

Chapter 1754-1776

Soon enough, night fell and the entire area was completely engulfed in darkness. With how silent it was, the crackling of the bonfire—that Gerald and his party had started in the yard and were currently sitting around—was crisp as day...

With the presence of a very large piece of meat for dinner—that was currently cooking over the bonfire—, it was evident that Gerald had saved some food for a rainy day. Gerald had made sure to keep some rations in his own bag, anticipating the possibility of the villagers exchanging all of the food in Ray's backpack.

Due to how large the meat was, all five of them were sufficiently full by the time dinner was over.

With their bellies now filled, Ray couldn't help but ask in a slightly worried tone, "...Do you think Fane and his gang will come looking for trouble with us tonight, Mr. Crawford?"

"Don't worry, we'll just take turns being on guard tonight. You can sleep first, and after two hours, we'll switch places. That way, nobody will be able to sneak up on us!" said Gerald.

Even if Fane wasn't present, Gerald would've still suggested for the same thing to be done. After all, they were currently in unfamiliar territory. With that in mind, they needed to be on guard at all times to prevent getting sneak attacked.

Inclusive of Old Flint, Gerald was more worried about Juno and Nori's safety. He swore to himself that he wouldn't allow either of them to suffer from any injuries or get hurt during this journey...

Regardless, Ray was naturally not against Gerald's suggestion, and he nodded in agreement.

It was late into the night when Juno and Nori finally fell asleep, their shoulders leaning against each other. Old Flint himself could be seen meditating at the side while Ray eventually dozed off as he leaned against a pillar.

As for Gerald, he sat before the bonfire, keeping a lookout for danger while occasionally looking at the sky...

From where he sat, the night sky looked utterly picturesque. Soon enough, a bright crescent moon—that had earlier been blocked by clouds—revealed itself along with countless dazzling stars...

Due to all the neon lights and street lamps in cities, such beautiful sights were impossible to enjoy in urban areas. With that in mind, the natural beauty—that could only be witnessed out here in the wilderness—would surely be able to refresh anyone's mind...

Whatever the case was, the night was uneventful and ended peacefully.

It appeared that despite Fane and his gang's rashness, they knew their limitations well. After all, that group of bullies hadn't caused trouble for Gerald and his party at all that night.

Even so, Gerald was abruptly awoken early that morning when he heard a racket nearby.

With that, the awakened Gerald—who had fallen asleep at dawn since he figured that nobody would be dumb enough to attack them in daylight—instantly ran out to have a look.

Shortly after, he came across a group of villagers who were discussing something while standing around a well. With how unpleasant their expressions were, Gerald could only assume that something bad had happened.

When the villagers noticed that Gerald was curiously walking toward them, they quickly surrounded him. Before Gerald could even ask what they were doing, one of the villagers pointed at him before asking, "Was it you?"

Raising a slight brow in his bewilderment, Gerald then replied, "...Was it me, what? What happened?"

Upon hearing that, the villager then harrumphed before furiously retorting, "Was it you who killed Fane? After all, he offended you yesterday!"

After the angry villager said that, the other villagers quickly pointed at the well, prompting Gerald to walk over and look down...

The second he did, Gerald was instantly greeted by the sight of a massive floating corpse... With how fat it was, he had no doubt that the body belonged to Fane...

Stunned that Fane would die so suddenly—and be found dead in the well of all places—Gerald then faced the villagers before asking, "How... Did he die?"

"...What do you mean, how did he die? Are you seriously pretending to be surprised that his body is here? You're the only one here who has a grudge against him, you know? Who else could've killed him?" blamed another villager. "Look, I didn't even leave the house! How could I have killed him?" explained Gerald.

While that was the truth, he knew the villagers weren't going to buy it so easily. With that in mind, the best way to clear things out would be by investigating how Fane truly died.

Still, Fane's death certainly explained why he and his gang hadn't caused Gerald and his party any trouble the previous night.

Though Fane was definitely a villainous character that deserved retribution sooner or later, Gerald had to admit that his death was a bit too untimely.

Whatever the case was, Gerald then added, "...Look, before we start pointing fingers, let's just get the corpse up first to see how he really died!"

Hearing that, the villagers couldn't argue with Gerald's logic, so they began tugging his corpse up.

The second the fat corpse was out in the open, everyone saw that his face had been completely ruined. With how badly his face had been clawed up, Fane barely had any notable facial features left.

Squatting down to get a closer look at Fane's corpse, Gerald eventually found a deep gash in Fane's neck. With that in mind, Gerald deduced that he had died from blood loss.

Once he got back to his feet, Gerald then turned to look at the villagers before displaying his hands while saying, "From what I can see, whatever killed Fane had sharp claws. I mean, just take a good look at his mangled face! There's a deep gash in his neck too that could've only been inflicted by extremely sharp claws! With that in mind, I couldn't have been the killer!"

Realizing that Gerald's statement made sense, the villagers quickly accepted that he wasn't the killer. However, if that was the case, then who was the murderer? What happened the previous night? Also, why weren't Fane's subordinates with him? All these were still mysteries...

All of a sudden, everyone suddenly heard a young voice shouting, "S-something terrible has happened! D-dead bodies!"

Turning around to see the nervous boy who was running toward them, the villagers exchanged glances before one of them said, "Calm yourself. What happened?"

"F-Fane's underlings... All of them have died at their home!" exclaimed the terrified youth.

Upon hearing that, everyone instantly began trembling. Nobody could've seen this coming...

Regardless, Gerald and the villagers then hurried over to where Fane's subordinates were staying. Upon

arriving at the shabby-looking yard, everyone could see their dead bodies lying all over the yard. Upon closer inspection, all of them had died the same way Fane had, with bloody gashes on their necks. With that in mind, Gerald knew that the same person had done the deed.

“What on earth could have caused all this to happen...?”

“Indeed... could... could the ghost have come out of the forest?”

“T-that’s impossible!”

Though the villagers were now theorizing the current events among themselves, Gerald didn’t bother about them. Instead, he quickly returned to where they were staying, only to find that Ray and the others had awoken.

Seeing that Gerald had returned, Ray was prompted to ask, “Where did you head off so early in the morning, Mr. Crawford?”

Ignoring Ray’s question, Gerald instead turned to face Old Flint before saying, “Old Flint, please, come with me!”

Upon hearing that, the old man quickly followed Gerald out.

Curious, Ray followed both of them out as well. While Ray had no idea what was happening, judging from Gerald’s expression, he knew that it was a serious incident.

It wasn’t long before the trio arrived at the well.

Pointing at Fane’s corpse—that was now lying on the ground—Gerald then said, “Please have a look at this corpse, Old Flint! Something attacked him yesterday before tossing him down the well!”

Upon seeing the corpse, the shocked Ray then shouted in disbelief, "...Isn't that Fane, Mr. Crawford? We just met him yesterday! How could he die so abruptly?"

Not even bothering to answer Ray's question, Gerald simply kept his gaze on Old Flint.

Old Flint himself simply stared at the corpse, clearly analyzing it. After a short period, he then said, "...This is the work of feral vampires!"

"Feral vampires?" repeated Gerald, surprised by Old Flint's answer.

"Indeed. Only their kind would have such sharp claws that could easily kill. What more, if you pay closer attention, you'll be able to see bite marks on his neck! It can only signify that his blood had been sucked up!" explained Old Flint.

"So, what you're saying is that there are feral vampires in the forests around us? Why weren't we attacked last night instead?" asked Gerald.

Seeing that Gerald was rather doubtful about his claim, Old Flint then replied, "That's because the feral ones are afraid of fire. We had a bonfire burning last night, remember? That's why the feral vampires didn't go after us. My guess is that this Fane person must have gone out in the middle of the night. Seeing that they couldn't target us, the feral vampires must have gone after him instead!"

Old Flint's deduction made sense to Gerald, so he bought his words. To think that all this had been the work of feral vampires!

Whatever the case was, Old Flint then added, "We mustn't linger around for any longer. We have to set off immediately!"

Watching as Old Flint then turned to leave, Gerald took one final glance at Fane's corpse before following Old Flint together with Ray.

Once they were back home, they quickly packed their stuff and silently left the village. After all, if the villagers knew that they were leaving under such short notice, they'd surely attempt to stop Gerald and his party.

Regardless, after walking for a bit, they eventually managed to enter the old forest deep in the mountain...

Now enshrouded by trees, the group remained vigilant as they slowly proceeded.

While walking on, Ray couldn't help but ask, "...What do feral vampires even look like, Mr. Crawford?"

Hearing that, Gerald wasn't too sure how to reply. After all, he had never personally met a feral vampire either. With that, he then turned to look at Old Flint before saying, "Not a clue. Do you know what they look like, Old Flint?"

"Feral vampires have particularly sharp fingernails that can easily tear through human skin, not unlike a predatory animal's claws. They're also reliant on and enjoy drinking blood, so much so that they have a keen sense toward blood!" explained Old Flint.

Now understanding that they required blood to live, Ray then asked, "...If they're as scary as you say, then why are we even looking for them?"

Hearing that, neither Gerald nor Old Flint responded. Only Gerald and the old man were allowed to know the reason for now, and until they arrived at the vampires' territory, the remaining trio wasn't going to get a clear explanation about their mission from either of them.

Until then, the trio simply had to focus on helping Gerald and Old Flint remain vigilant against surprise

feral vampire attacks.

Not long after, the group was able to hear rather loud rustling from within the trees. Stopping in their tracks, Gerald and the others immediately heightened their vigilance!

Seconds later, a group of people—who were dressed in clothing that made them blend well with their surroundings—rushed out from the trees before quickly surrounding Gerald’s party! “...Who are these people, Mr. Crawford?” whispered Ray as Gerald shook his head, a deep frown on his face. Quite frankly, he had no idea who they were either.

Following that, a man with a buzz cut stepped forward, staring at Gerald and his group before asking, “Who are you people?”

“Kind sir, we’re merely merchants who are here to have some fun!” replied Gerald.

“...Merchants you say? Out here in the middle of nowhere? Who are you trying to fool?” retorted the man as he glared at Gerald.

“You’re free to choose not to believe us. Regardless, what are you and your men doing all the way out here?” replied Gerald.

“We’re here to look for the vampires’ territory!” declared the man with the buzz cut, not seeing a reason to lie.

“...Oh? You’re here to look for their territory as well?” replied Gerald in surprise. To think that these men had the same goal as he had!

“Hmm? So, you’re saying we share a goal?” said the man as he signaled for the rest of his men to lower their weapons.

“Well then, if that’s the case, allow me to introduce myself! I go by Lech Zak, and I’m the leader of my team!” said Lech as he stretched his hand out.

Hearing that, Gerald then returned a firm handshake as he replied, “Gerald Crawford!”

Following that, Lech then said, “Didn’t expect to bump into other teams looking for the vampires’ territory as well!”

Nodding in agreement, Gerald then turned to look at Old Flint who had been standing behind him. Seeing that the old man wasn’t showing any response, Gerald was instantly relieved. After all, this meant that Old Flint didn’t have too much animosity toward Lech and his subordinates.

With that in mind, Gerald then turned to face Lech before asking, “Do you know where exactly the vampires’ territory is located?”

Retrieving a map from his pocket, Lech then spread it out for Gerald to have a look.

“We’re currently here, you see, and the vampires’ territory is within this mountain. With that in mind, we’ll need to dig our way into their territory!” explained Lech.

Hearing that, Gerald could instantly tell how well-prepared Lech and his subordinates were.

Regardless, since both parties were looking for the vampires’ territory anyway, they figured that they may as well just work as a team.

With that, after a short rest, the two groups then resumed their journey.

Eventually, they finally arrived at the area where they had planned to start digging.

“This is it, Gerald!” exclaimed Lech as he waved his hand at his team members—who were following behind—, indicating that they had arrived.

With that, Lech and his teammates retrieved their shovels—along with any relevant equipment—before starting to dig the earth beneath them.

“You guys keep an eye on things while we dig! Let’s get our well-deserved rest once we make it to the other side!” said Lech.

Knowing that it wasn’t easy to dig out a passageway and that it would be some time before Lech and his men were done, Gerald naturally had no objections.

After nodding in agreement, he then returned to his own party to start keeping watch.

Seeing that Gerald had returned, Ray then asked in a slightly worried tone, “...Do you trust these people, Mr. Crawford...?”

Understanding where Ray was coming from, Gerald then replied, “Don’t worry, I can sense that he’s a righteous man!”

Upon hearing that, Ray’s worries quickly subsided. After all, he trusted Gerald’s judgment.

“What about you, Old Flint? What do you think about Lech and his men?” asked Gerald as he turned to look at the old man who was sitting close to them. Throughout their journey, Old Flint had remained strangely quiet...

Regardless, the old man simply replied, “We’ll have more help with an additional team. There’s safety in

numbers!”

Hearing that, Gerald then nodded in agreement...

After two hours, a loud sound could be heard coming from where Lech and the others had been digging. Guessing that Lech and his men had managed to dig out a passageway, Gerald and his party quickly ran toward the sound.

As they had guessed, a giant passageway was now visible for all to see... With how dark it was inside, it was pretty much impossible to tell what was down there...

Regardless, Gerald and his party were just in time to see Lech ordering his men, “You two! Get in there and scout ahead! If you find that anything’s amiss, get out immediately!”

“Copy that!” replied the two men as they switched their flashlights on and began walking into the newly formed passageway...

Reappearing minutes later, the two men then reported, “Everything’s normal inside! We can go through!”

“Excellent! Still, please be careful, everyone! Don’t move around recklessly and always keep a lookout for your team members!” declared Lech.

“Loud and clear!” yelled everyone in response.

“Come, Gerald! Let’s head in together!” said Lech as he looked at Gerald.

Hearing that, Gerald nodded slightly before entering the passageway by Lech’s side, the rest of Gerald’s party following closely behind them.

Once inside, they soon saw all sorts of colorful paintings on either side of the stone walls. From how primitive they looked, one could easily guess that these paintings had been here for ages...

"...Can you discern anything from these paintings, Old Flint?" asked Gerald as he curiously turned to look at the old man.

After looking for a while, Old Flint then replied, "...The pictures describe the history of the vampires' development in ancient times! It very clearly describes the start of their species up till their eventual decline! With that in mind, I can safely say that we've made it into the vampires' territory!"

Upon hearing that, Gerald and the others were pleasantly surprised. After going through so much effort, they had finally managed to enter the vampires' territory!

"...However, the fact that those corpses were found dead like that... It can only mean that some vampires are still alive! They're incredibly dangerous opponents, so please be careful, everyone!" added Old Flint.

Vampires in general were an independent race that almost never had contact with people from the outside world. It definitely explained why they resented those from the outside world so much. It was also the reason why they usually attacked any non-vampires on sight.

It certainly didn't help that vampires were naturally fast and could easily kill any number of people they wanted.

"Not to worry, sir! All of us are experts at fighting, so we aren't to be trifled with either! With that in mind, I believe that the vampires won't dare to act all unrestrained on us!" replied Lech in a confident tone.

Upon hearing that, Old Flint gave no reply...

Regardless, after about ten minutes of walking, everyone finally made it out of the passageway that spanned at least a few hundred feet. Though they could've made it across much faster had they wanted to, they had taken their time while walking across since all manner of sharp gravel were scattered throughout the area. With that in mind, they were all honestly glad that they had thick-soled shoes on...

Either way, at the end of the passageway lay a gigantic hall... In the middle of the hall, was a wheel of sorts that only served to add to the area's strangeness and mysteriousness...

After looking around, the astonished Ray couldn't help but say, "Color me surprised! To think that such a large palace-like place would exist up here in the mountains!"

True enough, this place was much larger than the tomb they had seen in Ghost Country. With that in mind, it appeared that the vampires were extremely powerful...

Whatever the case was, the others then began curiously inspecting their surroundings... Gerald himself—as well as a few others—immediately went for the wheel in the middle of the room...

Looking at the wheel, Ray then asked, "Any idea what this wheel symbolizes, Mr. Crawford?"

Before Gerald could even reply, Old Flint explained, "That's the vampires' Wheel of the Sun and Moon! They use it to calculate time!"

"Calculate... time? Why would they require such a big wheel just to calculate time?" asked Ray.

"Oh, they didn't use it to calculate regular time. Instead, the wheel calculates when they need to replenish their blood!" replied Old Flint, instantly causing a chill to run down Ray's spine.

As it turned out, the vampires used this wheel to calculate when exactly they needed to suck fresh blood,

and the thought of it alone was honestly spine tingling...

At that moment, one of Lech's team members could be seen stretching out his hand to grab what seemed to be a pearl—that was embedded on one of the stone walls—as he shouted, “Hey captain, there's a pearl here! I'm sure it'll sell for a lot!”

Upon realizing what was happening, Gerald instantly yelled, “Don't pluck it off the wall!”

Unfortunately, Gerald was too late.

The team member had already taken it off the wall, and he was now looking at Gerald in bewilderment, wondering why he was getting so worked up about the pearl in his hand.

Before anyone could react any further, a thunderous sound could suddenly be heard!

Turning to face the source of the sound, everyone's eyes widened in horror when they realized that a massive stone had fallen and completely blocked the palace's entrance!

“Everyone, duck!” shouted Gerald as he instantly pushed Old Flint and the rest of his party members to the ground.

The second his sentence ended, countless arrows began shooting out from the surrounding stone walls!

Sadly, some of Lech's team members weren't quick enough to react, which led to them getting pierced by volleys of arrows! Soon enough, those members flopped to the ground, dead and lying in their own pools of blood...

For those who managed to duck in time, none of them dared to even raise their heads, afraid that arrows would pierce right through their skulls...

Nobody could've anticipated there to be such a death machine in this place...It wasn't long after before the place went silent again...

Since no more arrows were being shot out, it was only fair to assume that the terrifying mechanism had finally ended...

Breathing a sigh of relief, Lech then fearfully said, "To think that such a death trap would be here of all places, Mr. Crawford...!"

Nobody could have foreseen this... However, that didn't change the fact that this had been caused by one of Lech's men. The culprit himself had been pierced by dozens of arrows and was currently lying in his slowly encroaching pool of blood... What a terrible way to die...

Still, this was what happened when people randomly touched things in here. With that in mind, Lech then glared at his men before yelling, "Listen up! The rest of you aren't allowed to move until I say so!"

Hearing that, all of Lech's men simply nodded and remained standing where they currently were... Not that any of them were daring enough to touch anything anymore. After all, who knows what they could trigger next? The next trap they triggered could very well be the end of them!

Seeing that his men weren't objecting, Lech then turned to face Gerald again before asking, "What do you think we should do, Gerald? The exit's been sealed shut!"

As Lech had said, there was now a gigantic stone blocking the exit, which meant that there was no way they were going to be able to leave the way they came in from. With that in mind, they could only look for another exit...

"...Cave-like structures definitely have more than one exit, though the problem lies in how difficult it is to find them!" replied Gerald.

Hearing that, Lech then ordered, "Alright, listen up, men! There has to be a way to leave this place, so let's start looking for an exit!"

With that, everyone from Lech's team began scanning high and low for a way to leave the underground palace...

Gerald and his party, on the other hand, stood before the wheel, studying it to see if it had any way of getting them out of there...

Sometime later, Ray declared, "...Mr. Crawford! There appears to be a mechanism of sorts down here that can be turned!"

Upon hearing that, Gerald squatted down and saw that Ray was right. There was indeed a round mechanism that looked like it could be turned...

Old Flint himself then said, "If my guess is correct, turning that round mechanism should activate this wheel!"

Momentarily turning to face Old Flint, Gerald then nodded. He believed in the old man's wisdom, so he quickly began turning the mechanism without any hesitation...

Soon enough, a loud 'clank' could be heard.

After realizing that the wheel itself was starting to turn, Gerald and the others quickly took a few steps back, fully vigilant since nobody knew what was going to happen next.

The wheel itself only stopped turning after it slowly spun by a hundred and eighty degrees... And the second the turning ended, an explosive sound was heard!

Turning to face the source of the sound, everyone watched as an opening slowly revealed itself on the wall where the wheel ended up facing once it stopped moving. By the time the stone slab was fully lifted, everyone could only stare wide-eyed at the new entrance before them.

Quickly shaking the shock off, Gerald then said, "Let's go!"

With that, he and his party instantly entered the new opening. Naturally, Lech and his men quickly followed after as well.

While they had anticipated this to be their ticket out of here, it was anything but... As it turned out, it was the entrance of yet another underground palace!

There were towering stone pillars on either side of the newly uncovered underground palace, and beside each pillar was a platform. The middle of each platform gave off a faint light, illuminating just enough for all of them to see where they were going...

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"Hot d*mn! To think that there was another palace down here! In fact, this one looks much larger than the previous one!" exclaimed Ray.

"Please be careful, everyone! And don't do anything stupid!" warned Gerald, hoping that everyone had learned their lesson about randomly touching things.

"Copy that! Still, what are those things, Mr. Crawford...? They look so luxurious!" asked Ray as he walked toward one of the platforms to get a closer look.

"Those are Treasure Glaze Platforms. They're specially used to light up candlesticks used for sacrificial rituals. The fires in them can last forever!" explained Old Flint when he saw that Gerald was making no effort to reply.

Upon hearing that, Ray was rightfully shocked. To think that such magical items existed...

His awe was cut short, however, when everyone suddenly heard one of Lech's men scream in agony!

By the time they turned to look at him, his entire body was already burning! With scorched skin and eerily hollowed-out eyes, it wasn't long before all that remained of the man was a pool of blood on the ground!

With how gruesomely he had died, everyone was understandably terrified.

Though they made sure to distance themselves from that pool of blood, the same thing soon happened to yet another of Lech's team members! Before the second member died, however, Gerald and the others were able to notice several black, spider-like creepy-crawlies crawling all over the poor man's body.

Before they could even register what was going on, everyone froze when millions of tiny 'squeaks' could suddenly be heard all around them!

Immediately looking around to investigate, Gerald realized that countless of the spider-like creatures had appeared and were currently all over the surrounding pillars and on the ground!

"Run! Hurry!" yelled Gerald as he immediately dragged his party toward the innermost part of the underground palace.

Of course, Lech and his remaining men followed closely behind, though soon enough, both parties found that it was useless. They were completely surrounded by endless spiders! There was simply nowhere to retreat!

“W-what should we do, Mr. Crawford?!” asked the anxious Ray in a fearful voice.

A single spider was scary enough, but now that there were millions? It was beyond terrifying, to say the least.

Frowning deeply, Gerald then yelled, “Try using fire!”

Hearing that, everyone quickly gathered whatever they saw that could be burned before lighting them up and tossing them to the ground.

To their horror, many of the spiders persevered, and the fire was nothing more than a temporary obstruction for them!

With that in mind, it wasn't long before more of Lech's team members got into contact with the spiders and turned into pools of blood as well...

Seeing that, Gerald and the remaining survivors were terrified out of their minds... None of them wanted to die so terribly...

Calming himself, Gerald racked his mind for a solution, until suddenly, an idea came to him.

Looking at Juno, Gerald then quickly asked, “Juno! Do you have anything that repels insects with you?”

Upon hearing that, she nodded before replying, “I-I do have a can of insecticide with me! I don't know how useful it'll be, though!”

“Just give it to me! Hurry!” instructed Gerald as Juno quickly fished out her insecticide from her bag.

Thankfully, Juno had brought along that can of insecticide to deter insects from biting them while they were in the forest. To think that it would actually be a life saver...

Regardless, the second the insecticide was in Gerald's hand, he immediately sprayed it on the surrounding spiders... and it seemed to work!

The second they came into contact with the insecticide, the spiders rapidly began retreating! They were saved! "...Thank god you brought along this young woman, Gerald...! Otherwise, we would've all met our maker today...!" muttered the still fearful Lech, as he expressed his gratitude toward both Juno and Gerald.

Had Juno not brought along that can of insecticide, they'd surely have died today...

Following that, Gerald then broke the can open before rubbing some of the liquid inside on his clothes.

"Rub some of it on your bodies! With any luck, it'll continue warding off the spiders!" instructed Gerald.

Hearing that, everyone then quickly began doing just that, making sure to rub as much of the insecticide as possible onto their clothes and shoes. Hopefully, this would keep the spiders away...

Now that the crisis was over, Old Flint then said, "...I'm guessing the vampires raised those spiders. If my analysis is correct, any blood that the spiders suck can later be retrieved by the vampires for their own consumption..."

"How abominable! To think that they would actually raise such horrible creatures!" scowled Gerald.

Then again, it made sense. Only the vampires could think of such a vile tactic...

Regardless, Gerald and the others then resumed inspecting the area soon after...

Sometime later, one of Lech's men came running toward them—from the deeper parts of the underground palace—as he shouted, “Captain! We've managed to locate a stone door deeper in!”

Hearing that, both parties immediately rushed toward that place, and soon enough, they were greeted by the sight of a massive stone door...

“Push the door open!” yelled Lech.

“Copy that!” replied his remaining men as they instantly began pushing the door in hopes of opening it...

To their dismay, no matter how much they pushed, the stone door never moved an inch!

Seeing that, Gerald then said, “Since it can't be opened by force, I'm sure there's a mechanism somewhere that'll get it to open!”

Following that, Gerald quickly began investigating the area in search of mechanisms that would trigger the door to open...

Just as Gerald had anticipated, it wasn't long after before he found a spot on the walls that could be pushed. Pushing it down hard, the stone began moving backward... and soon enough, a loud sound could be heard!

With the mechanism now triggered, the stone door began quivering, and soon enough, it began rising!

“Marvellous! You truly are amazing, Mr. Crawford!” praised Lech.

Either way, by the time the stone door was fully opened, everyone couldn't help but momentarily gape

in awe. Past the door, was a large, glazed house, alongside two stone bridges. Adding that to the fact that the floor was paved with bluestone, the sight was nothing short of extraordinary...

Once they snapped out of it, everyone rushed to one of the stone bridges. However, upon peering below, what awaited them wasn't a river nor a pool... Instead, it appeared to be a bottomless abyss that struck fear into anyone who saw it...

Regardless, the group then moved past the bridge and soon found themselves standing right before the glaze house.

"...The house appears ancient... If my guess is correct, then this should be the center most part of the vampires' territory!" declared Old Flint as he sighed rather emotionally.

To think that all of them had finally reached the deepest part of the vampires' territory... The entire journey truly had been difficult, and many large sacrifices had undeniably been made to get this far...

However, it wasn't long after before Gerald and the others noticed a problem, that being the fact that the house's large door was locked.

Seeing that, Lech immediately ordered, "Men, unlock the door!"

Hearing that, a specialist from Lech's team quickly took a few tools out from his fanny pack and got to work...

Not too long after, a clatter could be heard, signifying that the unlocking process was a success!

With that, Lech then pushed the door open and everyone else made sure to follow behind him. Upon entering, however, they quickly realized that the insides were mostly barren aside from a large disc in the middle of the house that was surrounded by four pillars...

“Now what could that be...” muttered the slightly curious Gerald.

Hearing that, Old Flint then said, “...This should be where the vampires cultivate themselves. Looking at the disc, I’m guessing that only the leader of the vampires is allowed to sit there!”

As Gerald nodded in understanding, Lech himself could be seen frowning as he asked in a dissatisfied tone, “...Whatever the case is, there’s nothing in here! Are you sure we’ve found the right place?”

There was simply nothing of value that Lech could see.

“This is definitely the vampires’ territory! I’m sure of it!” replied Old Flint, his tone resolute.

Upon hearing that, the disappointed Lech could only choose to believe the old man’s words.

Shortly after, Lech led his men away to start searching the place for valuables. Gerald and his party, on the other hand, remained in the glaze house, hoping to uncover any information from the disc.

It wasn’t long after before Lech and his teammates discovered a secret room at the side of the house...

Upon entering, their eyes instantly widened. This place was filled with riches and treasures of all kinds! Upon closer inspection, there was even a giant pellet-making furnace in the middle of the room!

Walking toward the table by the furnace, Lech was quick to notice several bottles—ranging from small to large—placed neatly on it.

“There are lots of pellets here, captain! Are we taking them away as well?” asked one of Lech’s men.

“What kind of bullsh*t question is that? Of course, we’re taking them! They’re valuable medicines, you know? They’ll surely sell for a hefty price!” retorted Lech.

Hearing that, his men then immediately began taking action, carrying everything valuable—that they could—out of the room. Naturally, this included the pellets.

By that point, Gerald and the others had already left the house. When they saw Lech and his team members taking so many spoils with them, all of them were naturally shocked.

Even so, Gerald didn’t try to stop them. After all, unlike Lech—who had specifically come here in search of treasure—, Gerald and his party had other objectives. With that in mind, there was no reason for him to fight for any spoils with Lech and his team members.

Still, that didn’t stop Ray from whispering, “Those people are way too crazy, Mr. Crawford!”

“Pay them no heed. Let’s just focus on taking care of ourselves!” replied Gerald with a subtle smile.

Old Flint himself then added in a serious tone, “They’ll be punished sooner or later. After all, those treasures are cursed! Whoever takes them will surely not have a good end. With that said, don’t even think about touching any of the treasures you see!”

“Old Flint is right. No matter how precious the items you encounter are, never take them! Actually, to be on the safe side, don’t even touch them!” Gerald made sure to repeat Old Flint’s message just to emphasize how dangerous it was to even touch the treasures in this place. While human greed was near endless, self-control was key in surviving, especially in their current situation...

Regardless, after nearly half an hour of transferring all manner of treasures out of that room, Lech and his men had compiled enough riches to fill at least two large cars... Seeing how much treasure there was, it was no wonder why Lech and his men had been drawn to this place...

Either way, once Lech got out of the secret room for the final time, he then walked toward Gerald before smiling as he said, "These are the treasures we got from that secret room, Gerald! Since both parties have contributed a lot to get this far, I'm willing to share some of our spoils with you!"

Smiling subtly in return, Gerald then replied, "I appreciate the consideration, Mr. Zak, but we didn't come here for the vampires' treasures. With that in mind, you're free to keep all the spoils!"

Upon hearing that, Lech was momentarily stunned. To think that Gerald would actually reject treasure!

'If he and his party didn't come here for treasure, then what did they come here for...?' wondered Lech.

After a brief pause, Lech then smiled as he said, "...Well then! Since you're being so kind, I'll gladly just take all the treasure with my men!"

With that, Lech and his men then began leaving the area.

Once they were quite a distance away, one of Lech's couldn't help but ask in an astonished tone, "Were... they uninterested in the treasure, captain? But if that's the case, why did they come here in the first place...?"

Lech only sneered in response, his expression gloomy.

'There are clearly only two reasons why they would have rejected my offer... Either they really do have another objective... Or there's something even more valuable down here aside from what we've found!' Lech thought to himself.

At the very least, he had more or less accurately guessed that Gerald and his party had no interest in the treasure since they were after some other important thing that was useless to Lech and his men.

Gerald and his party themselves would've never anticipated that Lech would actually think about them that way...

All of a sudden, one of Lech's men began screaming, "S-spiders! Massive spiders up ahead!"

Turning to look at the man who had shouted—who was currently attempting to flee backward—Lech stared wide-eyed as several humongous spiders began leaping out from the abyss under the stone bridge! Without even giving Lech and his men a fighting chance, the large spiders instantly attacked them!

As they attempted to defend themselves, Lech and his men quickly realized that hundreds of small spiders had also rushed out and had now completely surrounded them!

Seeing that, Gerald and Ray instantly wanted to help them. However, they were promptly stopped by Old Flint who declared, "Stop! Not a step further!"

"What? Why can't we help them?" asked the vexed Gerald.

"Have a good look! The spiders aren't coming for us at all! They're only rushing for that group, which proves that the curse of the treasures is starting to take effect!" explained Old Flint.

Upon hearing that, Gerald finally understood why all this was happening. "So what you're saying is that the spiders will only attack those who touch the treasures?" asked Gerald.

Watching as Old Flint nodded, Gerald and his party were instantly shocked. To think that the spiders would actually select their pRay...

Meanwhile, Lech and his remaining team members were being swallowed alive by the gigantic spiders!

It was truly a gruesome sight...

Staring at Gerald—who was still standing by the door—the pitiful Lech who was getting devoured could only plead, “B-brother Crawford...! Please, save us...!”

“H-Help! Please...!” screamed the other agonized members of Lech’s team as well.

Even so, there was nothing that Gerald could do. All of them had taken the cursed treasures due to their immense greed. In other words, they had brought all this upon themselves. With that in mind, Gerald could only watch helplessly as they continued screaming and getting eaten...

Lech himself was torn clean in half before being tossed right into the abyss...

As for the rest of his team members, they were completely swallowed up by the smaller spiders, and all that was left of them now were puddles of blood...

It had barely even taken minutes for Lech and his group to be completely taken out...

Regardless, now that Lech and his men had been dealt with, the giant spiders then turned to eye Gerald and his party.

Though Gerald and his party vigilantly stared back at them, in the end, the spiders never made a move on them. Instead, they simply returned into the abyss under the stone bridge along with the smaller spiders...

This was naturally a pleasant surprise for Gerald and his group. To think that the spiders would actually leave them be! With their worst fears now over, they could all finally take breaths of relief...

Ray himself—who had earlier been anxious out of his mind—couldn’t help but sit on the ground, finally

able to catch his breath now that the danger had passed. After a while, the still jittery Ray then turned to face Gerald and Old Flint before saying, “That was way too nerve-wracking, Gerald! Thankfully you warned us about not touching the treasure, Old Flint! Otherwise, we would’ve surely suffered the same fate!”

After nodding in agreement, Gerald and Old Flint then began heading over to where Lech’s teammates had died... Even from afar, all the treasure they had been carrying could be seen lying in piles on the ground...

As they got closer, Gerald’s nose couldn’t help but twitch, prompting him to ask, “...Do you smell that?”

Smelling the same light scent that Gerald was, Old Flint then explained, “...This is sandalwood incense. The vampires must have used this to lure the spiders! It appears that this is how the ‘curse’ operates!”

Feeling enlightened, Gerald then replied, “So what you’re saying is that the smell—that had originated from the treasure—ended up transferring onto Lech and his men after they touched them? And that the spiders only attack those who have the smell lingering around them? If that’s the case, everything makes sense now!”

As it turned out, the ‘curse’ was merely an overstatement. In the end, it was an explainable phenomenon that simply required a little more investigation...

Shaking his head, Old Flint then sighed before saying, “Still, they only have themselves to blame... Had they not been greedy enough to touch the treasure, the spiders wouldn’t have attacked them in the first place!”

As the saying went, you reap what you sow...

Whatever the case was, Gerald wasn’t interested in thinking any further about it anymore. Some things and people were simply destined to be ruined. While he wanted to say that Lech was simply unlucky, it was honestly not that much of a surprise that he ended up dying this way...

Soon after, Gerald and the others returned to the chamber once more...

However, once inside, they were suddenly greeted by odd knocking sounds...

Now feeling vigilant, Ray couldn't help but look at Gerald as he asked, "...Do you hear that, brother Gerald?"

Nodding, Gerald then replied, "I do."

With that, all five of them immediately began looking for the exact source of the sound... until eventually, Gerald realized that it was coming from the very center of the round platform in the chamber...

"...The sound is coming from over there!" said Gerald as he pointed at the platform.

Hearing that, everyone quickly gathered around the platform before pressing their ears onto it... True enough, now that their ears were directly on the platform, the constant knocking became even clearer! Upon closer inspection, the knocking sounded almost rhythmic as well.

"...Do... you think someone could be trapped inside, Gerald...?" asked Ray.

"...Judging from the rhythmic knocking, that may just be the case!" replied Gerald, feeling that only a living thing would be capable of making such varied knocking.

After a slight pause, Gerald then instructed, "...Investigate the platform, Ray! We may be able to open it up!"

Hearing that, Ray instantly did as he was told. After a while, he noticed something odd.

Pointing at an obscure pull ring on the round platform, Ray then said, “Gerald, I think I’ve found something!”

Walking over to have a look, Gerald could see that a chain was attached to the pull ring. In other words, it could definitely be pulled.

“...All of you, stand back! I’m pulling the ring! The second you feel that something’s wrong, I want you to leave this place immediately!” ordered Gerald as he looked at the rest of his party members.

Once they were quite a distance away from him, Gerald then began tugging the pull ring...

As Gerald closed his eyes tight—since he needed quite a bit of force to even tug the pull ring—the others held their breaths as they kept their eyes glued on the round platform, ready to bolt if anything bad happened.

Regardless, the clanking of chains soon began echoing across the chamber...

After a little while, Gerald couldn’t be bothered tugging slowly anymore and simply yanked the chain—that was several meters in length—till it could no longer be tugged.

Now that the chain couldn’t be tugged any further, the round platform slowly split in two, revealing an opening in the middle of it!

Seeing that, Ray and the others didn’t dare to move an inch, simply remaining vigilant as they waited to see what would happen next...

Gerald—being the fearless person he was—on the other hand, simply tossed the chain onto the ground

before walking toward the now open platform...

Staring into the hole, Gerald couldn't help but raise his eyebrows...Imprisoned at the bottom, appeared to be a strong, long-haired, ape-like creature...

"...What's down there, Brother Gerald?" asked Ray in a whispery voice.

Looking at them, Gerald then quietly signaled for them to come over to have a look for themselves.

Seeing that, the other members of Gerald's party then crept over before peering down as well.

Looking at Old Flint, Gerald then asked, "...Do you have any idea what that is, Old Flint...?"

After seemingly thinking for a while, Old Flint then replied, "...If my eyes do not deceive me, that should be a black gibbon. I recall a tale about the vampires raising a black gibbon and using it to help them catch humans... Perhaps this is the one!"

As Gerald's eyes widened, Ray quickly said, "Then... this black gibbon must be a fierce beast! It's best that we keep it locked under the platform!"

True enough, such a vicious black gibbon couldn't be allowed to run free. Otherwise, it would surely spell trouble! Unfortunately, Ray had said that a bit too late.

After all, the beast had long broken free of its chains, and it had simply been trapped beneath the round platform for the longest time. Now that the platform was finally open, however, it naturally wanted to escape.

With that in mind, the second Ray's sentence ended, an ear-piercing roar could be heard! A split second later, the black gibbon leaped right out from the bottom of the platform that was at least a few meters

high! What superior jumping capabilities!

Seeing that, Gerald and the others instantly backed away as they vigilantly stared into the eyes of the beast. The gibbon itself stared back at each of them before beating its chest!

Before anyone could react, the beast bolted right out of the chamber, disappearing from view!

Since it hadn't attacked them, all of them found themselves feeling slightly confused. Then again, they weren't complaining. After all, at the very least, they now had one less problem to worry about...

"...Alright, we need to start looking for the exit. We shouldn't stay here any longer!" declared Gerald. After all, who knows what other dangers they would face here.

While it was true that the gibbon and spiders hadn't chosen to attack them, it didn't mean that there weren't any other threats down here. Gerald himself believed that they shouldn't push their luck by staying down here for any longer...

Regardless, after hearing that, Ray, Juno, and Nori readily agreed. After all, they had all been eager to leave this place for a while now. Old Flint himself simply agreed calmly. After all, being used to such situations, fear was the last thing on his mind.

Whatever the case was, Gerald and the others then began looking for the exit...

Instead of an exit, however, the party soon bumped into what appeared to be the entrance of another chamber...

Upon entering, they were instantly greeted by the sight of a sandalwood casket decorated with gold trims... The casket itself was suspended a few meters above the ground by four chains that held onto its corners...

“My god! I never imagined all this to be within a mountain! What a massive place!” exclaimed Ray, his eyes widened. For Ray, this entire trip had been incredible, and nearly everything that had happened had amazed him...

Old Flint himself slowly walked to the bottom of the casket. After examining it for a while, his voice almost sounded emotional as he muttered, “This... This must be where the vampires buried their ancestors...! This casket must have belonged to the first ancestor of the vampires...!”

“What? But that means this casket must have been here for thousands of years!” exclaimed Gerald.

Indeed. Countless people have attempted to locate the casket of the first vampire ancestor in order to obtain the vampiric pearl within it...” replied Old Flint with a nod.

“The vampiric pearl? You came here looking for that, right?” asked Gerald.

“I did. The vampiric pearl is a treasure of the vampires that’ll allow me to obtain a new body!” explained Old Flint.

Upon hearing that, Gerald simply nodded. While the treasure certainly sounded intriguing, he wasn’t all that interested in it. After all, he had only come here to help Old Flint out.

Regardless, after properly inspecting it, Gerald then said, “...Well, it seems safe enough. Let’s open the casket!”

Hearing that, Old Flint then nodded, eager to finally be able to get his hands on the vampiric pearl.

Seeing no objections from Old Flint, Gerald then turned to face Juno and Nori before saying, “You two, stay a distance from us! If anything goes wrong, run for it, understand?”

Naturally, Juno and Nori obeyed. Quickly walking toward the entrance, both of them then stood still, not daring to move around too much as they waited for Gerald and the other two to begin uncovering the casket...

Seeing that the girls were now at a safe distance, Gerald then faced Ray before instructing, "Ray, come over here! You're in charge of unchaining those two corners while I unchain these two!"

Once both of them got into position, Gerald and Ray then slowly began unchaining the casket... and once the final chains were released, the casket fell to the ground with a loud 'thud', instantly sending a cloud of dust flying all over the place!

Since the casket had been here for thousands of years, it wasn't all that surprising for it to be this dusty. Whatever the case was, their next step was to open it...

"...Alright, stand there and help me push the lid off!" ordered Gerald.

"Sure thing, Gerald!" replied Ray as he did as he was told...

Following that, Gerald then pushed hard to open the lid of the casket... and soon enough, the contents inside were plain for all to see.

Everyone close enough was greeted by the sight of a body that couldn't decay any further as well as several treasures that had been placed along with the corpse.

Seeing that, Old Flint instantly began investigating the contents of the coffin...

"Where could the vampiric pearl be...?" asked Gerald in a curious tone.

However, before Old Flint could come up with an answer, Gerald—who had noticed that the vampire’s throat was bulging slightly—quickly added, “...I... I think it’s in his throat!”

With that said, Gerald then took a small knife out before slicing open the corpse’s throat... And sure enough, a blood-red pearl soon revealed itself! It was the legendary vampiric pearl!

Handing it to Old Flint, Gerald then asked, “This should be it, right?”

The old man’s hands now quivering, Old Flint then emotionally replied, “...Yes... Yes, it is... I’ve finally found it... The vampiric pearl...! To think that it would be so well preserved...!”

Despite the joyous occasion, it was around then when the vampire’s body crumbled into ashes before promptly disappearing...

Seeing this, Gerald couldn’t help but frown slightly. For some reason, he felt that something was off...

Regardless, the old man quickly began mumbling excitedly to himself as he walked over to a lone corner to admire the pearl...

While his behavior was slightly odd, Gerald and Ray simply exchanged glances with one another. Whatever the case was, their mission was complete now that they had obtained the pearl. With that in mind, it meant that it was high time they finally left this horrible place...

With that, Gerald then said, “...Alright, since we’ve got what we wanted, let’s hurry and leave this place already!”

Naturally, Nori, Juno, and Ray agreed to that without a second thought.

As they quickly gathered their things to prepare to leave, Ray couldn’t help but notice that Old Flint was

still standing in the same corner, though he was now trembling for some reason...

Finding it slightly odd, Ray then called out, "Old Flint, we're about to leave now!"

However, the second his sentence ended, Ray's eyes widened when Old Flint turned back to glare at him, his eyes now fully crimson...

Shivering in fear, Ray then yelled, "Um, G-Gerald? Something's wrong with Old Flint...!"

Hearing that, he turned to look at the old man and quickly found himself shocked to see Old Flint's state as well.

"...Old Flint...? What's wrong?" asked Gerald in a serious tone, his eyebrows furrowed.

Unfortunately for them, this wasn't the Old Flint they used to know anymore. While his appearance remained the same, the red-eyed being before them was now nothing more than a blood-craving monster...

"Gerald, look at his throat! There's a red glow there!" yelled Ray, prompting Gerald to focus his gaze there.

True to Ray's observation, there really was a red glow there, and it was then when Gerald understood what was happening. Old Flint must have swallowed the vampiric pearl! As a result, he was now a bloodthirsty vampire!

With a bloodcurdling roar, everyone watched wide-eyed as blood dripped from the corners of Old Flint's widened mouth... before the old man bolted for Gerald and his party!

Vampires loved consuming the fresh blood of the living the most... With that in mind, Gerald knew that

Old Flint now saw him and his party as nothing more than a meal!

Understanding that, Gerald quickly rushed forward while yelling, "Get out! All of you! I'll deal with him!"

Upon hearing that, Ray instantly began dragging Juno and Nori out of the area, the trio then hiding not too far off to observe what would happen next.

Gerald himself immediately summoned his Astrabyss Sword before slashing it onto Old Flint!

However, what followed was a loud, 'clunk'! As it turned out, not only was the sword ineffective against the old man, but Old Flint's body was now as hard as steel! From the looks of it, the old man's skin was now probably sword and bulletproof!

Seeing that Gerald was fighting back, Old Flint—who no longer recognized Gerald—attempted to claw at the youth, though Gerald was able to dodge his attack by taking a step back.

Growling in annoyance, the old man then leaped at Gerald, attempting to pin him down! Of course, Gerald wasn't about to give him that chance. After waiting for the perfect moment, Gerald retaliated with a kick, sending the old man flying backward!

While Gerald managed to avoid getting attacked, Old Flint himself looked perfectly fine as he got to his feet again. From the looks of it, Gerald's powerful kick probably felt like nothing more than a tickle to the old man...

Roaring in anger, Old Flint quickly began charging toward Gerald again, this time more frantic than before!

In response, Gerald tossed out what seemed to be a ghostly chain as he yelled, "Soul Chain!"

The chain itself flew toward the old man before wrapping itself around Old Flint's body! Now bound, Old Flint began thrashing around, desperately trying to free himself. With how violent the old man was, Gerald couldn't help but think that had he used rope instead of the Soul Chain, Old Flint would've broken free by now...

Regardless, seeing that the old man was temporarily bound, Gerald wordlessly bolted toward Old Flint before poking at his throat!

And just like that, the vampiric pearl came flying right out of Old Flint's mouth!

The second it was out, Old Flint appeared to calm down considerably, his eyes quickly returning to their initial color... As it turned out, the vampiric pearl truly was the culprit...

Whatever the case was, Old Flint soon regained his consciousness... Now sobered up, the first thing the old man asked was, "...What... What happened to me...?" "...Don't tell me... You don't remember anything at all?" replied Gerald.

Shaking his head in his slight confusion, it truly appeared that he had no memory of what had just taken place.

"...Tell me, why did you swallow the vampiric pearl?" asked Gerald. After all, had the old man not swallowed it, he wouldn't have entered that maddened state.

"I... What? I... swallowed it...?!" replied Old Flint, his eyes widened in disbelief as he stared at Gerald.

"You did! After swallowing it, you turned into a madman and started attacking us!" explained Gerald.

After hearing everything that had happened from Gerald, Old Flint couldn't help but look at the pearl—that was still on the ground—as he muttered in his bewilderment, "...I... The last thing I remember was you giving the pearl to me... I had no idea I did all that after that!"

Staring at the old man, Gerald had a feeling that he wasn't lying. Call it a gut feeling, but Gerald chose to believe Old Flint's point of view.

However, if Old Flint truly hadn't been in control of himself when he started attacking, that clearly meant that the vampiric pearl was the source of the problem.

Still, if that was the case, why didn't anything happen to Gerald when he touched the pearl earlier? What bizarre secrets lay behind all this...?

Whatever the case was, after thinking for a brief moment, Gerald told Ray to hand him a piece of cloth. Once he obtained it, Gerald then wrapped the pearl in it before slipping it into his bag.

It was better not to have such a terrifying item too close to him. Otherwise, who knew what would end up happening?

Either way, it wasn't long after before Gerald and the others managed to find a way out of the vampires' territory. However, now that they were finally free, the party of five didn't descend the mountain. Instead, they went upward.

Soon enough, it began snowing rather heavily... It certainly didn't help that the north wind was blowing so hard.

"Why the hell is it snowing all of a sudden?! What even is this place?" exclaimed Ray in his surprise.

"Let's not think about that first... We need to focus on finding shelter!" replied Gerald as he kept an eye out on anyplace they could hide from the snow.

Agreeing with Gerald, the five people quickly began scouting through the area... and eventually, they

found a dark cave.

By that point, the snow was falling so heavily that it was evident that a snowstorm was coming soon. With that in mind, Gerald and the others were thankful that they had managed to find shelter before that happened.

Upon entering, they found that it was a pretty suitable place to wait out the snowstorm. Even if it wasn't, it still beat being buried by snow in the middle of nowhere...

Once they entered a bit deeper, however, Ray quickly pinched his nose as he grumbled, "The hell? What on earth is this horrible smell?"

Hearing Ray's complaint, Gerald and the others quickly caught onto the pungent odor as well. Soon enough, it got so terrible that they felt like vomiting! Even so, they didn't have much of a choice but to remain here. It was either this, or dying under layers of snow...

"...Just bear with it. Some animals may have been here before!" replied Gerald.

Nodding in resignation, everyone simply sat down, hoping that the snowstorm would end soon...

To their dismay, it showed no signs of stopping, even after quite a while.

While they didn't realize it, all five of them slowly began dozing off... To be fair, they hadn't rested for an entire day, so it only made sense for all five of them to feel completely drained...

Though having a nap wasn't really an issue, the real problem was that they didn't know what inhabited this cave...

And soon enough, two red glints could be seen coming from deeper within the cave...As the two glints

came closer, it was slowly revealed that they were the eyes of a huge white bear!

Since Gerald and the others were currently fast asleep, none of them knew how dangerous their current situation was!

Regardless, after looking at the five people who had dozed off at the cave's entrance, the bear seemed particularly interested in Ray. The fact that Ray was snoring only attracted the bear's attention even more!

Slowly moving toward Ray, the bear quickly began licking his face!

"...Five more minutes... What is it Gerald...? Has the snow stopped...?" mumbled the sleepy Ray as he began patting the bear's face...

The second he felt how unnaturally furry 'Gerald' was, Ray instantly froze. This... This wasn't Gerald, was it.

By the time he opened his eyes, Gerald and the others were already staring vigilantly at the bear. To think that such a dangerous creature would be living in this cave! With how close the bear was, all of them could smell it and even feel the warmth its body was exuding...!

Slowly motioning for Ray not to move hastily, Ray gulped before slowly turning to see what he was patting... and the next thing he knew, he was staring straight into the eyes of the white bear...!

Instantly overwhelmed with fear, the bear appeared to sense that, and it immediately let out a terrifying roar!

Seeing how wide the bear's jaws now were, Gerald immediately yanked Ray away from the bear before yelling, "Run!"

Hearing that, the rest of the party instantly bolted out of the cave together with Gerald!

Quite honestly, they would've been much better off if they hadn't chosen to run. After all, the white bear immediately got excited when it saw how fast Gerald and his party were running. In the end, it was a carnivore, and it craved fresh meat, especially from such lively humans!

With that, the white bear quickly began chasing after them!

Instinctively turning back to look, Ray was horrified when he saw that the bear was chasing after him!

"H-hey, now! I'm all skin and bones, brother! Stop chasing me already...!" yelled Ray in his desperation as he continued fleeing from the hungry bear. It was his first time being chased by a white bear, and he hoped that if he survived, there wouldn't ever be a second time. What an utterly horrible experience!

By that point, Gerald had managed to find a safe spot for Juno and the two others to hide in.

Running toward Ray, Gerald then yelled, "Over here! Hurry!"

Upon hearing that, Ray instantly began running toward Gerald!

Seeing that the bear was still targeting the frantic Ray, Gerald quickly summoned the Astrabyss Sword, hoping to finish off the white bear.

"Leave it to me, Ray! Go hide with the others!" ordered Gerald as the bear came dangerously close to him.

Aiming closely, Gerald then slashed the sword the second the bear got close enough! While the attack was able to hit, Gerald had only managed to inflict a minor cut to the bear's underbelly! In other words, the bear wasn't all that hurt yet!

Now irritated, the bear stomped its paws before charging fiercely toward Gerald!

In barely a second, the bear was already inches before Gerald! Even if he didn't die from being smacked by the white bear, he was sure to still get seriously injured!

Of course, Gerald wasn't about to grant it that opportunity.

Dodge rolling till he was right under the white bear's belly, Gerald then stabbed it right into the beast!

With how loudly the bear had roared in response, Gerald knew that he had finally managed to deal substantial damage on the bear!

Even so, that stab wasn't enough to kill it. In fact, it only made the bear even more enraged! Now looking like it had gone mad, the bear began attacking Gerald with all that it had!

If it wasn't for the fact that this was a life-or-death situation, the sight of Gerald and the bear leaping all over the mountain was honestly quite amusing.

Regardless, after realizing that it wasn't going to be able to get its hands on Gerald, the bear suddenly switched targets to the others who were hiding!

Realizing that the bear was running toward his friends, Gerald then yelled, "Careful! It's coming!"

Seeing the incoming bear, the rest of Gerald's party quickly attempted to disperse from the tree that they had been hiding behind this entire time!

Before they knew it, however, the bear had rammed its head right into the tree! While none of them

were directly hit by the bear, the immense impact of the collision caused all four of them to momentarily lose their footing!

Unluckily, Juno took a step too far backward and was now frantically attempting to balance herself from falling right into the valley!

Upon seeing that, Gerald instantly bolted toward the scene!

Giving the white bear a hard kick, the beast ended up flying right down the valley! With the main threat now gone, Gerald then rushed to save Juno!

While he was just in time to grab onto her hand, the soil at their feet was a bit too loose, and both of them ended up falling right into the valley!

Eyes widened in horror as they watched their friends fall down the valley, Ray and Nori could only yell, "Gerald! Juno...!"

It was sometime later before the duo finally awoke again... Somehow, they had managed to survive the fall... Looking around, they quickly realized that a stray branch had broken their fall!

Whatever the case was, Gerald found himself quickly asking in a concerned tone, "Are you alright, Juno?"

Nodding subtly, Juno then replied, "I'm fine... I just hurt my arm a bit... I'm guessing it's a sprain!"

Watching as she rubbed her arm, Gerald quickly began examining it by gently pinching it... After a while, Gerald breathed a sigh of relief as he said, "...Yeah, it should just be a sprain. Thankfully it's not a fracture!"

Hearing that, Juno felt much more rest assured.

Still, she couldn't help but look down. They were still quite a distance off the ground... It certainly didn't help that it was pitch dark down there. Neither of them knew what lay down there at all...

"...Say... how are we even going to get down...?" muttered Juno.

"Hush. Do you hear that?" replied Gerald as he looked at the girl.

Upon hearing that, both of them momentarily fell silent as they perked their ears...

After a short while, both of them widened their eyes before shouting at the same time, "... That's the sound of flowing water!"

"...Say, Gerald...? Do you think...?" mumbled Gerald as she turned to look at Gerald.

"Indeed! From the sound of it, there appears to be a river down there!" replied Gerald as he nodded confidently.

"...Then, are you thinking of...?" asked Juno as she paid close attention to his response...

Seeing the subtle smile on Gerald's face after she said that, she knew that Gerald had got the message. In the end, Juno was probably the only person who could understand him so quickly...

"You know me, Juno! Since we don't have any further options, we can only take risks!" replied Gerald.

Since it was quite a distance down and they didn't have any other way of descending, they just had to

take the risk and hope they fell into the river...

“...Agreed! I’m with you!”

Juno trusted Gerald a lot, which was why she wasn’t against Gerald’s dare-devilish suggestion.

What more, if they leaped together, they’d at least die together... Though needless to say, surviving together was definitely still Juno’s main goal.

Regardless, after readying themselves, Gerald then looked at Juno before asking, “Ready?”

Watching as she nodded firmly, Gerald then hugged her tight... before both of them plunged deep into the valley!

Falling faster, and faster, it was only a few seconds later when both of them fell into a body of running water with a massive splash!

As they had guessed, there really was a river at the bottom, and thank god they were right. The river saved their lives...

Whatever the case was, now that they were still alive, Gerald—who hadn’t let go of Juno this entire time—quickly swam Juno to the river bank...

Now soaking wet and freezing—since the river water consisted of freshly melted snow from the mountains—Juno couldn’t help but find herself shivering.

Seeing that, he knew he had to get them warm as soon as possible.

With that in mind, Gerald then wordlessly began running into a nearby forest to gather dry branches and twigs. Once there was enough, he quickly rubbed two sticks together, and with enough friction, a fire was eventually started...

Pleased with how well the branches and twigs were burning, Gerald then called out, "Over here, Juno! Hurry and take whatever clothes you can off to let them dry as well!"

Too cold to even reply, Juno then shivered over and removed everything—but her undergarments—before sitting right beside him by the fire...

Seeing that Gerald then wrapped his arms around her for extra warmth...

When she finally got warm enough, Juno couldn't help but blush when she realized how close she now was to Gerald...

Gerald himself couldn't help but feel that the shy girl looked extremely lovely under the light of the fire...

Regardless, with how tightly he was holding onto her, Juno felt a great sense of security... And throughout her life, Gerald had been the only person who had made her feel this secure.

Eventually, Juno couldn't help but raise her head, smiling as she said, "It's so nice to have you by my side, Gerald!"

Smiling in response, Gerald then pecked her on her forehead before replying, "I'll be by your side throughout this Juno! You'll always be safe with me!"

Nodding, Juno gladly believed in his words. As long as she was with him, she feared nothing.

It was about half an hour later when their clothes finally dried up. With that, the duo got to their feet and began leaving the forest. After all, the sooner they reunited with Ray and the others, the better.

After striding through the forest for a while, a black wolf suddenly leaped out from the bushes!

Watching as it charged toward them, Gerald swiftly punched it right in the head, resulting in the agonized wolf howling one final time before it fell to the ground, dead!

To be able to kill a wolf with just a single hit, Gerald's punching force was truly nothing to scoff at...

Either way, Gerald found the wolf's appearance to be a blessing. After all, they didn't have to worry about starving now!

"Are you hungry, Juno? Also, I'm assuming you've never tried wolf meat before?" asked Gerald.

Startled, Juno instantly shook her head. She knew where this conversation was going...

"Great! I haven't tasted wolf before either, so this will be a nice gustatory experience for both of us! Not that we have any other food sources anyway, so we may as well just fill our bellies with what we have!" added Gerald. Naturally, Juno wasn't against that idea.

Regardless, Gerald then got to work processing and butchering the wolf.

He made sure to properly skin the wolf since wolf fur could be sold for a pretty hefty price. Once that was done, he then sliced the wolf's meat into manageable pieces.

After washing the meat by the river, Gerald started another fire. Once that was up, grilled wolf meat was soon to come...

It was never a good idea to travel with an empty stomach and both of them knew it. With that in mind, eating till they were full was their current best course of action.

In less than half an hour, the wolf meat was already well-done and both of them could finally dig in. Using a large leaf he found as a plate, Gerald then tore off a few chunks of the cooked meat before handing them to Juno.

After getting some for himself as well, both of them then sat under a tree to enjoy their meal.

Taking the first bite, Gerald—who really hadn't tasted wolf meat before this—couldn't help but exclaim, "My god! Wolf meat is delicious! It's unlike anything I've ever tasted before!"

While the tastiness was definitely a plus, even if it wasn't delicious, Gerald would've eaten the meat anyway. After all, the goal was just to fill their bellies.

Either way, once they had their fill, the two put the fire out before getting to their feet, ready to resume their journey.

However, at that moment, the rustling of leaves could be heard... Alerted by the sound, Gerald quickly pulled Juno along and hid in a nearby bush.

It wasn't long after before a few odd and fragile-looking humanoids came out from the forest...

Shocked by what they were seeing, Gerald and Juno then watched on as the creatures surrounded what remained of the wolf's corpse before gnawing at its bones!

Judging from the way they were devouring the corpse's raw meat and sucking its blood, Gerald suddenly had an idea what they could be.

Could... those be feral vampires?

“Gerald...? Do you have any idea what those monsters are...?” asked the confused Juno.

“If my guess is correct... They’re feral vampires!” muttered Gerald.

Upon hearing that, Juno gasped loudly though she managed to stop herself from screaming.

Unfortunately, that was all it took for the feral vampires to realize that they weren’t alone.

Watching as the feral vampires began looking around, Gerald knew for a fact that it was only a matter of time before they got discovered.

With that in mind, he then grabbed Juno’s arm before whispering, “We’ve been found! We need to run!”

Before Juno could even reply, Gerald was already tugging her along as he bolted from the scene.

Naturally, this instantly caught the feral vampires’ attention!

Roaring ferociously as they gave chase, the sight of a living human that promised fresh blood was simply too much of a temptation for these blood-craving creatures!

And thus began the game of cat and mouse between the duo and the feral vampires.

With how fast the feral vampires naturally were, all of them soon caught up with Gerald and Juno!

Realizing that they had been surrounded, the terrified Juno couldn't help but worriedly ask, "W-what now, Gerald...?"

"Don't worry, I'm here!" comforted Gerald as the glaring feral vampires continued growling like beasts at the two humans...There was simply no easy way out of this.

The very next second, the four feral vampires began their assault on Gerald and Juno!

Watching as their claws extended toward the duo, Gerald quickly summoned his Astrabyss Sword before slashing the first feral vampire that got too close!

And just like that, the feral vampire that was slashed was cut clean in half!

With blood spewing out of their dead brethren, the other three feral vampires instantly began backing off. After all, they now knew that Gerald's sword was not to be taken lightly.

"Come at me if you're not afraid to die!" growled Gerald as he glared at the remaining feral vampires.

Seemingly understanding what he had just said, the trio then turned around before bolting off.

While the crisis was now lifted, Gerald had come to learn that those feral vampires were actually rather timid. After all, they were easily scared and fled so quickly.

Regardless, Gerald then put away his sword before saying, "Alright, let's leave this place before those feral vampires come back!"

With that, the duo resumed their journey with Gerald taking the lead... and half an hour later, they

finally made it out of the forest.

Once they were outside, Gerald immediately took his phone out. Finally, some reception!

He had earlier planned to contact Ray and the others, though the forest naturally prevented him from calling. Whatever the case was, there was reception now so it was high time he finally tried to contact Ray so that they could regroup.

To Gerald's dismay, Ray wasn't picking up. Frowning slightly, he then tried a few more times. In the end, however, the result remained the same...

The fact that there was beeping as the call tried to connect meant that Ray definitely had reception. So why wasn't he picking Gerald's call up...?

Thinking about it, there were only two possibilities as to why this was, the first being that Ray and the others hadn't noticed the call. The second, however, meant that they could very well have gotten themselves into trouble and were unable to answer...

While it was unfortunate, Gerald had a hunch that the second possibility made more sense...

After all, Ray was addicted to gadgets, so there was no way he would ever ignore his phone. The fact that Ray still wasn't answering even though he had reception only solidified Gerald's theory that something must have happened to them.

Seeing that Gerald was still trying to call Ray—after quite a while—the concerned Juno was prompted to ask, "...Do... You think something's happened to them, Gerald...?"

Furrowing his brow slightly at the thought of it, Gerald's expression darkened as he nodded while saying, "...That's very possible, especially since we've bumped into feral vampires here. I have a sneaking suspicion that Ray and the others must have encountered them as well!"

“...W-what? Then, they...” exclaimed Juno, her heart feeling heavy.

“Don’t worry, Old Flint’s with them. If anyone knows how to deal with feral vampires, it’s him! With that in mind, the feral vampires shouldn’t be able to hurt them that easily!” replied Gerald, attempting to reassure Juno though he wasn’t all that sure about their safety either. Still, he simply didn’t want Juno to worry too much about them at the moment.

After all, the important thing now was to try regrouping with them.

With that in mind, the duo immediately began searching for their party members at the edge of the forest.

Not long after, they managed to come across a bag that looked strikingly similar to Ray’s... Upon rummaging through it, they found his mobile phone. With that in mind, the bag undoubtedly belonged to Ray...

No wonder he hadn’t answered any of Gerald’s calls... He had been separated from his bag and phone!

While they at least knew why he hadn’t been picking up now, Gerald and Juno were also much surer that something terrible must’ve happened to their other party members...