higher than before you were demoted, I'm a Knight-Captain now. I am also stronger than you now. You are nothing, you piece of useless garbage!"

"Why you...!" Jonathan kicked his chair away and started walking towards Ephiltres. Harker hurriedly stood and held him back.

Brad, seeing the friction, hurriedly came over to say, "Kind Sirs, if you want to get physical, please do it outside. Please do not fight inside here."

Jack also told Jonathan to calm down. The old soldier finally sat back grumpily into his chair, which Harper brought back into place. Ephiltres made a deriding laugh from his seat.

"Well, I take you two know each other when you were under the second prince's camp?" Jack asked.

"Know is an understatement," it was Harper who answered. "That detestable man was largely the main reason We got banished to this town."

"Yeah, let's just say I'm at that time a leader of a squad who was told to do a questionable mission," Jonathan said. "That prick was under me at the time. When I learned that the mission was to kill an innocent person, I refused to carry it out and instead worked to help the person escape. Ephiltres not only ratted me out, he secretly followed the person who I helped and took him out, just to get a promotion. Since it was a questionable mission that was not announceable to the public, they couldn't blame me for insubordination. I was instead being banished here. Harper followed along for defending me. Sorry again, mate."

"Never regret it, man. You know I will always follow you," Harper said.

"Still, if it is the current me, I probably would have carried out the mission. I am too naïve back then," Jonathan said.

"Don't say that, you will be as bad as that fellow there," Jack said.

"Yeah, boss. I don't believe that," Harper added.

"But see where that naivete got us. Rotting in this nowhere town while he has now become better than me in every possible way," Jonathan lamented.

"I thought you two are just lazy soldiers, but knowing you were such honorable ones, I promise I will do my best to help you back to the capital," Jack said.

"Hmph! What honorable? That was the old me," Jonathan said as he drank his beer.

Jack stood up, "all right, I'm heading over."

"To where?" Harper asked.

"To have a chat with the two of them," Jack answered.

Ephiltres and Sidney were sitting at different tables, but next to each other, which Jack found funny. It was clear the two were curious enough to find out what the other party knew by sitting so close to each other, but none of them started any conversation. So, Jack decided to be the one who started it.

"Hiya! How are the two of you doing?" Jack called to them.

Sidney sipped his wine pretending to not hear. Ephiltres was more blatant, he picked on his ear as he chuckled disdainfully, "Did someone just bark?"

Jack had been expecting the cold shoulders, so he was not the least bit bothered.

"Hehe, the two of you are trying to act cool, but I know you are in a predicament, right?" Jack said loudly. "I know you two are looking for Aubelard as well, same as me. We each represented different princes. That Horatio fellow must have acted as if he only sent out an invitation to one prince but in reality he sent for all three princes, having us compete for him. Well, not that I blame him. Our princes are indeed competing, after all. However, I can see that despite the two of you arriving here, you still have no idea how to proceed, am I right? I have a piece of information that I'm willing to share so all of us can move forward. What say you?"

Sidney didn't show any reaction, but her eyes were slightly shifting in Jack's direction. Jack knew his words attracted her attention, she was simply pondering how much of them she could trust.

Ephiltres, on the other hand, showed his distrust from the getgo. "You? A weakling outworlder? Having information that we don't? Haha. You are too full of yourself! This is our world, outworlder. If anyone knows anything, it will be us. So stop trying to swindle us from giving you our information!"

Jack wasn't upset by the slander, he simply laughed and asked. "I don't know anything? Well, then pray tell, did you two not just arrive here? While I am already here since yesterday."

"Doesn't mean anything, that just means you have a faster steed than us," Sidney finally spoke.

Jack's steed was indeed faster, but he didn't admit it. "Really? Is your steed so slow that an outworlder beat you by an entire day? I know you came here because of a rumor. I'm also pretty sure you two didn't dilly-dally after hearing the rumor. I bet you teleported to the nearest town before using your fastest steed to come here. Let me ask you then, is the third prince's intelligence network better than the other two princes that I managed to get ahold of the rumor first?"

Sidney tapped her cup of wine onto the table rather hard, "Don't be absurd, prince Therribus' spy network is the best!"

Ephiltres chuckled. "In terms of manpower, that's true. But in terms of smartness, I don't think so. Do you think my spy learn the rumor from the same source? Mine stole it from yours! Hahaha."

Sidney gave Ephiltres a hostile glare.

"Well, then how do you explain I manage to arrive here first? Also...," Jack took a seat opposite Sidney, ignoring the two's animosity. The woman mage turned to Jack and frowned. How dare this outworlder to sit on her table without being invited?

Jack pretended to not notice the scowl, he continued speaking, "Since I am here first, I have had the head start of an entire day of investigation.. I have even met the person who spread the rumor that drew the two of you here."

Chapter 569: Cooperation Between Competitors

Jack stayed silent afterward, allowing them to ponder his words. After a while, Sidney asked, "So, have you already confirmed that Aubelard is here?"

Ephiltres spoke out at this time, "If he already confirmed, he won't be here anymore. He will be on his way to Tranviste already. He is just spouting horseshit!"

Jack didn't respond to Ephiltres. He continued to stare at Sidney with a confident smile. "Do you believe what he said?" Jack asked her.

"I believe you have not confirmed Aubelard's whereabouts. As he said, you would already be on your way if so," Sidney said.

"That's true. But I have a pretty good idea already. However, to confirm, I will need help from you two. Or at least, from you, you seem to be the more reasonable one, and also the more powerful. We can leave him in the dark."

"You...!" Ephiltres slammed the table, showing the first time he lost his cool.

Seeing the reaction, Jonathan and Harker pulled their chairs and came over to sit behind Jack.

"Is that guy giving you trouble? Don't worry about him, I will deal with him if he tries anything," Jonathan said loudly.

"You dolt! Didn't I say I'm stronger than you now?" Ephiltres threatened.

"Not by much! I am still more experienced. Don't think just because your level is slightly higher that I will lose to you!" Jonathan didn't back down.

Jack ignored the commotion, he stayed calmly with a confident smile. His gaze never left Sidney. The woman mage was also observing Jack, trying to read if this outworlder was duping her.

"What kind of help do you need?" Sidney asked.

"Slaying Aubelard," Jack replied.

Sidney frowned again from the answer.

Ephiltres immediately said his piece after hearing Jack, "Are you insane? Did Horatio not tell you how strong Aubelard is? He is a level 80 rare elite! The three of us combined... No, you don't count, you are too weak. The two of us combined with those two lackeys of yours are still not enough to go against such an opponent!"

"Was! He was a level 80 rare elite," Jack replied. "Didn't Horatio inform you two that Aubelard is wounded? He is in a weakened condition. I'm pretty sure his current strength doesn't reflect his prime."

"Pretty sure? That means you are not certain," Sidney said. "Why do we want to take the risk? The quest is only to find his whereabouts. There is no reason to poke the hornet's nest."

"Because he won't stay here for long," Jack answered. "If you return now to tell Horatio about that Aubelard is here. By the time his force arrived, Aubelard will be long gone already. Imagine what his reaction will be if he thinks you are lying to him. Do you think he is still interested in supporting your prince after?"

"Hmph! Horatio mentioned that Aubelard can't afford to travel," Ephiltres said. "he is wounded, you said it just now yourself. If he is truly here, he won't be able to leave."

"As I said, I have information that you don't. He is wounded, but he is healing. I know Horatio said that his wound won't heal for several hundred years, but he had somehow found a way to heal himself. I admit I don't know what method he is using but trust me, he is."

Jack heard Peniel's voice in his mind, 'How do you know that?'

Jack simply replied, 'later.' Outside, he continued speaking, "If you leave now after confirming his existence here, you won't find him the next time you are back. Not to mention, I believe the two of you have shown his picture a lot to whoever you came across in this town, haven't you? Such brazen inquiries will surely draw his attention. I bet by tomorrow, he would have known about you two looking for him. He won't take the risk of staying in this place, wounded or not."

"Aren't you showing his picture around as well?" Ephiltas asked.

"I have only shown it to three persons since I arrived," Jack said.

The two went quiet after, they were obviously in thought. Jack didn't let them think too long though, he said, "Let's say if we managed to kill him. I'm sure whoever takes proof of his demise to Horatio will receive high praise. The guy had betrayed the Maxius family, it is pretty clear it's his head they want. Imagine the gratitude and respect you will receive for the deed. Your prince will be proud of you."

Sidney gave Jack a sharp stare. "What's your angle? You know there will only be one of us who will get the reward. We are competitors."

"That's true. However, this prize needed the strength of all of us. I suspect Aubelard is still too strong for us even when wounded. We can get back to competing once we take care of the problem at hand. What do you say?"

"If that's the case, it will just be the two of us fighting Aubelard, you are too weak to contribute anything. This is too good for you, we will be the one doing all the work," Ephiltas said. By now, he had moved his chair to sit at the same table as Jack and Sidney. Jack gave the guy a disdainful stare.

"I can say the same thing! I'm the one that did all the searching before you came. I'm the one that found out all the clues, you two are just enjoying my hard work. Not to mention, you two are alone, I bring three extra fighters, so I say I'm more than contributing in this matter."

"Three?" Sidney asked.

"Yeah, these two, and then another one we will meet tomorrow. This third one is also the one who spread the rumor that brought you here."

"This third person is strong?"

"Yes."

Sidney gave the matter some thought, before saying. "All right. Let's do it. We will cooperate until we are done with Aubelard. After that, don't blame me for turning on you people."

"Fine by me. Wait for me outside this tavern tomorrow morning. I will come and pick you up," Jack said.

"I will be here," Sidney replied.

"I will be here too," Ephiltres said.

Jack gave Ephiltres another disdainful stare, "I thought you are not interested?"

"Who said I am not? Don't think to leave me out of this. I will follow you, people, if I have to!"

"Heh, suit yourself. Just be here tomorrow morning. I will leave you if you are late," Jack said before leaving. Jonathan stood up, he glared at Ephiltres and spat before he turned around and followed Jack.

Outside, the old soldier asked, "So, we are done for today?"

Jack nodded. "Yeah, let's return and rest. If my prediction is correct, we might have a tough fight tomorrow."

"As long as not against that undying freak again," Jonathan said.

He and Harper then walked in the direction of their station. After walking a while, they realized that Jack was still with them. They asked, "I thought you said we are done? Why are you still here?"

"I'm staying at your place!" Jack uttered. "Do you think I'm going to sleep by myself? Those two just now are enemies. They can change their minds and attack me during my sleep. No way I'm going to sleep alone with such dangers around."

"Damn, you are making us your bodyguards full time. Fine, come along then," Jonathan said.

During their walk, Peniel talked with Jack using her mind, 'Why do you want to fight Aubelard? Those two are right. Even in a weakened condition, that old vampire will still be very dangerous. You are risking your life unnecessarily. The quest just needs you to confirm his location, slaying him is unneeded.'

'That's true if I am just completing Horatio's quest. But right now, I'm more concerned about completing the missing children case. If there is a chance the girl that was missing just a few days ago is still alive, I need to give it a try...'

'You think the two quests are related?'

'I do.'

'How so?'

'I think the Count was actually Aubelard. Remember the granny said the Count's grandfather came here not long after the time Aubelard fled his country? I think he had been using his disguise spell to pose as a human. Every few centuries he pretended to pass away and took over the son role and became the new Count.'

'Are you saying the son is just made up? There is no such a person?'

'I think there is, just not an actual son. I think this so-called son was a person he only met in this country. They might have collaborated together. One posing as a son while the other the father. My guess is this collaboration might have gone bad and the son was scheming on the father.'

'The hooded stranger? But even if it's true, how do you know he wants to take down Aubelard and that Aubelard is healing?'

'I'm just guessing from the hooded stranger's words. To be honest, I'm not entirely certain myself. I'm just acting that way to make those two agree to come with me tomorrow. But I believe our hooded stranger will explain tomorrow. It's better if we hear his explanation since mine is mostly just assumptions. By the way, you haven't explained about that Deathless Draugr. You said you have a suspicion about what that monster is, didn't you?'

'Yes, that monster should be a tethered being,' Peniel replied.

'Tethered being?'

'It is a creature that originally has no life. Its life is linked with another. It is a puppet that is created by powerful alchemy and spell. As long as the owner it is linked to is alive, the puppet won't die.'

'That is a powerful puppet then. Can there be more of that thing? We will be in trouble if there are more.'

'One master can only have one puppet. This puppet method is also not without its toll, the owner will have his or her power weakened while this puppet is active. It is also usually bound to an area. That's why I suspect it cannot leave the crypt.'

'I see... So the only way to defeat such a puppet is by killing its owner?'

'There are some tools that might work, but we don't have them. So, yes. We need to kill the owner.'

'Guess the coming fight will be rather troublesome,' Jack thought.

Chapter 570: Identity Of The Hooded Stranger

In the morning, Jack came to the tavern and found Sidney and Ephiltes were already waiting. The tavern was closed so they stood outside.

The two didn't give Jack any friendly greetings so Jack also wasn't courteous. He gave them a silent gesture to follow him. The two trailed behind Jack. Jonathan and Harper walked between Jack and the two in case the two tried anything funny.

They arrived in front of the Count's mansion soon. Much earlier than the time limit the hooded stranger asked for. The stranger only said before noon, so Jack assumed the earlier it was, the better.

Jack knocked on the door, which was soon opened. It was no longer the butler this time. It was an old maid. The maid studied the group.

Jack was just about to introduce himself when the old maid said, "Come, young master is expecting you."

So, the hooded stranger is truly the Count's son, or at least its pretender. Jack knew Aubelard brought no relative when he fled Sangrod.

The maid took the group to a large study room. A lean man with long black hair and extravagant clothing was standing overlooking a large window. Jack felt like he was seeing Horatio's back again the first time he met that Vampire prince, except this one had black hair instead of silver.

The long-haired man turned around, revealing a face that was different from Horatio, but the same youthful look. Jack thought his face was very handsome despite the paleness of his skin, but there was an aura of sadness from his expression. Jack used Inspect on him.

Arlcard Maxius (Special Elite Vampire, Mature), level 40

HP: 180,000

'He is also a vampire?' Jack thought within. Outward, Jack said, "I thought Aubelard fled his country without bringing any relative?"

Arlcard smiled, "So, you already know my father's identity?"

Sidney and Ephiltas didn't utter any sound, but their eyes went lively. This was the confirmation they were looking for. They could leave already now if they wanted to complete Horatio's task.

"You didn't bother to use a human disguise. So, I assume you are planning to come clean?" Jack asked.

Arlcard took a seat behind a large work desk. "Please sit," he said to his guest.

There were plenty of sofas around. After everyone sat, there was a clear indication of four parties in this room for they all sat away from each other. Arlcard, Sidney, Ephiltas, and Jack's group. The young vampire was amused by this.

"So, why did you invite us here?" Jack asked. "You should know that us looking for your father is not for the best intention."

"I do. He will know about you three as well, soon," Arlcard answered.

"The two of you aren't exactly communicating well then, I presume?"

Arlcard smiled. "To answer your earlier question, you are right. Aubelard fled Sangrod Empire alone. He then came to this town almost a hundred years ago. I, however, was the original inhabitant of this town. This mansion is my house, my original family's house before my current father slaughtered everyone and turned me. Making this house and myself as his properties. He spared and turned me because he saw a promising blood lineage within me. Wanted to make me his weapon."

Arlcard stood up as he gazed at the view of the town outside. "You might think, why did I bear myself living with the slaughterer of my family for so long?"

Jack indeed thought so, but Peniel gave her answer to everyone, "Not really. After humans are turned into vampires, they had a strong feeling and connection to their maker. It is as if they are truly reborn. Their old self no more. They are a new person, a newborn who depended upon their vampire maker."

Arlcard turned back and smiled hearing Peniel's words. "You are a rather knowledgeable fairy, miss..."

"Peniel," Peniel answered.

"Miss Peniel. Thank you for explaining," Arlcard made a short bow. "It is indeed as you said. My father, my vampire father, also believes so. What he doesn't know, is that my human's hatred carried on despite my new life."

Jack saw Peniel's eyes go wide, there was disbelief in her eyes. Jack didn't understand what's the big deal? If someone butchered your family, of course, you will feel hatred for the person responsible.

"This feeling is of course repressed by the psychic hold my vampire father has on me. After I went past the Fledgling state and became a mature vampire, that bond has become weaker. I can do more as I will. But of course, I still act obediently in his presence."

Peniel spoke out at this time, "even when a vampire matures, the bond shared between you and your maker should not diminish."

"Is it? Then perhaps my hatred and rage against him are so great that it won over whatever vampiric bond that holds me."

"Or you can be lying and all this is just a ploy to trick us," Peniel said.

"Hm... I admit you might see it that way. But if it is so, my father could just be outside of this room, ready to slaughter all of you to cover his tracks."

Everyone turned to the door instinctively upon Arlcard's words. Arlcard laughed at his guests' wariness.

"You are welcome to look outside to check. The reason I ask you to come before noon is because, at this time, he was sleeping inside his coffin in the catacomb under this mansion."

"The one that linked to the graveyard where I first met you?" Jack asked.

"Yes. The same catacomb where you escaped from yesterday. That Deathless Draugr you faced is the protector of my father's lair. It was made to eliminate any intruder that dares to step foot inside the catacomb."

"Okay. Let's say you are telling the truth. What is your purpose for luring us here?"

"Ain't it obvious? I want you all to help me enact vengeance," Arlcard said.

"Hmph, we are not your helper," Ephiltas said. "Why do we want to take the risk? Our task is simply to find out about your father's whereabouts. If you want revenge, the authority in Sangrod will gladly send someone powerful to take care of your father. All you need to do is just make sure that your father doesn't leave this town."

Uh-oh, Jack thought. He didn't expect this guy to be so cunning. There was indeed that way. If Arlcard agreed to this suggestion, the current missing child was as good as gone.

"We can't let Sangrod people come here. I know the reason they are looking for him. They will do more than simply capture or kill Aubelard," Arlcard said. "Furthermore, we don't have the time anymore. If my father proceeds with the ceremony tonight. His wound will heal enough that he no longer needs to continue staying at one place."

"Ceremony? Does this have anything to do with the missing children from the town?" Jack asked.

Arlcard eyed Jack for a while before answering, "yes."

With the confirmation, Jack didn't find the swift disappearance of the children to be so strange anymore. A vampire could use his mesmerizing stare to hypnotize the children before speedily taking them away without any struggle. And the fact that Count Dante was an inhabitant of this town made it not strange if he was seen walking around, observing the townsfolk. People would just think he was making a round to make sure that everyone was safe.

"So that means the children are still alive?" Jack asked.

"Child. The last girl that is kidnapped is still alive, for now. The rest... are not," Arlcard answered.

Jack stood up in anger. "You monster! You know all about this and you just let those children get taken? Is your father using their blood to help heal his wound?"

Horatio mentioned before about Aubelard needing blood sustenance to ease his wounded condition. That's why Jack had suspected that Aubelard was in this town when he heard that the missing cases had happened even before five years ago. The count might have given this information to throw Jack off focus by widening the clues he had to search. The count didn't know that Jack was actually looking for Aubelard and this information had instead caused Jack to link it with his existence. Of course, at the time, Jack had not yet suspected the Count as Aubelard.

"Spare me your judgment. I have seen him commit many atrocities since he turned me. There is nothing I can do about it anyway. Not until now," Arlcard replied.

"What is this ceremony that can heal him?" Sidney asked. "Horatio mentioned Aubelard's wound is not something curable."

"Let's just say that a fool came into this town less than two months ago, bringing with him something incredible that ends up falling into my father's hand. That something has enabled my father to perform a ceremony to speed up his recovery process."

"That's why the kidnapping had increased in these last two months," Jack said.

"Yes," Arlcard confirmed. Arlcard could see that Jack's interest was in freeing the children. He didn't need to give Jack any incentive to go against Aubelard.

He then looked over to Sidney and Ephiltas. These two, on the other hand, needed persuasion. He said to them, "The reason that the Maxius family chased after my father was because he had taken something powerful from them. They want it back. If you kill my father for me. I will let you people take that item. You can give it to the Maxius family, or keep it for yourself. It matters to me not. Do you want in? Or do you want to leave?"

Sidney and Ephiltas were silent from the question. Sidney finally spoke first, "I can send words to have the army send someone powerful enough to take Aubelard on."

"As I said. No time for that anymore. By tomorrow, Aubelard will be in a state where he is no longer bogged down by his wound.. You will not find him again if you leave this town today."