

“A Walk in the Forest feat. False”

Author: Suemitsu Kenichi

The life that vanished in my arms.

The sensation lingers, refusing to fade away. As though in inverse proportion to my own loss of death, he gained it. It felt like death itself, something I could never touch again, no matter how much I desired it...

As they strolled through the rain-soaked forest together, False often recounted stories from the past.

"After that, I tried every possible means to die. I've slashed my body to shreds until it was nothing but chunks of flesh. I drained all the blood from my body until I was completely desiccated. I've crushed my head under massive boulders, blown my heart apart with gunpowder, and dissolved my body to an unrecognizable state with powerful acid. No matter what I did, I couldn't die. My destroyed body always regenerated completely against my will. I even went decades without eating, but I couldn't starve to death. The phenomenon of 'death' itself has been stripped away from me. Once I realized that, I stopped trying to die altogether."

He spoke with such casual detachment that Ul could only listen with a bitter expression.

"...Well, uh... I guess being immortal comes with its own struggles, huh?"

"'Struggles' doesn't even begin to cover it. Living for such a long time robs the world of its shape. Memories don't settle properly, and events are recognized not as a continuous line, but as isolated points. I don't remember much about the distant past. And yet, the sensation of the life that slipped away from my arms back then is seared into my mind. Over thousands of years, my sense of self has shattered countless times, only to be dragged back to reality by that memory. That sensation has gradually transformed into something that justifies my existence. No, 'concept' isn't the right word. It's more like a void, something I can never fill, but can't stop trying to. The void left by Ul who no longer exists has become the very reason I continue to exist in this world."

Ul laughed and didn't take his words seriously.

"You really can say embarrassing things like that with a straight face, huh? I'm right here, aren't I?"

"When my sense of self crumbles, it feels like I'm pinned to the depths of my consciousness. But I always hear a voice, your voice, calling out to me, Ul. The last time I woke from such a crumble, I found myself surrounded by countless corpses. My body was drenched in blood. I didn't know if those fanatics seeking eternal life had killed each other or if I had done it myself. There are too many bloody stories like that, and I don't remember each one clearly."

The two of them continued walking through the rain-soaked forest, without so much as an umbrella. Yet, Ul noticed something strange, False wasn't getting wet at all.

"...Hey, why aren't you getting wet?"

"Oh, that's because the rain isn't actually falling. It's just something I've made you think is happening. But it's nothing you need to worry about."

Even with that explanation, Ul found it hard to accept. False, however, continued speaking without concern.

"You remind me of someone... Ah, that's right. It's been so long that I don't remember clearly, but you're similar to someone named Julio Miller."

"Who's that?"

"After more than ten years passed since the Clan Fest Tragedy, there was a time when I was under the protection of the Vlad Agency. Searching alone for a missing TRUMP was less efficient than staying where information gathered. So, I deliberately leaked my location to let them find me. Julio was the monitoring officer assigned to me then. Oh, and there was another one. His name was... Ah, yes. Emile."

"You remember them pretty well, don't you?"

"It's not that I've forgotten. It's just hard to recall. Memories from a long time ago are still better than recent ones. But I don't remember much about what happened yesterday, and I'll probably forget most of today by tomorrow. Everything here feels like a hazy dream."

"What happened while you were with the Vlad Agency? Did they experiment on you or anything?"

"No, nothing like that. The treatment wasn't bad. Aside from the strict surveillance and the fact that it was basically an isolated prison, I was treated like a guest. During the day, Julio and Emile, the agency's assigned observers, were always by my side. They were essentially my caretakers. It seems the Vlad Agency had no intention of harming me."

"But why...? If they had an immortal being in their hands, wouldn't they have had so many questions?"

"Listen, Ul. All vampires are thought to have a mental connection to TRUMP. There's a hypothesis that the collective consciousness and memory of the species accumulate in TRUMP, like an Akashic record. This is inferred from the fact that underage vampires in the Cocoon Phase, when their sensitivity is fully exposed, are more susceptible to TRUMP's mental influence. If someone were to harm me, a chosen immortal, it could have a negative effect on TRUMP's psyche. Harming me could lead to a 'species collapse phenomenon.' That's why the Vlad Agency had no choice but to handle me like a fragile object while keeping me in custody."

"Sounds like you must have been really bored."

"Not exactly. The classified information about my being held in an isolation facility was leaked. There are primordial believers even within the Blood Pact Council. A spy or something must have been involved. The location of the facility became known to them."

"Who are 'they'?"

"Let's see... what were they called again..."

False strained to recall a distant memory.

"I don't remember well, but it was some kind of criminal organization made up of primordial believers. They wanted my immortality. Such fools. I'm not 'TRUMP,' I'm 'FALSE.' I don't have the power to bestow eternal life. Yet those fools desired me. One day, a group of armed primordial believers attacked the isolation facility. Their goal was to capture me. In the fierce gunfire, the guards were killed one after another. It was absurd. They were dying to protect someone who couldn't die. Julio and Emile tried to sneak me out through a hidden passage, but the exit was already surrounded. However, the attackers were swiftly annihilated."

"Did you kill them?"

False shook his head.

"No, it was Dali Delico who killed them."

Ul's eyes widened in shock.

"Dali Delico? The one in our textbooks? The legendary figure in vampire history and the hero of the Blood Pact Council?"

"Yes. But at that time, Dali Delico had retired from the Vlad Agency and was living a reclusive life. Julio and Emile told me about him. There were rumors he had become a shell of his former self. Others said he was searching for the missing TRUMP alone. In any case, he was like a hermit, surrounded by a mix of truth and fiction. Ul... Dali Delico was your father."

Hearing this, Ul was taken aback.

"Wait a second. You're saying Dali Delico is my father? That doesn't make sense. Dali Delico lived thousands of years ago. There's no way he could be my father."

False listened to Ul's protests without a change in expression.

"After that, Dali Delico sheltered me. By then, he had lost his former dignity and was merely a withered old man. Still sharp, though. I'm sure the day Ul and Raphael died in the clan massacre was the day the real Dali Delico also died. What remained was a living corpse. He never took up new ambitions. However, he couldn't let the prestigious Delico lineage end with him. He adopted four descendants from the family's branch line as heirs. I spent about 30 years at the Delico estate. On his deathbed, Dali told me this: Just as I protected Ul in the massacre, the Delico family would protect me. That protecting me would protect the vampire species as a whole. This will was passed down to Dali's adoptees and descendants. Afterward, with their support, I began researching immortality to restore my body to its original state. But the research didn't go well. The only result was a side product: an elixir of agelessness."

"Is that how you started the experiments in the Sanatorium Clan?"

"Exactly. Compared to causing the 'species collapse phenomenon,' the sacrifices made in the clan are trivial. For the Blood Pact Council, particularly the primordial believers among them, the research into immortality is intriguing. Our clan is an unspoken rule of the Blood Pact Council. The boys and girls in the Cocoon Phase are sacrifices to maintain peace in vampire society."

"That's horrible... but why did you create the Sanatorium Clan in the first place?"

False paused, digging deep into his memory.

"I once read an intriguing book about the downfall of the Verachicca family, written by an author named Winter."

"Who were the Verachicca?"

"They were a family that once governed an independent estate. They used Initiative to make everyone believe that their deceased patriarch was still alive. It was a forced Shared Illusion, different from the Cocoon Phase symptoms. Eventually, the illusion unraveled."

"So, you modeled the Sanatorium after them?"

"I only used it as a reference. I made sure to do it better. This Shared Illusion exists for everyone's happiness."

"But you're still conducting immortality experiments, right?"

"Yes. Ever since I witnessed Dali Delico's death, I've continued the research. If someone could adapt to the elixir extracted from my blood... I thought I might be able to see Ul again. He is my reason for continuing to exist, my eternal companion."

"...I'm Ul," the boy said uneasily. He forced a smile, looking at False, but his gaze had turned cold.

"You're not Ul. This is just a game of 'pretending to be Ul.'"

Hearing this, the boy fell into a state of panic.

"No! I'm Ul! Your best friend! I don't care if this is some Cocoon Phase nonsense! There are things you shouldn't say! Why are you saying this?"

False, still with a cold expression, stepped closer to the boy, placing a hand on his cheek.

"I've grown tired of this game. It's time to end it."

False activated his Initiative. A ringing noise filled the air. The boy's memories were altered. The memories of pretending to be Ul, False's stories during their walk, everything, began to fade away.

The boy, no longer Ul, blinked in confusion.

"Huh... False? What are you doing here?"

"What do you mean? You ran away from the clan, and I, as a prefect, came to bring you back."

The boy looked around, realizing where he was.

"Why am I out here? I... can't remember."

"You're probably not feeling well due to your Cocoon Phase. Go back to your room, take your medicine, and rest. I'll make sure the master doesn't hear about this."

"Thanks, False! I owe you one!"

With those words, the boy who had been playing along with the game of "pretending to be Ul" hurried back to the grounds of the clan. A gentle breeze brushed by. When False looked up, the sky was clear and bright. False himself would never see the rain of illusions.

"...Now then, who should be the next Ul?"

He muttered quietly, as if trying to suppress the emptiness within himself.

Returning from the forest to the boys' dormitory of the clan, False surveyed the students as if selecting something. His gaze came to a halt on one particular student.

"...Yes, next will be Camellia. He's a fun guy, and I feel like he'll make a good UL. If he doesn't work out, I can just replace him with another UL."

False called Camellia to an isolated spot and used his initiative to alter his memories. A sound like ringing in the ears. The memory alteration was swift.

False plastered a deliberately cheerful smile onto his face.

"...Hey, UL. Where have you been? I've been looking all over for you."

Camellia, still unaccustomed to the implanted memories of UL, hesitated.

"...I... huh? What was I doing just now?"

"What do you mean? We promised to go to the library together at noon, didn't we?"

"...It felt like I was dreaming."

"A dream?"

"Like I wasn't UL, but someone else... It was that kind of dream."

"Well, that's just the Cocoon Phase messing with you. It throws your mental balance out of whack, so you end up dreaming all kinds of weird things. I'll go to the infirmary and get you some 'medicine.'"

As False turned to leave, UL called out to him.

"Wait a minute, False!"

False paused, turned around, and flashed another feigned smile.

"What are you talking about, UL? Who's False? I'm... Sophie Anderson, remember?"

At that, Camellia - no, UL - finally showed signs of accepting the fabricated memory.

"Oh, right... You're Sophie. What was I even saying? I guess the Cocoon Phase is really messing with me."

"Blaming everything on the Cocoon Phase isn't great, you know. Come on, let's go. There's a new book by Dali Delico in the library. It's about a case involving missing boys and girls during the Cocoon Phase. Sounds interesting, doesn't it?"

"Dali Delico? You mean the famous author?"

"Yeah, though it's not exactly polite to borrow his name without permission. It's disrespectful to Dali's descendants."

Camellia - no, Ul - was baffled by Sophie's words.

“What are you talking about?”

“Don't worry about it. It's nothing to do with you. But if that new book by Dali Delico ends up exposing the existence of this clan, things could get messy. Ul, I might need your help with that.”

With that, Sophie headed for the library in the common area of the clan. Camellia, newly transformed into Ul, hurried to follow.

And so began another of Sophie's new “pretend-to-be-Ul” games. To him, it was no more than a childish illusion, offering little in the way of comfort.

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