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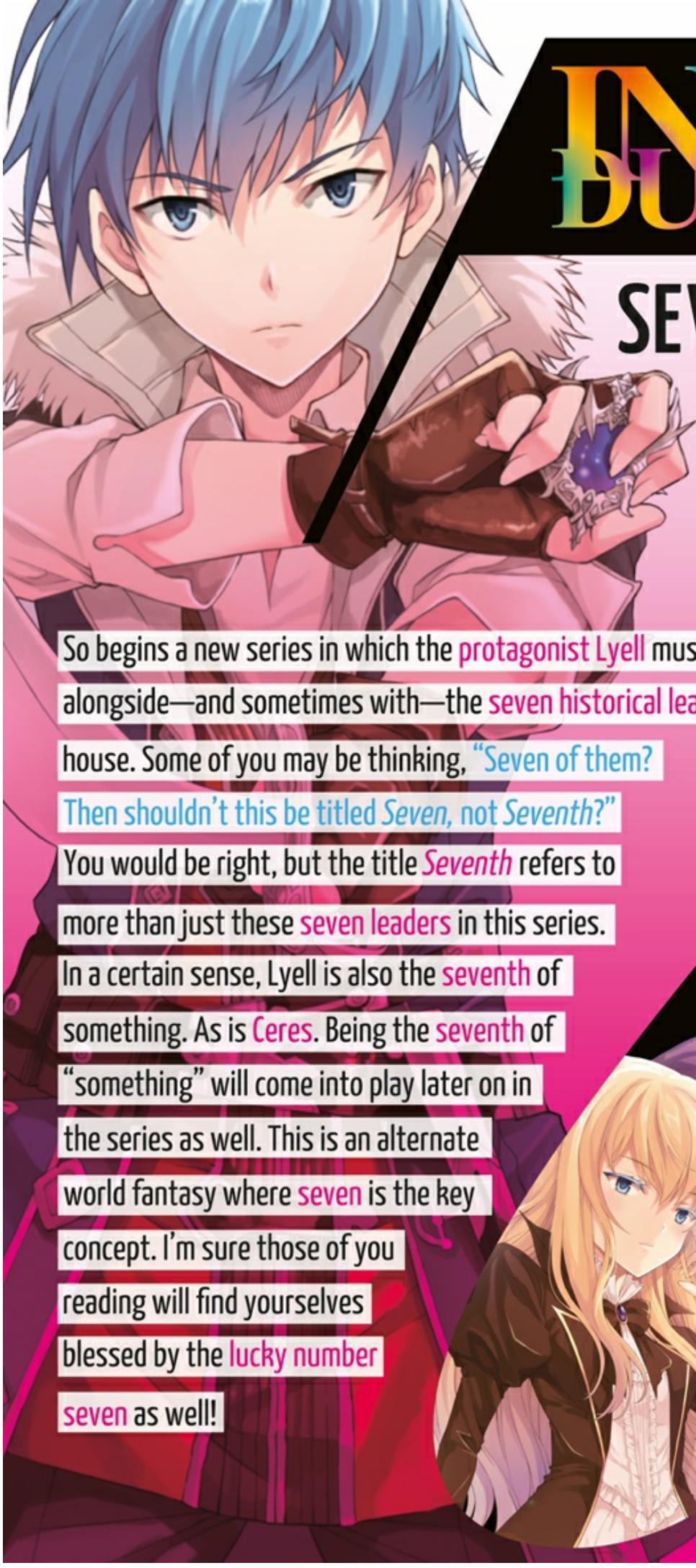


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# INTRODUCTION

## SEVEN or SEVENTH?

So begins a new series in which the **protagonist Lyell** must fight alongside—and sometimes with—the **seven historical leaders** of his house. Some of you may be thinking, “**Seven of them?**” Then shouldn’t this be titled *Seven*, not *Seventh*?” You would be right, but the title **Seventh** refers to more than just these **seven leaders** in this series. In a certain sense, Lyell is also the **seventh** of something. As is **Ceres**. Being the **seventh** of “**something**” will come into play later on in the series as well. This is an alternate world fantasy where **seven** is the key concept. I’m sure those of you reading will find yourselves blessed by the **lucky number seven** as well!

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# Prologue

This year marked three hundred years since the founding of Banseim Kingdom, the greatest country on the continent. It was nestled in the very center of the landmass and surrounded by a number of foreign neighbors.

Banseim had risen up from the ruins of the Centrus Kingdom, which had once unified the continent and ruled it with fear before it fell. The man who'd led the charge to overthrow the long-corrupt kingdom and absolve it of any right to rule became the first king of Banseim. Three hundred years had passed since then, and a king and the aristocracy still governed the kingdom today.

As Banseim continued to thrive, one regional noble family grew to hold an important position in the kingdom: the Walts. They had over two and half centuries of history behind them and were descended from knights of the court who'd left to develop forestland for themselves, thus becoming regional nobility.

The founder of the noble house, Basil Walt, had been a court knight and the third son of his family. He'd elected to join a pioneering group, clearing out a beast-infested forest to build the foundations of what would become the current-day Walt family. His successor was Crassel Walt, a man who merely maintained what he'd inherited before passing it off to the head of the next generation, Sley Walt.

Sley had fought in one of the most famous battles in Banseim history, the Retreat of Remrandt. Although he and his limited troops were overwhelmingly outnumbered, they'd managed to stop a massive invading army. He later became known as the Hero General, becoming one of the notable names in the Walt family history.

The fourth generation head was Marcus Walt, who'd inherited a baron title thanks to his father's notable accomplishments. The rest of the aristocracy soon took notice and accepted him into the fold, thus beginning a seemingly boundless surge of prominence for the Walt family. Well, at least until the next

successor, Fredriks Walt, took over.

Unlike his father and grandfather before him, Fredriks was known for being a lecher. The Walts had somehow obtained viscount status under his rule, though just a few short years after marrying his wife, he'd already taken on four mistresses.

During the reign of the next Walt head, Fiennes Walt, Banseim plunged into a dark age. Fiennes had taken advantage of the situation to expand his lands, make connections with court nobles, and systematically steal border territories. In the eyes of the people, his actions dragged the Walt name through the mud.

The birth of the next successor, Brod Walt, marked a new golden age for the Walts. At the time, chaos still reigned in Banseim, inviting foreign countries to take advantage and invade. The Walts had moved up from a viscount to an earldom by this point, and it was Brod who'd taken the initiative and swooped in with all the fury of a lion to save Banseim in its time of need. In doing so, he was welcomed as an adviser to the royal family, thus restoring glory to the Walt family. However, in the next generation, under Brod's successor, Meisel Walt, darkness again descended upon their house.

It was a spring day bursting with sunlight, which ill befitted the events taking place.

The Walt estate was appropriately vast and opulent for an earldom. A fence encircled their spacious lot, on which sat their mansion designed by a famous architect. Although the place was luxurious, it didn't forsake functionality in the process. All of the gardens—the one out front, the one in the inner courtyard, and the one in the rear courtyard—were perfectly maintained. The lawn and trees were trimmed frequently, of course, and even the fountains and ponds were cleared and cleaned regularly.

In one corner of this picturesque property, the lawn had been gouged out, leaving the bare earth exposed. It was here that a boy and girl stood opposite each other, surrounded by a group of adults clad in suits and sporting impeccably groomed facial hair.

I was that boy, and standing across from me was my sister, as well as my

father, Meisel Walt. He was wearing white gloves and kept glancing down at his pocket watch, concerned with the time. As I watched him, I wondered, *How much time has passed? Has it been a couple of hours by now? Or only a few minutes? Seriously, why is this even happening?*

My mother, Clare Walt, was wearing a blue dress and standing beside my father. A maid stood next to her, holding an umbrella to shield my mother from the sun's rays. Neither my mother nor my father were looking at me; their gazes were glued to my younger sister, Ceres Walt. My *perfect* sister. If there was anybody in this world beloved by the Goddess, it would have to be Ceres.

My fingers tightened around the hilt of my saber, a gift I'd received from my parents on my tenth birthday. It was currently slick with sweat and blood. I'd long abandoned my jacket and was now clad only in a shirt, vest, and trousers, and my skin was covered in cuts and scrapes from head to toe, quite literally. All of them were wounds Ceres had inflicted on me, and there were no small number of them, though they were all shallow. She'd done that on purpose, to toy with me.

In contrast to my bedraggled appearance, my sister—two years my junior—looked pristine and perfectly at ease. She also carried a weapon my parents had gifted her. It was a rapier, a slender yet exceedingly sharp sword made specifically for piercing your opponent. Her fingers traced over the blade. As far as she was concerned, it was merely a brand-new toy she'd barely played with. She eyed the yellow Gem encrusted in the hilt with a look of satisfaction. The sword was a masterpiece, made by a great artisan from the best materials possible.

My saber was quite sharp, but it didn't even begin to compare to her weapon. The blade was noticeably chipped, and the hilt had grown black with grime. I wanted so desperately for my parents to look my way that I practiced with it frequently, swinging it some ten thousand—no, hundred thousand—times.

In spite of my efforts, I couldn't compare to Ceres and her skill, even though she was wielding a rapier she'd only just received today. I didn't want to believe it was simply a difference in talent that separated us. Ceres was receiving an education just like mine, except that since she was a girl, her weapon training was supposed to be limited to mere self-defense. Yet somehow, I couldn't even

lay a finger on her.

Her fingers continued brushing over the blade as she began to speak, never once bothering to look my way. Her words oozed with boredom. “Are you done yet, dear brother? You swing that sword every day like a fool, but this is all you have to offer? And you call yourself a son of House Walt? For shame.”

I gritted my teeth and glared at her. We’d only begun this little duel thanks to one of her whims. During her birthday celebration, my parents had gifted her this brand-new rapier. Delighted, she immediately said, “I want to fight *him*.” Or so I’d heard. I didn’t know firsthand because I hadn’t been here. I didn’t spend time with my family; my days consisted of commuting from my room to the small space I’d been allotted in the corner of the garden, the place where I polished my magic and sword skills.

Why had things turned out like this? Everything had been normal until that one day. Frustration rose like bile in my throat, sadness like a knife digging into my heart. I couldn’t forgive myself for being such a coward, but somewhere deep down, I was beginning to accept the fact that I simply couldn’t win against her. I hated myself for it too.

*Even if I can’t win, if I could just land one hit on her...*

As I was busy thinking about my next move, my father’s voice broke through the air. “Ceres makes a fine point. I can hardly believe a boy born into the Walt family is standing before me looking so pathetic. I cannot face our ancestors like this. Suffice to say, you’re no longer a part of our family.” His words were flat, bereft of all emotion.

Not willing to miss an opportunity to disparage me, my mother added, “Why couldn’t you have been born with even an ounce of talent? Oh well. I suppose this has cleared any doubt at least, hasn’t it, dear?”

“Indeed, it has. My heir will be Ceres.”

Both of my parents regarded me coldly as they stood behind my younger sister. The way they glared at me was far different from the way they gazed at Ceres, their eyes filled with familial affection.

I lowered my eyes to the ground for a moment. When I lifted them again,

Ceres greeted me with a deranged smile. That expression would have looked hideous on anyone else, but she was still beautiful. Even at the tender age of thirteen, she had an intoxicating charisma about her.

“Not yet,” I said, trying to work myself up. “It’s not over yet!” I tamped down whatever fear I felt and lunged forward, thrusting my blade at my little sister. I was fully aware of the power behind my attack; it would pierce right through her if my aim was true. Alas, that was only if I didn’t miss.

“It’ll be the same no matter how many times we do this. You’ve already served your purpose,” Ceres said, deftly rotating her body to evade my attack. As my momentum brought me closer to her, she plunged her rapier into my foot. Before she leaped away, she ripped it back out again, and the pain flared seconds later.

We shifted our respective positions and turned to face each other once more. Ceres lazily lowered her rapier and thrust her other hand at me, pointing. “Enjoyable as it was watching you fall to pieces by my blade, I’m bored of this now. Can’t you just disappear already? Or at least try to be a little more amusing.”

Magic began forming at the tips of her fingers, fiery sparks coalescing. She was planning to use fire magic.

A chill ran down my spine. “Ice Wall!” I bellowed, swiping my hand through the air. Ice jutted up from the ground, rising around me. The chilly air it produced cooled my heated body.

As far as spells were concerned, mine was barely intermediate level, but only a fairly powerful mage could conjure such a thing—in other words, only nobility.

In response, Ceres used the most basic of spells. “Fire Bullet. We’ll see how long your little Ice Wall lasts.” She grinned from ear to ear as she launched her fireball at me.

Normally, the spell would be extremely small and compact, but Ceres’s Fire Bullet was like none I’d ever known; it was much larger, and it slammed against my barrier with impressive force. The spell typically consisted of a single round, or several at most, but on top of its overwhelming power, it fired repeatedly

without pause. My ice wall rapidly melted, and with its destruction, the surrounding air began to heat up.

“One more!” I thrust my hand forward, intending to erect a second wall to shore up my defenses so I could hold out, but suddenly, I heard Ceres’s voice behind me. She’d been right in front of me a second ago, but when I whipped around, there she was, smiling at me.

“That’s all you’ve got? You really are a worthless whelp.” She reeled her arm back and then swung.

*I have to dodge!* I thought instantly, but my body couldn’t keep up. Time slowed to a crawl for me, but not for Ceres; she moved at the same speed she always did. Her left hook landed on my cheek, hurtling me backward. I slammed into the very Ice Wall I’d created, then collapsed onto the ground.

I pressed my hands against the dirt, trying to push myself back onto my feet, but a shadow fell over the grass in front of me. I lifted my chin in time to see Ceres’s red shoe rushing toward me. Raising my left hand, I managed to block her kick, but the force of it shot me through the air again, this time shattering the Ice Wall. I curled my body to soften the impact when I hit the ground, promptly popping back up to my feet, but my left arm was throbbing murderously. Apparently, her kick had broken the bone.

Ceres studied me. “My, how unsightly.” She pressed a hand over her mouth and giggled, seemingly enjoying my battered state.

My left arm dangled uselessly at my side, pain still shooting through it. I gripped my saber tighter and twisted my body back into a fighting stance.

“You really want to keep up this little sword fight?” Ceres asked. “Well, fine, I guess. I’ll stab my blade into you even deeper this time.” She leaped forward, and in the blink of an eye, she’d closed the several-meter gap between us.

I slashed sideways, trying to cut her down, but my blade only met empty air. Worse yet, a familiar yet unbearable pain ripped through my shoulder and thigh. Blood trickled from my freshly opened wounds, peppering the ground.

I glanced over my shoulder to see Ceres taking a stance with her rapier.

“I had three chances to kill you just now. Is that really all you’ve got, Lyle?”

she questioned, finally using my name. It felt like forever since I'd last heard it from her lips.

That's right. My name is Lyle Walt, and I was supposed to be the next successor of the Walt family. Alas, my superior younger sister outshone me, and I was deemed worthless.

There was a time when my parents had expected great things of me, when our retainers and servants had called me a child prodigy. I was a genius, they'd said, perfectly fit to continue my family's legacy. That had lasted until I was ten years old.

At only eight years old, Ceres had surpassed me in every area. All the warmth my family had shown me evaporated as they turned cold and distant. The love they'd showered me with was instead directed at my sister, and even the retainers and servants began to regard me with icy looks. They all rejected me entirely.

In spite of all that, I still wanted my parents to acknowledge me again. Just once would be enough. I tirelessly practiced my sword skills in the hopes that they would peel their attention from Ceres long enough to notice me. I also polished my magic, read a number of books, and followed any lessons I was given to the letter. Yet for all my efforts, my parents had not once offered me a kind word these past five years.

I readjusted my grip on my saber and glared at my sister.

*If I can get just one hit in, I thought.*

Years ago, I thought I could never bring myself to hurt my younger sister, but that had passed. Now, I turned my blade on her with the intent to kill. I'd looked after her and protected her for so long. Fawned over her, even. So why was this happening? Did I mess up at some point without realizing it?

“Do you really hate me that much? Why?! Why are you doing this?!“ I shouted.

“I do hate you,” Ceres answered, sounding bored. “I hate you more than anyone else in this world. Why, you ask? Hm... Come to think of it, I can't even remember why I hate your guts so much. Oh well. You can just *disappear* from

my sight." She'd acted all cutesy until she hit upon the word "disappear," when all emotion—any glimmer of humanity—drained from her face.

Fear welled within me, and in an attempt to drive it back, I advanced a step.

Ceres swung her rapier. The blade looked as supple as a whip to my eye, almost as if the weapon were actually alive. It was as though it possessed a will of its own and was coming to kill me.

*Just one!* I told myself again. *Just get one hit in!*

As her rapier came bearing down on my shoulder, threatening to bite through flesh, I purposefully lunged rather than dodge it. Her blade cut into me, but I swung my saber. She was surprised, but she narrowly avoided my attack, yanking her rapier out of my shoulder in the process. The metal was painted crimson. A split second later, blood came gushing out of the wound I'd sustained from her attack. Everything played out in slow motion before my eyes.

*There!*

I flipped my saber around, forcefully changing its course so I could bring it slashing back at her. She'd looked completely at ease until this point, but now her eyes widened. She quickly tried to put some distance between us, and the movement made her skirt flutter, the hem dancing in the small space between us.

*I've done it. My attack is going to land!*

The tail of her gown briefly drew Ceres's attention, her face unreadable, but then her eyes shot back to me. Her brow was wrinkled, and she was glaring with such unbridled hatred and anger that I flinched, stopping my attack. In that split second, her eyes wandered to the grip of her rapier. Her lips spread into a smile.

"Garbage. Useless worm. I'm gracious enough to let you keep breathing, yet you have the audacity to think you can touch me? I won't allow it. Yes, it's time for you to disappear now. I'll char you to a crisp right where you stand!"

She flipped her rapier to the side and began forming her magic. The temperature around us shot up. Wind began whipping up from the ground.

“Y-You can’t mean to...” I didn’t let myself finish as I cast my own spell. I erected a wall of ice around me, using as much water as I could to reinforce it.

Ceres continued glowering at me as she bit out, “That won’t save you now. Firestorm!”

Flames rode upon the wind as it raged around me, gaining momentum and power until it was a full-fledged storm. My icy defenses melted in mere seconds. The heat in the atmosphere was unbearable and stifling. But amidst it all, I kept trying to use my own magic to fight back.

*Is this it? Is this where it ends? Why me, at a place like this...? Why...? Why was I ever even born?*

Tears poured down my cheeks, and immediately after, the firestorm dissipated. I scanned my surroundings. Ceres was still in front of me, expressionless as always as she gazed straight at me. My family and their retainers had gathered beside her.

After all the magic I’d used, my mana was so severely depleted that I sank to my knees.



The saber fell from my hand as I collapsed forward. But even as I lay on the ground, I kept my eyes pinned to my sister as she approached.

Ceres snatched my saber up and said, “You really treasure this thing, don’t you? It’s so beaten up, though. Is it really that important to you?” She looked down her nose at me—both figuratively and literally.

“Don’t touch it,” I spat, summoning all my remaining strength to choke out those words.

My attempt at resistance earned me a swift kick, which sent me tumbling with such force that my body carved a visible hollow in the ground, cutting straight through my parents’ lawn. The heat of her spell had mixed with my melted ice and turned the rest of the ground to mud. By the time I skidded to a halt, I was covered in it.

Ceres wasted no time in closing the distance, and she planted her foot on top of my head, forcing me to look at her. “Interesting. But sadly, you have no need for this anymore.” She tossed my saber into the air. The metal of her own blade turned bright red as she sliced through my weapon like it was butter. The numerous shards scattered across the ground.

Tears continued flowing down my cheeks as I reached toward the remnants of my sword. I recalled the now-dim memory of a fond conversation between my parents and me.

When my father handed me that saber, he’d said, “Lyle, you’re a Walt. When it comes to weapons, you need one of the best.”

Mother had watched, a little exasperated as she glanced at me. “Honestly, dear, you spoil him too much. Oh, but, Lyle, it does suit you perfectly. I’d expect no less of my son!”

“He’s my son too, remember?” father had grumbled. “It’ll only be a couple more years until you go outside to fight with beasts and fulfill your obligations as a noble. When that happens, it would be an embarrassment to our earldom if you were to wield an inferior blade. I expect you to train yourself so your skills can match the craftsmanship of that blade, Lyle.”

When was the last time I saw them smile? I couldn’t remember.

Before my fingers even managed to graze a fragment of that saber, everything around me turned black, and my consciousness started to fade.

In the same instant that my saber shattered, my heart broke as well. I was convinced I couldn't win anymore. No matter how much effort I put in, no one would ever recognize my hard work.

The others present at the scene ignored me in favor of clamoring around Ceres.

"You were as incredible as ever, Lady Ceres," said a knight I'd previously admired, one who'd taught me much many moons ago. His name was Bale Lundberg.

Alfred Baden, a man who'd trained alongside me, now gazed down at me as if I were nothing but dirt beneath his shoes. "As someone with the same master, I'm ashamed at how pathetic your brother was."

"With you to lead House Walt, we can all rest at ease," said one of the servants. He wasn't the only one to feel that way; the other servants smiled and laughed too, delighted I would no longer be around.

Did they really hate me that much? Was I that much of a nuisance to them all?!

I then heard my father's voice.

"With this behind us, Ceres will officially be our only child. Honestly, from the moment she was born, she was all we ever needed."

My mother added, "You're exactly right. Though more importantly, dear, Ceres's dress has gotten all dirty. Please be sure to buy her a new one."

The way they fussed over her dress made it clear that they'd long forgotten about me. After a while, their footsteps faded, and their voices disappeared along with them.

*I'm so frustrated...so angry...*

Sapped of all my strength, I was convinced I would die right here, at least until I sensed someone approaching. At first I thought they meant to finish the job. I

was relieved; at least they'd put me out of my misery quickly.

"How pitiful..." mumbled a voice. "How could such a thing happen? If only Earl Brod were still with us." I wasn't sure to whom this voice belonged, but they referenced my grandfather. That brought back memories. My grandparents had been so caring and kind.

*That's right. I guess I'll be able to meet them both if I die. But how can I even face them like this?*

No sooner did I wonder that than my consciousness faded completely.

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While Lyle was out cold, something else was happening at the Fuchs household. The Fuchs were essentially vassals to the Walts, and their lands neighbored each other. In fact, they were more loyal to the Walts than they were to Banseim Kingdom.

Inside the Fuchs estate, Gerald Fuchs, the house leader, was seated with both hands interlocked atop the desk in front of him. His daughter, Novem Fuchs, waited expectantly for his next words.

"News just came in," he said. "Lord Lyle has been disinherited and driven from the Walt household. We also received official notification that the engagement between the two of you will be dissolved."

Novem was the second daughter of her family, and under normal circumstances, her status wasn't nearly high enough to warrant marrying into the Walt household. The Fuchs had proposed this arrangement around the time Lyle's family began treating him so coldly, which was why the Walts had agreed to it. From an outsider's perspective, it probably looked like the Fuchs were making a bet on him even though his parents had already abandoned all expectations of him.

"Oh? In that case, I will go to his side," said Novem. "Thank you for everything you have done for me."

Gerald was half-exasperated seeing how undaunted his daughter was by the news. "You always react to everything like you knew about it ahead of time. You've been that way ever since you were little." He paused a moment before

adding, “Look after Lord Lyle. I’ll provide you with some traveling expenses, though you can expect them to be meager.”

Novem shook her head. “It will only cause trouble if you do that. Were the Walts to discover someone was helping the two of us, their suspicion would likely fall on you and your house. You need only turn a blind eye to me and my actions. That will be more than sufficient.”

She spoke so decisively that all Gerald could do was draw his brows. He sighed, conflicted, then pulled himself to his feet and reached for a staff hanging on the wall as decoration.

“Suspicion will fall on me either way if you go with him,” said Gerald. “And it would be too heartbreak for me to send you away with nothing at all.”

The Fuchs’ most treasured heirloom was a Demonic Tool. The metal was imbued with special magic and engraved with Arts, allowing it to manifest special power. Arts were essentially blessings the Goddess offered to humans, making them similar yet decidedly different from magic. There were Arts that strengthened the body beyond normal limits, and Arts that made it easier for you to manipulate magic. Arts could even give you sight to glimpse far into the distance, beyond the range of normal sight. There were so many types and uses.

That said, most humans could only ever utilize a single Art, but they could become more proficient at it through rigorous refinement and experience. The more you honed their body, the stronger it could become.

There were three different stages of Arts. The first stage was the most rudimentary. The second was achievable through intense exercise, which would allow you to use a more powerful version of their ability. By the third stage, a person’s Art would be amplified in power severalfold.

Demonic Tools were developed as a way to use several different Arts. They were engraved on the tool so that a person could access a number of other Arts beyond what they already possessed. They could select what Art they wanted and replicate it through use of a Demonic Tool.

With the staff in hand, Gerald offered it to Novem. “Take this with you. It’s only one single staff. Even if the Walts do complain, we can easily make

excuses. Besides, it's only fitting that you have this. You have inherited the name Novem, after all..."

Novem carefully took it in both of her hands and bowed low. "Thank you, father. Now, if you'll please excuse me."

Her attitude was arguably a bit too detached considering their relationship, but Gerald only laughed.

"True to yourself to the very end. As your father, I would've expected a daughter of mine to tear up and be reluctant to part." He briefly paused before he finally added, "Go on. Go to Lord Lyle."

She obeyed his command and left the room. Gerald watched her go, noticing that she never once peered back at him over her shoulder.

"Even if you should face me someday as an enemy, I'm sure you wouldn't shed a single tear, Novem. But that's fine. You're fine the way you are," he mumbled to himself as he plopped back into his chair.

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My body felt like it was on fire. The pain was awful too. It was dark, everything ached, and I felt nauseous. Naturally, I assumed this was what the world was like after you died. I had fought with Ceres and then...what? What happened after that?

I had little time to wonder as a voice trickled into my ear. It sounded so distant, and there was more than one too. To whom did they belong? The first of the voices was brusque, and it sounded like they were searching for me.

"Hey, I think he's here. Or rather, he's close. A little far off, but definitely on the way!"

A second voice snapped back, "Oh, put a sock in it. Every single person here can tell that without your commentary. Keep a lid on it, wouldja?"

"What'd you say?!" the owner of the first voice howled. "You have some nerve to say that to your own parent. Let's take this outside!"

"Please, you know we can't go anywhere. Are you stupid? Oh, how silly of me. Of course you are."

A third voice, sounding more detached than the previous two yet somehow amused with the situation, said, “Y’know, I never dreamed the day would come where we’d all meet up like this. Guess it’s the power of that orb—sorry, jewel, I guess I should call it. Yeah, jewel seems to fit much better. Anyhow, who roused us all in the first place? Marcus, you got any clue?”

That meant there were more than three of them. Someone was someone’s parent, and I heard a name too. Marcus? I felt like I’d heard that name somewhere before. The more pressing question, however, was where these voices were coming from to begin with. As I strained my ears to listen, another voice joined the chorus, this one sounding more distant and serious.

“I cannot be entirely certain, of course, but it does seem to be some blood relative of ours. I suspect that is why we were awoken. Well? What do you think, my son?”

Son? Just what kind of intricate family tree did these people have? Worse, the number of voices increased as yet another new one joined in. This one sounded annoyed to even be here and rather half-hearted.

“Not a clue. And... And it seems like we all look like our younger selves. Even though I was pretty up in years when I keeled over.”

A stirring voice responded, “All the better if we have turned back time, no? Although, I never knew the Gem we passed on carried such an ability. I never had an experience like this when I held it. What about you, Brod?”

Brod? That name was definitely familiar to me; it was my grandfather’s name.

*Wait, does that mean I really am in the underworld now?*

Brod responded, “There’s no doubt in my mind. I can tell—this is my grandson, Lyle! Can you hear us, Lyle? Respond, boy!”

It seemed the name was no coincidence. This was my grandfather, but something about him was strange. His voice sounded so much younger now than I ever remembered. Nonetheless, it was familiar to me. A little bit different from my memories, admittedly, but I was certain this voice belonged to him.

*But, uh, what the heck is going on?*

While I scrambled to digest the situation, the first voice—the curt and cold one—said, “Then I guess that settles it, hm? My house has lasted eight generations now!”

The detached voice answered, “Gramps, you’re a little confused there. The seventh head said this is his grandson. So you’ve got at least nine generations. That is, of course, assuming this kid has inherited the role of house leader.”

The first voice remained silent, perhaps embarrassed by the mistake.

I was having a hard time understanding. I was sure one of those voices belonged to my grandfather, but the others mentioned something about being sons and parents and whatnot too... And grandparents? How the hell were these people related? It was almost like...

“Guess that makes him my great grandson, eh?” said the detached voice. “Lookin’ forward to meeting him.”

Gr-Great grandson?! That would make him my great grandfather then. I suspected that could be the case, hearing the few names that I did, but...no, this couldn’t be happening. Such a thing wasn’t possible.

The second voice chimed in, “Well, at the very least, we did continue for eight generations. Kinda touching when you think about it.”

I had a feeling I knew exactly who these men were, as preposterous as the idea seemed. But could it really be that the historic leaders of our house had been waiting here in the underworld for me? My head was spinning so much that my consciousness began fading again. I could faintly hear their voices calling after me.

# Chapter 1: Jewel

I had a dream of the past. In it, I saw my former self, before I'd given up on everything, when I still thought that someone would eventually acknowledge me again. I was in the rear garden, recklessly swinging my saber around for practice. Tears trickled down my cheeks with each swipe I made through empty air. I looked pathetic. This was probably around the time I was twelve or thirteen.

While I observed my younger counterpart, a servant appeared with a girl in tow. The servant introduced the girl, then promptly left.

"Oh yeah," I murmured to myself as I watched. "I remember this."

The girl had shining hair the color of a fox's fur, which she wore pulled into a side ponytail. She flushed, her eyes staring down at her feet as she said, "Lord Lyle, after some negotiations between your house and mine, our families have decided that I am to be your fiancée."

My younger self coldly responded, "You sure got dealt a bad lot, getting pushed off on a total failure like me... You don't have to come here anymore."

I'd been so battered by those around me that I'd lost all faith in people, but in spite of that, the girl continued showing up. No matter how much I insisted there was no need for her to do so, as long as she was able, she would make her way there to see me. I treated her like she was nothing more than a pain in the neck, even as she dedicated herself to me.

Watching that now, I realized how awful I'd been to her. I was too terrified to believe in her, fearing that the moment I opened my heart, she'd betray me.

"What was it she said again?" I muttered to myself. "Something about how I'd saved her before? Like, before I started rebuffing her, I did something that managed to win her affections or some such? Well, it doesn't matter anymore. Yeah, that's right... Nothing matters anymore."

Everything was over now. There was nothing left for me. *Nothing.*

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In the room where I awoke, there was a mirror, and when I looked into it, I found a boy with blue hair and eyes staring back at me. I was covered in blood-stained bandages, which were gruesome enough to look at, but my attention was focused more on my face. My expression was dispirited, and my eyes were vacant and empty. For better or worse (and I was leaning toward the latter), I'd survived.

My reflection's face was lined with exhaustion. I turned away and started to remove my bandages, only to find the wounds had already closed up. There was no trace of the burns either, which I could only guess was thanks to some extremely expensive salve.

A voice called out behind me, "How are you feeling, Young Master?"

I glanced over my shoulder to find an old man standing there. Eccentric as he seemed, he'd nevertheless saved my life. He was wearing a hat, and his pants were covered in dirt, so he must have just come in from outside. He'd most likely been tending to the flowers. The man was our gardener, and he lived in a small house he'd built on the grounds. His wife had already passed. He apparently had children and grandchildren, but they lived elsewhere. This little hut of his had actually once been a storage shed for tools, but my grandfather had given him permission to renovate it for himself.

"Thank you. I'm feeling much better now," I said.

"That's good to hear. You were in rough shape. If only the estate's physician could have looked at you, then I'm sure you would have healed up better, but..." The man looked at me apologetically, and it was hard to believe seeing him now that he'd once been a soldier. He must have had experience dealing with injuries, since he'd done a proficient job at patching me up. The pity he regarded me with was not because of my injuries, however, but something else he was less eager to divulge. "But you've been disowned," he finished at last.

I smiled weakly.

The old man, Zel, grabbed a chair and plopped himself into it. He was already in his seventies, so his work consisted only of looking after a small section of our vast gardens. We had a number of other gardeners, but he was the only one

living on the premises. I often heard my parents complaining about how they couldn't really kick him out, much as they wanted to, since he'd been employed here from the time my grandfather was still head of the household. I wondered, how many years had it been since I heard them say that?

As I ruminated, I tried to lift myself up. My limbs were still heavy with fatigue, so I couldn't push myself much, but once I was fully upright, I said to Zel, "Thank you for rescuing me, sir. There's sadly nothing I can give you in exchange. Pathetic as it is, I've got nothing to my name now."

Seeing how despondent I was, he let out a deep sigh. He seemed genuinely pleased that I'd survived. It was the first time in a while I'd had a normal conversation with anyone, so even I was a bit happy.

"You didn't open your eyes for three whole days. I was really worried. You know, even I've found the situation here at the estate to be abnormal lately. What in the world could've caused all of this?"

Apparently, I wasn't the only one who found our family...dysfunctional, to say the least.

*It started five years ago. It's been so long that I can hardly remember it anymore.*

I'd spent my days being treated coldly even as I worked myself to the bone trying to gain recognition. No longer could I vividly recall the warm family moments we'd once had together. The bitter days stuck out too strongly in my memory.

"This incident with you was odd enough, but to think the master even appointed the young miss as his heir. If the former head were to hear of this, I can only imagine how furious he'd be. Master Meisel is different than he was before." Vexed, Zel lifted the hat from his head, knuckles almost white from how hard he was gripping it.

My grandfather, Brod Walt, had been a stern man. As part of the nobility, he'd held the rank of earl, overseen his own territory as a liege lord, and functioned as one of the more influential members of Banseim Kingdom's aristocracy. Back when he was still leader of this house, he enjoyed being an adviser to His Majesty. Since he had experience ruling his own territory, he'd

excelled at domestic politics, but he'd also proven himself on the battlefield numerous times when commanding troops. I'd heard time and again about how strict he was.

My father was even nervous in front of my grandfather, from what I'd been told. As his first grandchild, however, he was always indulgent with me. That was probably why my impressions of him differed so wildly from all the things I'd heard.

"All I ever saw of my grandfather was his gentle side. But now that I won't be succeeding our line, there's no way I can ever face him. I'm sure he'd be livid with me. Probably tell me what a pathetic excuse for a grandchild I am," I muttered.

My grandfather had once held high hopes for me, but I had betrayed them. It made all the effort I'd dedicated these years feel meaningless. My family had taken everything from me. I had nothing left. Not a single thing.

"Don't blame yourself overmuch," Zel insisted. "The previous head would understand your plight. Were he still alive, I'm certain he would have protected you."

I thought back to my deceased grandparents, how they had taken such joy in watching me grow. But they were gone now.

"I...only hope you're right about that. But either way, he's not here anymore. I have no idea what I should even do now... I guess I'll have to leave the estate either way." I smiled self-deprecatingly as I spoke.

Zel lifted himself from his chair and wandered to the kitchen to fetch some drinks. I kept my gaze focused on my lap, trying to hold back the tears that threatened to fall. Where had I gone wrong? I still had yet to come up with an answer.

*Why did this happen? Why...?*

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My body was fully healed by the fifth day. Thanks to old man Zel slathering me with that expensive salve, my wounds had closed up quickly. I was a bit worried he was going overboard to help me, but he merely smiled and

reassured me, "You needn't worry about me." He said this was his way of paying back a debt he owed to my grandfather. The whole time he looked after me, he had a grin on his face.

For all his kindness, I would feel guilty for relying on him too long. My parents had already disowned me. It'd be a real pain if they found out he was sheltering me. I had no doubt Ceres was ruthless enough to make him pay for it.

As I ate my dinner on my fifth night there, I brought up the topic of needing to leave with Zel. We were seated around a small table, enjoying the meal he'd prepared. The lantern between us cast shadows over our faces as I spoke. I knew he would probably worry about me having nowhere to go, which was why I'd found my own solution.

"Zel, I'm thinking about becoming an adventurer."

Actually, I hadn't done much thinking about it at all. This wasn't something I wanted. It was more that my only real options for independence seemed to be either mercenary or adventurer.

"An adventurer? But, you... Young Master, with your abilities, I'm certain you could find employment with the government through some other noble house."

I shook my head. Yes, perhaps he was right; for all my failings, I'd still undergone the necessary education to succeed my father. But assuming I did try to find employment through another house, I might only cause them trouble. The Walts were one of the most powerful aristocratic families and liege lords in the country. Their influence was enormous. I wouldn't put it past Ceres to threaten anyone who took me in. She'd probably do it with a smile on her face too.

Why did she hate me so much? I hadn't the faintest clue, nor could I begin to fathom it.

"I've lost everything, and I need a fresh start. I'm going to become an adventurer so I can make it on my own."

Zel forced a smile. "I don't know what to say. The previous head would faint if he heard such words coming from your mouth, but if this is the path you've chosen, perhaps it's for the best. Knowing you as I do, I'm sure you'll keep a

good head on your shoulders.”

I tilted my head at him.

Zel placed his spoon down and scratched his cheek. “You see, the former head hated adventurers and mercenaries. His view was always a bit...how shall I say...biased, when it came to those types. He was always unforgiving in his assessments of other people, but he was particularly harsh when it came to adventurers. I can only assume he had a very good reason for it.”

I was surprised to hear that, mostly because I always thought he was the type to judge someone based on who they were as a person and their abilities, not on their social position or anything else.

“Oh, really?” I said.

“There was much that happened in the past. But I guess you’ll be an adventurer from now on, huh?”

Eager to assuage his fears, I joked, “I’ll be rolling in dough if I become a first-rate adventurer, right? And be able to earn hundreds of gold coins in a single mission. Then I’ll really be able to pay you back for your help.”

Zel burst into laughter, grinning from ear to ear. “Ha ha ha, I look forward to that day, Young Master.”

I figured he was just humoring me. I didn’t actually think being an adventurer would be that simple. In fact, I already knew of the more unsavory aspects of that profession. I might have recently hit rock bottom, but I was still a former heir to a liege lord. It was only natural I’d have that much knowledge, at the very least.

Adventurers earned their coin by defeating monsters and diving into dungeons where treasure awaited. Everyone admired that idea of adventurers. Even children would hear those stories and long to join their ranks, but in truth, adventurers were nothing more than a collective of thugs.

An adventurer could call himself a mercenary, and a mercenary he would be. And those mercenaries had no compunction about attacking villages to steal their food supplies. Adventurers made their living by defeating powerful monsters, so if they decided to resort to common banditry instead, that would

make them a serious threat to any normal person.

That said, it wasn't like all of them were terrible people. Those adventurers with true skill could receive favorable treatment and even be appointed as government officials. There were even adventurers who led their own bands of powerful mercenaries, who could find profitable employment with a liege lord. There was no denying that while some were little more than refuse, others were deserving of genuine respect.

"An adventurer, huh? I suppose in that case, you'll need to make your way to their headquarters in the Free City of Baym."

I'd only mentioned the idea on a whim, but Zel replied with careful consideration.

"Baym?" I echoed back. "You mean the merchant city that has no liege lord ruling over it? If I remember correctly, it's supposed to be a trade hub for foreign countries, right? I've heard there are a lot of adventurers and mercenaries in the city, but you mean to tell me they're centralized there?"

I had only briefly heard of the place he mentioned. The Free City was sandwiched between Banseim and its neighboring nations, which was likely why I'd never learned anything of detail about it.

"It's a place where adventurers and mercenary bands gather, yes. The surrounding countries get into small skirmishes almost yearly, which I'm sure makes it easy for both adventurers and mercenaries to line their pockets. Thanks to its booming commerce, there's plenty of money, people, and goods there too. The place hardly needs any advertisement to convince all sorts to travel there. There's a lot of shady folks there too, so you'll need to keep your eyes peeled, Young Master."

There were many adventurers who transitioned into criminals. The Adventurers' Guild would expel any such offenders and put a bounty on their head. In larger hubs or places with bigger Adventurers' Guilds, there were those who specialized in taking down violators, such as sweepers or bounty hunters.

Adventurers didn't have the most stellar image, counting many a ruffian among their number. I wondered if I could make it in a place with so many of them. I'd made my declaration about becoming an adventurer without much

thought, and now I was starting to lose my nerve. I never gave any consideration to where I'd have to go in order to become one. Besides, realistically, it was a dangerous profession.

While I was lost in thought, Zel seemed to notice my anxiety and said, "Ha ha, try not to worry overmuch about what I said. As long as you don't venture to the shadier parts of the city where those ruffians gather, you'll be fine. It might be a good idea to get used to being an adventurer before you go to Baym, though."

He was probably right about that; it was a tall order to go to Baym as I was right now.

"I see what you mean. I figured I'd be fine going to Central for now."

Central was the largest city in Banseim, which was probably a given since it was the royal capital. I'd never been there before, but I had heard of how vast the place was. I figured I could find easy work as an adventurer there.

To my surprise, however, Zel shook his head as he informed me that adventurers weren't needed there. "They have an enormous population, but the knights and soldiers keep the peace well enough. I'm afraid I cannot recommend trying to find work as an adventurer there, for I fear you won't find much at all."

I was pretty ignorant of where adventurers made their living, so I listened to his advice with great interest.

"It's much the same for the territory your family rules over—the Vice Domain. The Walts maintain strong law and order, which means adventurers can't find much work here either. Might I ask you, Young Master, why you think that is?"

"Because...there aren't many monsters?" I guessed.

"Correct. Places with a strong governing body take it upon themselves to dispense with monsters and bandits alike. The places that truly need adventurers are those with high crime rates or those lacking sufficient manpower. Baym is an exception to the rule."

As mentioned before, Baym was a merchant city, but it was also a prime location for many adventurers to find work. There was no liege lord ruling over

the area, so a lot of the odd jobs fell to adventurers.

Still, the Walts' territory *did* have its own Adventurers' Guild.

"Do you really mean it? That adventurers can't find work here?"

He stroked his mustache as he said, "I've heard there is some measure of employment to be found. Vice is a large territory, after all. There are many pockets where even your family's rule doesn't reach."

The more we talked, the more interested I became in what was at first a hastily concocted idea. I hadn't given any thought about what to do with my future otherwise, and becoming an adventurer sounded interesting enough.

"So Central is out of the question, and Baym is out of my league...which leaves me where exactly? Where should I go? Personally, I'd like to get the heck out of this place, so I'd prefer somewhere outside of Vice."

Zel began rattling off a list of suggestions. "If you want famous places, I'd suggest maybe the academic city, Aramthurst. If you're looking for other popular places where adventurers and mercenaries gather, perhaps Auran. It borders a foreign nation, which is why I can't really recommend it; there's a lot of skirmishes around there."

"Auran, huh? I suppose I could go to Remlrandt and then travel to Auran?"

Auran was much closer than Aramthurst was. It protected the border between us and our neighbor. There was also a highway leading straight to it, sandwiched by the Walt-controlled Vice Domain and Remlrandt.

"I'm terribly sorry, Young Master. I'm not learned enough about adventurers, so that's all I can offer you."

Zel apparently didn't know much more than me, but that was practically a given since he was just the quiet gardener who looked after part of our estate. He still knew a lot of interesting things though, which I'd never known before simply because he'd never brought them up. If only I'd become closer with him sooner.

"Baym, Aramthurst, and Auran... I guess Auran is the closest. That's probably my best option for becoming an adventurer," I said, perhaps a bit too carefree

for my own good.

Zel furrowed his brows and said, "Young Master, please don't push yourself too much. There are plenty of stories of young adventurers going beyond their limits and getting themselves killed. I may not know much about adventuring, but I do know a thing or two about battlefields. It's the same story there."

"It'll be fine," I said. "I'll beat some monsters and conquer some dungeons. Then I'll climb my way to the top. Uh, while we're on the topic, how do adventurers get their meals anyway? I know they get their work from the Guild, but other than that..."

Exasperated, the old man paused and pinched the bridge of his nose as if he were battling a headache.

Again, I tilted my head, wondering if I'd really said something that outlandish.

"Well, I suppose it's only natural you wouldn't know about those sorts of things," Zel admitted. "Ordinarily, boys your age would've had plenty of opportunities to see the outside world, but you were more or less imprisoned here."

I couldn't even begin to describe what I felt hearing that. Ever since my parents had lost interest in me, they'd merely kept me here like a pet. I couldn't blame him for seeing the way I lived as imprisonment. Maybe that's what it actually was. Which made me wonder, why had I even accepted such treatment? It'd seemed so normal to me when I was living inside the mansion.

While I lost myself in thought, Zel began to share what little he knew. "I'm no expert myself, but as far as I know, anyone can become an adventurer as long as they register at the Adventurers' Guild. There's little difference there between common-born men and aristocrats. Although, people say it's not really a good thing for aristocrats and knights to become adventurers."

I nodded along, but I didn't actually know much about this. All I had was a vague impression that some thought adventurers' work was unfit for those who held otherwise respectable rank.

"Next, we should discuss work. Young Master, do you believe that an adventurer's job is to fight all the time?"

“Isn’t it?” I asked with a perfectly straight face.

He shook his head. “Yes, part of their work does involve eliminating beasts and conquering dungeons, as you put it. However, before an adventurer can take on those kinds of missions, he needs to earn enough money for his equipment. There are many who can’t simply take out loans. Even for those who can, it doesn’t mean they’ll be able to borrow enough to buy everything they need. So for those folks, the guild acts as a middleman and finds them work with reputable employers. As hard laborers working by the day, that is.”

The image I’d built up of adventurers in my mind suddenly crumbled. I thought an adventurer would have equipment already and use it to fight monsters, but apparently that was a fantasy.

“There’s physical work and all other kinds of odd jobs. Adventurers have to start off with that to earn enough coin to purchase equipment so that they can go out and defeat monsters. And once they defeat the monsters, that’s when they get to the real work of stripping the beast of any Demonic Stones or usable parts it might have. As long as you’re registered with the guild, you can take missions from them and they’ll buy any Demonic Stones you find.”

“*Only* Demonic Stones?” I clarified.

“Yep. The other stuff you’ll have to sell off to merchants. The Adventurers’ Guild as you know it today may oversee adventurers, but it was once known as the Demonic Stone Oversight Guild.”

Demonic Stones were red stones that monsters possessed inside their bodies. Craftsmen would use them as ingredients for their work, and some Demonic Tools used Demonic Stones to power them. Ever since the use of such Demonic Tools became more widespread, the stones that powered them became a vital energy source for daily life. The Adventurers’ Guild, which had locations scattered throughout Banseim and other nations as well, claimed the right to regulate them.

“I get the feeling the Guild is more intimidating than any country,” I remarked. “They’re scattered across numerous countries, but they still maintain a connection to one another, regardless of wherever they’re situated.”

Zel laughed. “No, no. It’s true they do have locations outside the country, but

it's not that they're linked so much as they all operate in basically the same way. They have to determine the standard and set the going rates for Demonic Stones, so by necessity, they've managed to form connections with higher-ups. But from what I hear, guilds tend to differ from place to place."

Demonic Stones were essential for daily living, and although the guild held the rights to them, the matter of their regulation was more complicated than I realized.

"I'm afraid that's all I know," said Zel. "Didn't get much education growing up. Not sure I was able to be of much help to you, Young Master."

"No, of course you were. I basically haven't ever left the estate myself, so...I learned a lot from our conversation."

"Good to hear. By the way..."

I'd finished my meal and was reaching for a cup of tea to wash it all down when his expression turned solemn.

"Since coming to stay at my house, have you sensed anything? Experienced anything that felt off? Anything at all?"

That was an awfully vague question. I crossed my arms over my chest and racked my brain. *Something that felt off*, I echoed to myself. Come to think of it, I did see that weird dream. Well, it was either a dream or the underworld—I wasn't sure which—but that was probably the only thing that qualified.

"I think...it probably happened when you carried me here," I said, prefacing my story.

"Yes?"

His expression was entirely earnest, which made me feel strange; this was hardly the kind of conversation for such a serious atmosphere. But I had no other information to offer him.

"I had a weird dream. I think I was in the underworld or something? I heard my grandfather's voice. Not just his, actually. I heard all the voices of our past house leaders. I'm sure it was nothing more than a silly dream, though."

I chuckled, trying to brush it off, but the old man didn't crack even a hint of a

smile. He instead nodded several times, then fixed his gaze on me.

“Young Master, it’s grown late. Tomorrow is sure to be a busy day, so why don’t we get a good night’s sleep?” His face had finally relaxed into a gentle, blissful smile. I could only guess my answer had satisfied him.

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The following morning, I polished off my meal and finished preparations to set out from my family’s estate. I left my tattered clothes with Zel, instead donning an old outfit his son had once worn. It consisted of a pair of boots, some pants, and a robe. Zel gave me a belt and a bag as well.

“Those were just something my son left behind, but it looks like they fit you perfectly. I’m sorry I couldn’t give you something newer. Those will just have to tide you over for now.”

He gave me an apologetic look, but I shook my head.

“No, I’m grateful regardless. And thank you for everything else too. I’m sure that the salve you used on me must have been expensive, and you looked after me and fed me. I feel terrible that there’s nothing I can do in return.”

Zel bowed his head. “No, you have done more than enough for this old man. These past few days have been truly enjoyable for me, Young Master. And before you go, I’d like you to take this.” He handed me a small leather pouch about the size of my palm, filled with coins inside that jangled together.

“No, I couldn’t possibly take money from you,” I said.

He forced it into my hands despite my protests. “You’re going to need it. How are you going to make it if you’re penniless? And if you’re dead set on eventually returning it, then just think of this as an investment for now.” He smiled at me.

“You have a point,” I confessed, relenting. “I’ll be borrowing this, then.” I swore to myself I would come back to return the money someday. At this point, that was the only real objective I had. “You have taken such good care of me without asking anything in return. When I pay you back, I’ll do it tenfold, I swear.”

“The sentiment alone is more than enough for me,” Zel replied. “In fact, I’m happy, since I’ve finally managed to fulfill the promise I made to the previous head and alleviate his lingering regrets.”

“Promise?” I echoed back.

Zel produced a long, narrow wooden box, cradling it carefully in his hands as he held it out in front of me and pulled the lid open. Inside was a silver necklace. I could tell at a glance that it was expensive. The pendant dangling from it had a jewel nestled in its center, one that looked awfully familiar to me. This round, blue Gem was about three centimeters across. It was decorated with silver-colored metal embellishments made of the same material as the chain. Seeing how meticulously it had been crafted, I obviously couldn’t accept it.

“Sir, I can’t take this kind of treasure from you. It’s obviously very valuable.”

His face hardened. “*You must* take it, Young Master.” After a short pause, he explained, “You were supposed to inherit this in the future anyway. The previous head entrusted me with it, and I kept it rather than hand it over to Master Meisel.”

As I eyed the trinket, I finally remembered—that round, blue Gem in the center was actually known as a Jewel. They were created long before Demonic Tools and could record Arts within them. Unlike a Demonic Tool, the user of a Jewel would actually have to learn whatever Arts were stored inside for themselves, so it wasn’t like you could engrave whatever Arts you wanted on it and manipulate them freely. In a broad sense, Demonic Tools and Jewels were similar, but because a Jewel was the more difficult of the two to use, there were few people who possessed them anymore. Jewels tended to interfere with even the most basic of Demonic Tools, rendering the Arts inscribed on them unusable. On top of that, while it was impressive that Jewels could record Arts in them, there was no guarantee that you would be able to get your hands on whatever Arts you desired. It was simpler to get a Demonic Tool for yourself that already had the Arts you wanted engraved on it.

Jewels were now treated as relics of the past. But if this one had been passed down from generation to generation, it likely had quite a bit of value. Other

aristocrats handed down Jewels like this to their successors as well.

“But why would something belonging to my grandfather be here? Isn’t this something valuable that’s been passed down through the family? Shouldn’t my father be the one to have it?” I asked.

“The previous earl wanted the Jewel to be fashioned in a way fit for his station,” Zel explained. “He got his hands on some rare metal and asked a first-class artisan to turn it into an accessory. This was the last piece that artisan produced before he passed away. And as fate would have it, your grandfather unfortunately met his own end before he could retrieve the finished product. I was the one tasked with overseeing the completion of it, so it was left in my care. Unfortunately, I never found the opportunity to give it to your father.” He gave me an apologetic look.

As I gazed back at him, I remembered something. My father had always treated Zel like he was an eyesore, complaining that he didn’t follow orders. Given that he was a liege lord, he was also busy most of the time. With his packed schedule and his disdain for Zel, he’d probably put off any attempts on the latter’s part to meet up. Or, as I suspected was more likely, he never had any intention of making any time for Zel to begin with.

I lifted the necklace out of its wooden case. The Jewel embedded in it really was a relic of the past—one we could no longer recreate, since we’d lost the knowledge to do so, and was akin to a prototype of the more modern Demonic Tools. It was a device for individuals to record Arts. Each person was only ever blessed with one Art, but in olden times, it was customary to store them and impart them on others. The Jewel was the method by which they did that.

Demonic Tools provided a way to avoid the annoying obstacle of trying to record Arts, and with their emergence, Jewels became largely obsolete. You could inscribe whatever Arts you desired on a Demonic Tool, which made them the easier option to use. Plus, with Jewels, there were prerequisites if you wanted to become proficient enough to use the second level of an Art or higher. I’d read in a book before that in order to access the higher levels of an Art, you would have to have knowledge of it, as well as the appropriate skills and aptitude to properly use it.

In regards to the Walts' Jewel specifically, I'd heard the third head of our house died in battle, unable to record his own Art that he'd painstakingly mastered, which meant it was lost to us. Nonetheless, all the other heads of our house had recorded their Arts in the Jewel. That made it far more valuable than your run-of-the-mill Demonic Tool.

"But are you sure about this? I mean, is it really okay for me to take something this precious with me?" I asked.

"With Master Meisel the way he is now, I couldn't give it to him. I realize it's a selfish judgment to make, but I would ask you, Young Master—no, Lord Lyle—to take it with you. If you do, I will truly be able to repay the former master for what I owe him."

I fastened the necklace around my neck, gripping the Jewel in my hand. It felt warm against my skin.

"Thank you. This is a family treasure, so I'll be sure to take good care of it. And...I swear I'll return one day. When I do, please let me repay you for all you've done," I said.

He smiled at me.

The two of us had never really spoken before, and yet he'd been kind enough to tend to my wounds after my family had abandoned me. Even now he was giving me a generous sendoff. I was grateful beyond words for all of it.

"I'll look forward to that, Lord Lyle."

I waved to him and turned to leave. The old man watched me warmly the whole time, until I was completely out of sight.

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Zel reflected on everything that had happened these past six days. He gazed at his house, which felt so much more vast and empty due to Lyle's absence. His family had once lived here with him. The previous head, Brod, had actually used it as his secret hideout, bringing alcohol along with him when he'd visit.

A picture of Zel's wife, one he'd commissioned before, sat in its wooden frame, propped up on a shelf. Zel reached for it, wrapped his arms around it,

and mumbled, "Hey, sweetheart. The weight I'd been shouldering all these years is finally gone."

Zel moved to the bed and plopped down, despite the fact that the sun was still hanging high outside. He'd been feeling short of breath for a while now. And as he lay there in his empty house, he began to recount the past.

"I never dreamed he'd have the same preferences as Master Brod, who also loved stewed meat. Master Brod would always steal his way out of the mansion to come here and drink with me. Thinking about it brings back so many memories."

Zel remembered the days when his house had been lively and full of cheer, when he'd had a wife and kids. Yes, so full of cheer, and the previous head, Brod, had paid him visits too. Master Brod had permitted him to make his home here in part because it would provide a personal escape. The reason he'd acted so much differently with the other help was likely because Zel was the only one he could actually let loose around and talk to.

Finally, Zel remembered the moment when Master Brod had entrusted the Jewel to him. He remembered, rather vividly, how much the master of the house had wasted away, bedridden. The earl had always been so commanding, such an inspiration, and it had brought Zel to tears to see how weak Master Brod grew near the end.

"The fact that he would trust me with the family's treasure right before he passed... I can only assume he must have realized something was strange too. But Master Brod...this loyal servant has finally fulfilled his duty to you."

Zel conjured an image in his mind, one of his younger days when the two had gone into battle together. After sustaining injuries, Zel had tried to leave the Walts, only for Brod to make him into a gardener and keep him nearby.

"What a crazy request to make of someone who knows nothing of tending to flowers and the like. But thanks to him, I'm still a gardener to this day. Ah, such fond memories indeed. Truly..." Tears welled in his eyes, not for the past, but for poor Lyle.

"The boy's still got a lot of growing to do, but I'm sure he'll be all right, Master Brod. Sweetheart, I'll be coming to you soon."

And with that, the man inhaled one last time, a peaceful smile on his face.

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It was a little past noon by the time I arrived in the city, where people were bustling in and out of one of the gates. There were horse-drawn wagons full of cargo, coaches, and many more people on foot. The guards posted there seemed to be busily working as well.

This was my first experience ever walking from the estate to the city. From here, the estate looked like a castle sitting atop a hill in the middle of a metropolis. It was a reminder to me that I'd only ever been on the other side, gazing out from our home. Even if I did ever leave, it was in a coach, and I was only able to peer at the scenery through a window.

Our estate was beautiful. The Walts had poured their hearts and souls into their land. I almost felt embarrassed for trying to run away from it all.

I scanned the area and spotted a merchant who was preparing to leave, so I decided to approach him. I figured I could at least get halfway to my destination by hitching a ride. However, when I called over to him, he eyed me warily, likely because I was wearing a hood. I asked him about his destination. He wasn't going as far as Rembrandt, but he would be stopping by a waypoint town in that direction.

"Um, so would it be okay if I rode along?" I asked.

"Just to the waypoint town? Fine by me, but we won't be gettin' there 'til nightfall. Might not be any rooms open for ya. I've got connections, which is why I can find a place, but they get a lotta traffic through there."

All I needed was for him to take me partway. I just wanted to get out of this city as quickly as possible.

"That's fine," I said.

"Better have some coin for me if yer gonna hitch a ride. And ya'd better not get any funny ideas in yer head. We lot move as a group, and if ya try anything, I've got merchant friends who'll hear 'bout it. I'll forget the fee if ya can use a weapon and work as a bodyguard."

Alas, I'd already lost my saber during my match with Ceres. Instead, I conjured a fireball in the palm of my hand.

The merchant flinched back in surprise, and his attitude suddenly changed. "Wow, didn't expect to see that. If yer a mage, then ya must be a noble or somethin'? Nah, lookin' atcha... Ah, stickin' my nose where it don't belong. I gotcha. If yer willin' to be a bodyguard, then I won't take none of yer coin. In fact, dependin' on how well ya do, I'd even be willin' to pay ya." The man had completely changed his tune and was now more than happy to offer me a spot.

Relieved, I said, "Thank you very much. As for after the waypoint town..."

Before I could finish my question, a woman's voice cut me off—and it wasn't just any woman's voice. I'd heard it somewhere before.

"Uh, um! Please let me come along too!"

I glanced back to find a girl with fox-colored hair pulled into a side ponytail. Her face was hidden by the navy-colored coat and hood she was sporting. She also had a skirt on and thigh-high stockings, as well as boots that came up to the base of her knees. In her hands she carried a silver staff and a large traveling case. I'd seen that staff somewhere before too. Though it was of simple make, I knew it to be her family's treasure.

Amethyst eyes peeked out at me from beneath the hood, glimmering with an inner strength I didn't possess. Her expression was gentle, if not nervous.

"Novem..." I mumbled.

Her gaze dropped.

Yes, this was none other than Novem Fuchs. The Fuchs were a barony that held a long history with the Walts. She was the second daughter of their family and the same age as me—fifteen. We were also engaged, but...no, since my family had chased me out, it was more accurate to say we *had* been engaged.

And for some reason, my now ex-fiancée Novem was standing there in front of me, ready to embark on a journey.

## Chapter 2: Former Fiancée, Novem

The wagon's load was rather sparse, so I took my seat in the back, leaning against a cask. A cloth tarp had been strewn over the top to provide cover. The way the wagon rocked and rattled as it moved along the road, nearly throwing me with each tiny bump, made me nauseous. Perhaps it would have been wiser to walk.

I distracted myself by focusing on Novem, who was seated quietly in front of me. She'd brought a square leather case to hold her things, and it was lying on its side next to her. She balanced her staff on her knees. Thanks to the way she was sitting, I could almost see up her skirt. Part of me thought she was letting her guard down way too much.

I peered at her face, and she turned her head. Our gazes met. For a moment, I held the attention of those beautiful amethyst eyes...until I couldn't take it anymore and glanced away. I couldn't look at her; I felt too pathetic.

The merchant, who was sitting in the driver's seat at the front, peered back at us and laughed. He seemed to be under the wrong impression.

"Ha ha, so young and innocent."

I didn't have the energy to correct him. I simply didn't want to be here in front of Novem. Though she was normally so quiet and reserved, she was a very tolerant person with a good head on her shoulders. We hadn't really been able to see much of each other lately, but she was one of the few people who smiled at me whenever we met.

But why would she do this? Why would she chase after me?

I glanced at the merchant to make sure he wasn't watching us before I addressed Novem. "Hey, what're you doing here? If there's somewhere you wanna go, you could just use your family's coach, you know. Why'd you bother coming after me when you already know my family's abandoned me?"

Even I realized how self-deprecating that sounded. I realized, but I didn't care.

Right now, I was more scared of her kindness. I was secretly glad for her presence, but at the same time...

"It's my duty to be at your side," she said. "Or is that inconvenient for you?"

So, as I'd guessed, she was here for me, not for a leisurely outing. But she was a baron's daughter. Yes, she was the second daughter instead of the first, but even so, she wouldn't be allowed to come after someone like me. Not when I'd been completely disowned, at least.

"My family ran me out of the house. Our engagement has been officially nullified. So, Novem...go home," I told her.

The Fuchsers would gain no merit if she stuck by me. If anything, it would cost them. I couldn't bear to cause them any more trouble than I already had.

It was normal for the nobility to prioritize family. Regardless of Novem's feelings for me, whether it be a passing obsession or a genuine attachment, I didn't have her pegged as the type who'd make a poor, impulsive choice like this. Sure, the two of us were close in age and had spent time together since we were younger. I mean, I could remember us playing together when we were five. But since my parents began ostracizing me, I couldn't remember the two of us communicating much. I was too busy throwing myself into sword and magic training in a desperate bid to win my parents' approval. Novem would occasionally visit, and we'd exchange a few words. She'd watch me as I trained in the gardens. That was about the extent of our relationship these past few years.

"I can't go back," she said. "Besides, I *want* to be beside you."

I was sure she could find someone more suitable for her without much effort, which would be a far better use of her time than slumming it with me. Even under our family's strict rules, she was more than qualified to be my future wife. There had to be plenty of guys out there who would eagerly take her hand.

*Maybe if I'm mean enough to her, she'll go back,* I thought, so I decided to say something I didn't really mean at all.

"It's a huge inconvenience. I finally thought I'd be free after they chased me

out of there, and now I'm stuck with you."

After a short pause, she smiled at me and said, "Even so, I'm going with you."

I stared at her. She'd had a stubborn streak since we were kids, but this wasn't the time she should be digging her heels in like this. Her kindness was only painful for me.

As a last resort, I resolved myself to be even crueler. I told myself I had to, for her own good.

"Sorry to say, but I've got zero interest in you. I plan to live a free life as an adventurer and pick up all kinds of ladies. In fact, I'm glad they kicked me out. That place was miserable. I-I planned to...leave eventually anyway, you know..."

The words were my own, yet they felt like poison on my tongue. I couldn't believe what awful things I was saying. Even someone as tolerant as Novem would be fed up with me now.

I dropped my gaze to the floor. For all the lies I'd just spewed, one honest thing I could say was this: I didn't want to see the look of scorn that was surely on her face. However, I knew we'd get nowhere if I didn't lift my chin again and face her.

*She probably hates me now.*

I looked up, only to find her smiling at me. Her expression was so warm, like a blanket of comfort that wrapped itself around me.

"This is a decision I made for myself. Even if I cannot be your bride, I want to serve at your side."

I was so happy to hear that. Yet, at the same time, I wanted to cradle my head in my hands. Novem was such an amazing girl. If she tagged along with me, there was a good chance it would lead to misery.

"And what'll happen to your house?" I asked. "Your parents will be devastated."

"That won't be an issue. My older brother will be succeeding the family. I'm only their second daughter. They still have my older and younger sister there. My parents agreed that it would be no inconvenience to let me do as I wished

and sent me off. When I told my father I would be going with you, he gifted me the family treasure—this staff.” Novem kept a smile on her face the entire time she explained.

*What in the world are the Fuchs thinking?! I can't believe they'd be dumb enough to entrust her with the family treasure too!*

I could feel a headache coming on. Why in the world would the head of House Fuchs send Novem to me like this? She was, to put it mildly, gorgeous. Not to mention, she'd also been raised in a strict household and given a proper education. She could put no effort in and still have men banging on her door asking for her hand. In fact, she was promising enough that she might even be able to marry into a viscount or earldom.

Simply put, it was a waste for her to be with me when she had the promise of happiness right at her fingertips. It was precisely because I'd known her since we were young that I at least wanted her to live a happy, fulfilling life. Alas, from the sound of things, she was resolved to walk this path. Nothing I said would make any difference.

Having given up on persuading her, I averted my eyes and grumbled, “Do whatever you want.”

Novem placed a hand over her mouth as she grinned. “I’ll do just that.”

I felt like I was dancing in her palm right now. In spite of all the harsh things I'd said, she seemed genuinely happy, as if she'd seen through all the bravado.

“Well, would ya look at that? This girl’s sure got it bad for you, kiddo.”

I heard a teasing voice cut in, but when I glanced around to locate the source, I saw no one inside the wagon but Novem and me. The merchant was facing forward, gripping the reins in his hands. Outside, a number of other merchants and travelers were commuting in our caravan, headed to the waypoint town, but none of them were close enough that I'd be able to hear them so clearly. Besides, this voice was familiar. That made the whole experience that much more unsettling.

I cleared my throat and asked, “Say, Novem, did you hear a voice just now? A teasing one, I mean.”

She shook her head, seeming genuinely puzzled by the question. “No? I’m sorry. I haven’t heard anything.” Her expression was apologetic.

“Nah, don’t worry about it,” I said, still scanning the area.

It had been a firm voice, a man’s voice. Strange then that I saw no men around us—none that could have sounded so close and clear. Was it my imagination? Was I still fatigued? Actually, I was kinda worn out. Maybe it was because my wounds hadn’t fully healed yet.

Feeling drained, I glanced up at the ceiling. All I could see above me was the cloth stretched overhead, and after staring at it for a bit, I closed my eyes. Perhaps all of this had taken a greater mental toll on me than I’d thought.

“Are you all right, Lord Lyle?” Novem asked worriedly.

I opened my mouth, intending to reassure her, but then I heard the voice again from somewhere close by. There was no mistaking it this time, yet Novem showed no indication that she was hearing anything.

“I’m just jealous you have anyone at all at such a young age, but to think she’s also this head over heels for you and willing to dedicate herself completely... How is this even possible?”

“Yeah, you led a hard life, father.”

My eyes shot open and I jumped to my feet, my head jerking back and forth as I tried to locate the owners of these voices.

Novem flinched. “What’s the matter?!”

Much to my dismay, nothing around me had changed from a moment ago. There were at least two distinct voices, by my judgment, yet there wasn’t a soul close enough for them to be coming from. I considered the possibility the merchant had masked his voice to poke fun at me, but that wouldn’t explain why Novem showed no reaction.

“It’s...nothing,” I said after hesitating.

*I guess it must just be exhaustion? I really should get some rest. Yeah, I do feel pretty worn out.*

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Maybe it was due to the season, but the waypoint town was bustling with activity when we arrived later that same day. We discussed our plans with the merchant and agreed to continue traveling with him. After confirming with him when we'd be departing tomorrow, Novem and I set off in search of an inn. We hunted all over, but as the merchant had warned us, everywhere was full up. When at last we did find one opening, it wasn't quite what I'd hoped for.

"You've only got one room? You can't do two?" I clarified with the innkeeper.

He nodded. "Lotta people come here around this time. Not everyone can have their own separate room. Since it's already this late, you'd better make up your mind fast before someone else comes along to take it."

I glanced back at Novem, who was hovering behind me. Given that she was a girl, I thought it best to avoid us sharing a room.

"That won't be a problem," she said, much to my surprise, and handed over a large copper coin to cover the expense.

"Hey, hold on," I cut in. I was going to ask her if she was really sure about this, but the innkeeper interrupted me before I could do so.

"Room is all the way back on the second floor. You can find the room number written on the tag attached to the key. Oh, and breakfast and hot water come free with your stay. I'd suggest you go fetch yourselves some dinner before you get settled in, since we don't provide that. Better take your luggage with you too. You do have a lock on your door, but we won't cover your losses if someone manages to sneak in and steal your things."

I couldn't comprehend the concept of lugging our travel bags along to eat. Like he said, the room had a key, so what was the harm in leaving our things here? I was traveling lightly enough, but Novem had a whole travel case with her. It looked awfully heavy to me.

Despite that, Novem said, "Thank you kindly. We will be sure to do that. What should we do about our key, though?"

"You already forked over the cash. I'm not gonna leave you high and dry. I'll keep the key 'til you get back. You can have this receipt. Bring it to me when you return, and I'll hand you the key. By the way, the pub next door is open for

business, so you can find food there. Tasty grub, I promise, and at a decent price too.”

Novem smiled. “That’s where we’ll go then.”

“Thanks. You’d be doing me a favor.”

A favor? What in the world? I was so utterly confused by their conversation and suspicious besides. Novem insisted we leave and dragged me outside. My mind was still struggling to comprehend what was going on, but I decided to follow her to the restaurant or pub or whatever you wanted to call it next door.

Outside, the town was teeming with people, the clamor almost deafening. My gaze whipped here and there as I looked around, feeling out of place in this environment that was so different from what I was used to back home. As I did so, I started hearing those voices again. This time, it was a gruff one that spoke up.

“Hold up. This kid really is a spoiled rich boy, isn’t he? He’s way too ignorant of the world. In fact, he was utterly hopeless in there with that innkeeper!”

As if to back me up, my grandfather’s voice chimed in, “He comes from an earldom! Lyle’s the next in line! There’s no issue if he doesn’t...know the particulars of these kinds of things!”

Another voice soon joined them, and it was far less sympathetic. “Nah, this is pretty bad no matter how you try to spin it. Even I can see he’s so far out of his element as to be useless.”

Despite the cacophony of noises around me, I could still hear them clear as a bell. They sounded like they were right beside me, and there was no mistaking the mention of my name. They were all men’s voices. Scour the area around me as I might, though, no such men were trying to speak to me.

Novem, who was walking a few steps ahead even as she kept her attention on me, seemed to notice my unease because she peered back at me worriedly. “Is everything all right, Lord Lyle? You look pale.”

“I-I’m fine!” I squeaked back, voice hitching. Apparently she couldn’t hear them.

"I can't believe him, looking perfectly pleased with himself as he makes the girl lug around her heavy baggage," another voice grumbled in my ear. "He's hardly carrying a thing yet still lacks the consideration to lend her a helping hand. If it were me, I'd hold her bags for her and give her the perfect escort."

A detached voice wondered aloud, "How many years have passed since my generation? We're an earldom now, you said? Well, I suppose at that rank, you have all sorts of servants to do everything for you. And if this boy is to be the next in line, perhaps his naivety is only natural."

*How many of these voices are there?!*

"That would never have flown back in my day. And regardless, he really isn't very dependable."

"They almost seem to be multiplying at this point," I grumbled to myself out loud.

Each voice was distinct, and they sounded close by. There were definitely more than one or two, and they were responding to one another. Just to be sure, I scanned the area again.

As I was looking over my shoulder, Novem called back to me, "Lord Lyle?"

She looked genuinely worried. I couldn't bear to cause her any more trouble, so I decided to ignore the voices. The one thing I could agree with them on was that a woman shouldn't be forced to haul heavy luggage, especially when I wasn't carrying anything. Sadly, I'd only noticed thanks to their criticism.

"Uh, um...Novem, that's heavy, isn't it? I'll carry it for you." I nervously stretched my hands out and relieved her of her burden. I had to practically pry her things from her because she insisted she could carry them herself, but once I had them in my grasp, we stepped inside the pub.

Despite my attempts, the critical voice continued, "You're supposed to hold her hand and escort her. And more than anything, you shouldn't be making *her* look out for you!"

For a split second, I debated holding a hand out and offering to hold hers, but we were already inside the pub. Was there really any point in it this late? And thanks to my inner debate about the matter, I loitered there in front of Novem

looking utterly lost.

A voice scoffed, “Pathetic. To think this boy is my great grandchild...”

There it was again, those words that suggested we were related. Was he really talking about me? Confused, I froze in the entryway, which drew the looks of a number of nearby patrons. Novem must have sensed that my mind was still in a jumble because she reached over and gently squeezed my hand.

“There’s a place open over there. Come, let’s take our seats.” She smiled warmly at me.

I finally calmed down, and after a short pause, managed to nod. “Uh, sure... Right.”

Novem escorted me the short distance to our table, then pulled out my chair for me. The moment I plopped down, the gruff voice from earlier growled, “Hey, what’s with this kid? Pathetic doesn’t even begin to describe him!”

Again, my mind was spinning, unable to process what was happening.

Novem took the seat across from me and hailed one of the staff. “Pardon me, but might we make our order?”

The person who came over to attend to us was still only a child.

“Welcome! What’ll it be?”

Novem opened the menu provided on the table and asked, “Can we order today’s special, even though it’s this late?”

“Yes! Will you have anything else? Aside from alcohol, we also have nice, cold, freshly squeezed fruit juice, which I’d highly recommend.”

Novem shot a look my way. I quickly glanced down at the menu, but I was clueless about what to order. I pulled a face, which was enough for Novem to sense my dilemma.

She smiled at the waiter and said, “Two of today’s special and some warm tea after we finish our meal, please.”

“You got it!”

The waiter promptly left to deliver our order to the kitchen. In his absence, I

dropped my gaze to my lap. It was hard to believe I'd made so many big promises to Zel, yet here I was feeling down because I couldn't even decide what to order for myself.

"The special today seems to be chicken," Novem noted. "Something to look forward to, isn't it, Lord Lyle?"

"Y-Yeah, guess so. I...didn't really recognize any of the foods on the menu." I glanced away. It was all I could do to mumble my agreement.

My actions seemed to once again spur the voices to life.

"Nope. This kid is way too pitiful."

"Being ignorant of the world is one thing, but this is ridiculous."

"He's only making it because the girl is so considerate and kind, but any normal person would have dumped him by the wayside at this point."

"Not only is he discourteous to her, but he's totally ignorant of the ways of the world. You really mean to tell me *this* is what an earl's heir looks like?"

"Eh, who cares about him."

"It's so bad even I can't make excuses for him."

"Y-You've all got it wrong! Lyle is a fine young man. I swear! Actually, I'm fairly certain I've seen that girl across from him somewhere before..."

From the sound of things, their impressions of me had tanked big time.

The waiter eventually brought us our food, but I could hear the voices chatting all throughout our meal. I tried to ignore them; I even clapped my hands over my ears to try to silence them, but they wouldn't go away. Novem was so worried about me that on our way back to the inn, she carried my luggage as well as her own.

*But more importantly, what the hell is going on here?!*

My mind was still in disorder even after we found our room and started to settle in. I decided to rest while Novem left to inquire with the innkeeper about getting some hot water. It didn't take long for her to come back, holding a bucket in her arms. Evidently, this was what we'd have to use to scrub the dirt

off of our bodies and clean up.

“There’s no bath?” I asked, puzzled.

“The more expensive the inn, the more likely they are to have one, but most places provide buckets of hot water to sponge bathe instead. Even inns that do have their own bath typically have an enormous public one shared between lodgers.”

“Really? I thought each room had its own bath...” Perhaps that mistaken assumption was born of my privileged upbringing.

Closer inspection of our room revealed what terrible condition the place was in. The walls were thin, and the window was boarded up. Noise filtered in from outside, along with a cold draft.

Novem looked troubled as she dipped a towel into the warm water and started wringing it in her hands. She instructed me to strip down, so I obliged her. She then started wiping down my body, all the while enlightening me on the finer points of inns and their accommodations.

“There are places you can lodge that have private baths per room, but those are extremely expensive. You would have to pay in silver for a single night there.”

I recalled the leather coin purse Zel had given me. There were some silver coins in it.

“I have some silver, actually. Won’t it be hard on you staying in places that don’t have a proper bath?”

Novem shook her head, her voice stern as she said, “You mustn’t waste your money, Lord Lyle! It will be a precious resource in the days to come. We should save where we’re able, otherwise it will be gone before we know it.”

“O-Oh. Really?”

Once she finished scrubbing my back, she set to washing my hair. She guided me until my head was just over the bucket, then proceeded to gently comb water through my hair.

An exasperated voice cut in, “Ugh, what a spoiled rich boy. You’d better get

your butt outside when she finishes with your hair.”

“Huh?” I blurted, almost jerking away without thinking. I managed to stop myself at the last second, remembering Novem was in the midst of washing my hair for me.

“What’s the matter?” she asked.

My surprised remark had drawn her attention. Even though I could hear these voices clear as day, she didn’t seem to hear a thing. Wanting to allay her worries, I assured her it was nothing and remained still while she finished up with my hair. Once she was done, I changed into my pajamas. I was about to stuff my dirty clothes into my bag, but Novem caught me.

“My lord, I’ll wash your underwear for you and hang it up to dry. As for your other clothes, let’s hang them up as well to air them out. Um, and also...” Novem trailed off as she struggled to voice what she wanted to say.

I cocked my head, waiting.

“Are you daft, boy?” one of the voices interjected. “Or is this all an act? It should be obvious enough that she can’t get naked in front of you, you dummy! How long are you going to hang around in here? Hurry up and get your butt outside! Trust me, boy, you’re a decade too young to be getting involved with women in *that* way!”

I jolted with the realization and scrambled for the door. “R-Right. I’ll be leaving then. If you need me, I’ll be right outside the door.”

“My apologies for asking this of you when you’re so exhausted. I promise I will finish quickly.” Novem watched me guiltily as I made for the hallway.

Outside, I found a rickety chair and plopped myself in it. At least the voices weren’t speaking to me anymore.

“Am I just hearing things?” I wondered to myself. “But it feels like they’re giving me advice... No, the real question is: where are these voices even coming from? There wasn’t a soul in the room just now aside from Novem and me.”

As I sat there, my eyelids began to grow heavy. I hadn’t used any magic since my battle with Ceres, and yet I felt physically and mentally drained. It would

normally only take a single night's sleep for me to recover, so why did I still feel like I hadn't regained my full strength? My only guess could be that my standoff with Ceres had taken more out of me than I thought.

"My body feels so heavy."

Or perhaps it was because I'd never journeyed this far before and it had worn on me. After Novem washed my hair and wiped down my body, I felt refreshed. It had put me in such good spirits that maybe that was the reason why I was so sleepy.

*Yeah, let's get a little shut-eye. That's the best thing for recovering one's mana. Once I wake up, then I can...worry about...other stuff...*

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"Wake up, you moron!" a voice roared in my ear.

My eyes shot open, and I awoke to find myself in a very different place than where I'd gone to sleep. I was still sitting in a chair, but not the same one I'd been in earlier. Feeling as foggy as if I were stuck in a dream, I slowly surveyed my surroundings.

"Uh...huh?"

This definitely wasn't the hallway in the inn. Someone must have dragged me with them while I was conked out. I glanced down, but no ropes were tying me in place. Apparently, this wasn't a kidnapping.

The room around me was circular, with a round table in the middle. At the center of the table was a large, round, blue gem that was embedded in the wood. The place must have hosted some lively gatherings, considering the large number of people present. When I glanced over my shoulder, I spotted a door behind me.

When I peered up at the ceiling, I found it was shaped the same as the table below it, sharing a similar round blue gem at its center. Larger gems were arranged around it in a beautiful display of radial symmetry. There were twenty-two of them in total, all of them blue, but they were dim, emitting no glimmer of light.

I returned my gaze to the people seated around the table. They were each dressed differently, which only made me wonder what kind of gathering this could possibly be. The man directly in front of me had an animal pelt hanging around his shoulders. His arms were thick as logs, and his brown hair was a messy, unkempt rat's nest atop his head. His skin had a healthy tan. His muscles, meanwhile, looked about as hard as steel. The first word that entered my head as I took in his appearance was "barbarian," in part because of the full beard he was sporting.

The man glared at me with his violet eyes and snapped, "Your eyes look about as lifeless as a dead fish, boy. You've got no spirit to you! None, I say!"

*Lifeless as a dead fish? That seems kinda uncalled for.*

Troubled, I surveyed the rest of the room. All of those present appeared to be either in their late twenties or early thirties. They were all men, and each one had a commanding presence about him.

I glanced back at the barbarian man in front of me. It was then that it hit me.

"Hold on. Could those voices I've been hearing be...?" I mumbled to myself.

"That's right. It's me! It's us! We've been the ones trying to talk to you this entire time, boy!"

Well, now I knew I wasn't crazy, but I still had no clue what was going on. The last thing I remembered was drifting off in the hallway. Where was I now? As I descended into confusion, a familiar voice called over to me.

"Lyle!"

I jerked my head, and when my eyes landed on the man speaking to me, my jaw dropped. "Wha? G-Grandfather?!"

He looked like a younger version of the man I knew, though he was taller and more muscular than I remembered. His gray hair was combed back, and his blue eyes were sharp and intimidating. His clothes looked the most expensive of any of those present.

"Look how big you've gotten... Makes an old man proud, Lyle."

Alas, he was the only one who looked pleased to see me here. The other men

present had different reactions; either they were indignant at my very presence among them, disinterested entirely, or exasperated with the whole situation.

My grandfather sensed their probing gazes on me and roared, “Do you lot have a problem with my grandson?!”

“Course we do! That’s why we called him here!” snapped the barbarian man. He was frowning as he leaned back in his chair, legs propped up on the table and hands folded behind his head. “What’s with this delicate little wallflower, anyway? I can’t believe my descendant is a pathetic weakling like this!”

I gaped at him. “D-Descendant?!”

I was having trouble digesting the situation. My grandfather was here, so didn’t that mean this was a dream? While I was busy grappling with that, another voice cut in.

“Haah... There’s a lot I’d like to say, trust me, but I figure the best course is to introduce ourselves first. Lyle, I’m your great-grandfather. I know we’ve never met face-to-face before, but it’s nice to make your acquaintance all the same.”

“What...?”

The man combed his fingers through his red hair, brushing it out of his face. His skin was the color of wheat, and he was bulky and muscular. It was obvious he paid little heed to his clothes; his shirt was unfastened at the top, hanging crookedly on his shoulders. He looked more like a middle-aged hoodlum than a lord.

The barbarian from a moment ago howled at me, “You’re too slow on the uptake, boy! We’re telling you that we are your ancestors!”

The man beside him was dressed more like a hunter, but his exasperated expression seemed to be directed at the barbarian man rather than me. When he finally did turn his gaze to me, it was to glare as he said, “Loath as I am to admit it, this man is indeed the founder of our noble house. You needn’t afford him any respect for it, though. As you can clearly see, the man is a savage.”

“Sorry?” I blurted back. I just knew I looked like a total moron right now.

One of the other men, who wore glasses, shrugged and said, “I suppose

introductions are needed after all. Let us go in order then, shall we?"

Everyone's eyes turned to the barbarian man.

"The name is Basil Walt, founder of House Walt. Got that, boy?!"

The man who resembled a hunter clicked his tongue in disapproval. "Hah, founder. You really make my blood boil. Oh, I suppose that means it's my turn next, eh? I'm Crassel Walt, the second generation head."

The third man spoke in a detached voice, smiling faintly as he said, "This is certainly an unnatural sight, but amusing nonetheless. Having all the house leaders gathered like this, I mean. I'm Sley Walt. Judging by how the others introduced themselves, I suppose I should add that I was the third generation head."

The man in glasses shook his head. "Father, aren't you enjoying this a little too much? Well, I assume it's my turn now. I'm the fourth head, Marcus Walt."

The next man seemed entirely unmotivated to even bother with introductions. Reluctantly, he grunted, "Fredriks Walt. Fifth head."

Then a large fellow forced a smile as he said, "You haven't changed at all, father. Lyle, I'm Fiennes Walt, the sixth generation head."

And finally, my grandfather cleared his throat and said, "I hardly think there's a need to introduce myself by this point, but I'll do it all the same. I'm the seventh generation head, Brod Walt."

There I was, seated in front of all the previous leaders of my house, but I couldn't even begin to comprehend what in the world was happening.

## Chapter 3: Historical House Leaders

After falling asleep that night in a hallway in the inn, I awoke to find myself in a strange room surrounded by my forefathers. I had no idea why any of this was happening.

The man who looked no better than a barbarian and had called me out for having eyes “about as lifeless as a dead fish,” was supposedly the founder of our entire house. Basil Walt was the one who’d started it all, who had laid the foundations for the Walts to eventually become an earldom. He’d led a group of pioneers, venturing out into the woods surrounding the capital to cut out a portion of land for himself.

Alas, for all his accomplishments, he was presently grappling with my grandfather, Brod Walt. The latter was actually wearing proper clothes for his station, which made it look all the more like some savage was accosting him.

“You’re the one who screwed up on this boy’s education!” huffed Basil. “He looks like a beanpole. There’s no meat on him, and his skin is so fair it looks like he’s hardly stepped foot outside!”

“That’s not my fault! Besides, the Walts are supposed to favor male heirs, and last I knew, Lyle was to be the official successor!”

At a glance, Basil seemed like he would be the stronger authority between the two, but everyone else regarded their squabble with cold disinterest. They tore their gazes away from them and focused their attention on me instead.

Crassel Walt was the man who looked like some kind of hunter. He had an impressive beard, and his fiery red hair was pulled back out of his face, save for a few loose strands that hung over his brow. It wasn’t just his attire that made me think of him as a hunter; it was the sharp gleam in his blue eyes, which were now scrutinizing me.

“Let’s ignore the two noise makers and resume our conversation,” he said. “Basically, you were originally supposed to be the ninth head of our house, until

your younger sister bested you and wrested that away, at which point you were completely driven out of your family's estate. That in itself is quite the troubling issue, but we'll leave it aside for now."

No sooner had he finished speaking than Basil roared, "That's not something we can 'leave aside'! How can a boy who loses to his younger sister be the next head? It's ridiculous! It's no wonder they drove him out!"

"What's your problem with my Lyle, huh, you savage?!" my grandfather cried.

Crassel maintained his cool as he said, "That's not the main issue here. Both of you, take a seat. Now, under normal circumstances, I don't believe a girl should inherit our house. At the very least, I wouldn't allow her to do so regardless of how exemplary she was, and I certainly didn't teach my descendants to allow such a thing either."

Sley Walt nodded in agreement. His silky blond hair was parted in the middle and hung around his shoulders, framing his crimson eyes. His clothing was rather simple compared to what I was used to, but with each succeeding generation, their attire got more expensive. Sley sported a shirt with a coat hanging over it, as well as some pants and boots.

"Ordinarily," said Sley, "the oldest son is the one to inherit the family. I was the second son, but due to certain circumstances, I inherited the position in my brother's place. I did have a younger sister, but the topic of considering her never came up. Maybe it's a generational difference? If, in the present day, it is rather common for women to be the heads of their house, then perhaps the choice makes sense."

Of all the men present, Sley in particular was famous. He was the first of our house to be killed in combat, and in Banseim, people referred to him as the Hero General. With only some dozen soldiers at his command, he charged into an army of ten thousand to buy time for his comrades, a move that ultimately led to Banseim's victory. That was what I'd heard, but seeing him before me now, I didn't really get that impression.

The man wearing glasses, Marcus Walt, was the next to interject. "Lackadaisical as ever, I see. Considering you did nothing to resolve the issue of succession yourself, father, I'd appreciate it if you'd keep your counsel to

yourself on this matter. Have you any idea of the pains I had to go through to become leader?" He had aqua blue hair and distinctive yellow eyes. The reason he seemed so much more intelligent than the others to me was probably because of the glasses, though.

Marcus was the fourth head of our house, which had become a barony during his time, all thanks to the accomplishments of his late father. It was only then that we truly became part of the nobility.

Unlike the others, he was just as I'd pictured. Our ascension to a barony meant he'd had quite a bit of work cut out for him when he took over. His aura was that of a man who'd lived through trying times but came out all the wiser for it.

"You want to speak of trouble? Thanks to a certain someone, I had my fair share as well," Fredriks, the fifth head, cut in. He hadn't spoken much up until now.

He wasn't at all what I'd pictured. As I was told, he'd brought four mistresses into the house and sired dozens of children. He was a womanizer and the least accomplished of any of our house leaders. Yet, by my eyes, he didn't strike me as that type at all.

Fiennes, the red-haired sixth head, who had a rough, almost feral look about him, nodded. He'd taken unscrupulous measures to see our house raised to an earldom. My father had often complained that he'd tarnished our image and made our house suffer as a result. Fiennes did look a bit like a middle-aged hoodlum, albeit a good-natured one. He was tall and covered in muscles, giving him the appearance of a rough-and-tumble warrior more than a brilliant tactician.

"I don't doubt that," Fiennes replied. "But anyhow, making one's daughter the successor purely because she won in a duel is mind boggling. Brod, are you sure you taught your son properly? No normal man would do such a thing, surely."

Those around my grandfather seemed to think of him as gruff, but he looked like a perfect gentleman from the outside. I did remember that as he got on in age, he worried about his thinning hairline making his forehead look bigger. He

was wearing the most expensive-looking clothing of anyone here, and combined with the aura he gave off, he seemed the most aristocratic person present.

“I’ll have you know that from my perspective, my son was heads above his peers. Besides, the last I remember, Lyle was still the successor, and Ceres was just an ordinary girl receiving education fit for a young lady of her station.”

Having heard everything the others had to say, Crassel concluded, “In other words, it’s not as though female house leaders have become commonplace in this day and age. I hardly need to tell you that something like this—having a duel to determine the successorship, thereby depriving the son of his rightful inheritance—was unheard of in my day.”

The others present agreed with that. Walts didn’t ordinarily employ swordplay duels to determine their successor. At least, that seemed to be the consensus.

“Indeed. I would never make such a choice.”

“Nor would I. Can’t even imagine doing such a thing.”

“To think my son turned out to be such an idiot... I’d punch him across the room if I could.”

Finally, the course of the conversation turned back to me. This time, it was Marcus who spoke to me—the one man who looked as if he’d seen too much in his lifetime, whose eyes were hidden behind thick frames.

“Have you considered that the girl, Ceres, simply held talent far surpassing that of Lyle here? It’s not entirely inconceivable that the current head would make the call to name her heir if he judged her to be more valuable to our house. What say you, Lyle?”

My gaze dropped to my lap. I didn’t want to remember the past, but I had no choice but to tell them what I knew. If it was inevitable anyway, better to get it over with now and have it out in the open.

With that thought in mind, I began telling them about my sister. Ceres was only two years younger than me and could do anything the adults asked of her. I told them how she would master techniques in a matter of hours that had

taken me some hundred hours or more to learn. But the most important thing was...

"My sister is completely perfect," I said. "Perfect at studying, of course, but it's more than that. I guess you could say it's the aura she gives off..."

"Aura? And what do you mean by 'perfect'? Explain yourself properly, boy!" interjected our barbaric founder, who was currently seated *on top* of the round table, his legs folded beneath him as he leaned forward.

After a short pause, I continued, "She has a way of drawing people in. That's how she got my parents. They didn't always ignore me, not at first. But once I passed age ten, the atmosphere in the house changed... Ceres started to become the center of everyone's attention."

Basil fell into silent contemplation. Marcus, meanwhile, took charge and said, "Basically, what you're telling us is that everyone around you recognized her superior talents, yes? I think we would all like to hear more about this, Brod."

My grandfather cocked his head to the side. From his perspective, my account was probably hard to believe. He stroked his chin and tried to reconcile what he'd heard with what he knew personally.

"Sorry to say that while I did think she was adorable since she was my granddaughter, what the boy's said about her...seems inconceivable to me," he answered. "Biased though I may be, Lyle always struck me as an excellent heir. I admit it's possible something happened after I passed, but...nothing special stands out in my memory, anyway."

My grandfather had dismissed the possibility, but the atmosphere at the estate hadn't been so bad while he was still alive. Granted, my parents were strict with me, but they were still kind. Ceres and I had enjoyed a normal—wait. Had we really had such a normal relationship? True, I was pretty sure we weren't at each other's throats, but...when did things start getting so bad? Strange. It was happening again—I couldn't remember.

As I wracked my brain, the previously silent Fredriks finally spoke. "So what you're saying is that sometime around the seventh or eighth head's time, the atmosphere at the estate changed, which means there's a fair chance her Art manifested."

“I’m not sure about that,” said Sley. “Even assuming her Art did manifest, it would take time for her to learn how to actually use it. That would be a little unrealistic, given the time frame, no? Lyle’s own Art has awoken, but from the look of things, he’s still yet to realize it himself.”

Arts were a boon entirely different from magic that the goddess imparted upon the humans of the world. As a general principle, each person only got one Art, and to better refine it, a person had to fight and gain experience. That said, we did possess technology that could replicate Arts. The Jewel I’d received was one such example, possessing the Arts of our historic—hold up a sec.

Suddenly, it dawned on me. I’d begun hearing those voices only after I started staying in Zel’s little hut. They’d grown clearer and more pronounced after he entrusted me with the Jewel.

At this epiphany, my jaw dropped, which indicated to the rest of those present that I’d finally caught on to what was happening.

“You’ve figured it out, I see,” said Sley. “That’s right. We’re currently inside the Jewel. We summoned you here. And while your Art is still incomplete and hasn’t demonstrated any effect as of yet, it’s true that you’ve awoken it. Although, it seems you’ve been harnessing it continuously, which is draining your mana.” He sounded as detached as ever.

“Um...so what is my Art exactly? And what do you mean it hasn’t demonstrated any effect?”

He shrugged. “Beats me. All I know is that we are connected to you through the Jewel, so we can sense the flow of mana from you. Oh well. I’m sure you’ll discover its abilities for yourself soon enough. Though, for the moment, you’re just wasting away your mana for nothing. The one thing I can tell you is that the blue Gem you possess—the Jewel—houses support-type Arts.”

Based on what Sley told me, Arts were split into three main categories. Arts used in close-quarter combat were called frontline types. A red Jewel was required to manifest them. Rearguard types required a yellow Jewel. These were primarily the kind of Arts that made it easier for people to harness magic. Blue Jewels were used for support types. These Arts weren’t directly linked to combat, but from what I’d heard, they were incredibly useful nonetheless.

Red, yellow, and blue Jewels were specialized in that they recorded Arts of their respective categories. However, someone in possession of such a Jewel would be influenced by it, thereby impacting the type of Art that they would manifest themselves. It was only natural, then, that having inherited a blue Jewel for generations, the Walts typically had support-type Arts, which they then passed on through the Jewel.

“Support-type Arts, huh...?” I muttered to myself, unable to mask my disappointment.

Sley grinned at me from ear to ear. “You don’t look too pleased about it, but just so you know, in my day, support types were the most popular.”

In the current era, the most desirable Arts were rearguard types because of the explosive firepower they could provide. Frontline types were popular enough too since they provided an instant power-up. Most people nowadays thought support types to be bland and boring. But if what Sley had said was anything to go by, the trends changed with the times.

“During my time, frontline and support types were the most popular, while having a rearguard type was seen as a stroke of bad luck,” said my grandfather. “My wife possessed a yellow Jewel, but she never actually used it. In Ceres’s case, I think the chances of Arts being involved are low. As for my son...” His voice trailed off as he fell into thought.

Crassel smiled wryly. “Well, my age was the same as Lyle’s. Support types were seen as useless. I suppose preferences shift with the generations, eh?”

Marcus cleared his throat, trying to redirect us back to the matter at hand. “At any rate, to sum up the course of this conversation, we have concluded that the chances of the girl having manifested an Art which enabled her to influence the house into walking the wrong path are too low to bother considering. The only remaining explanation, then, is that Lyle here lacked the necessary abilities to fulfill his role as heir.”

His assertion left me speechless. I’d worked tirelessly, slaving away in hopes that I would demonstrate that I was still fit to be the successor. If, in spite of that, they still meant to tell me that I lacked the capacity to hold that station, then perhaps they were right.

The awkward atmosphere, which seemed to paint me as a failure, prompted Fiennes to heave a sigh.

“Even so, don’t you think it’s unnatural?” he said. “I’ll give it to you that Lyle doesn’t seem the most dependable, but our house is an earldom now. His impressive lineage should be more than enough to compensate for his lack of worldly knowledge. Besides, having a woman lead the house has so many more drawbacks than benefits that it shouldn’t even be considered under normal circumstances.”

Actually, some noble houses had made women their leaders. For some families, the women were simply acting as temporary proxies on behalf of men, while for other families, it was a common custom. In female-run households, it wasn’t unusual for them to name a male as their successor, but the same couldn’t be said for houses that favored male successors. This was primarily because, if something happened, the house leader was expected to fight. Not to say that houses willing to send women to the battlefield didn’t exist, but they were in the minority. (Just so we’re clear, this isn’t me suggesting that women are inferior. I’m merely providing an explanation as to why male heirs are so much more common.)

“Brod, what of your retainers?” Fiennes asked. “Were there any among them that would have schemed to have Ceres become the successor instead?”

Grandfather paused to consider the notion, but he soon shook his head. “I can’t say it’s impossible, but our statuses are too different. None of them stands a chance of marrying her and taking over the house, even if they tried. The highest ranked among them would be Baron Fuchs and his house, but they have never been the type to do such scheming. If there was anything underhanded at play, it would have to be the branch family responsible for it.”

Basil, who’d been locked in silent contemplation this entire time, suddenly shot up. Gone was his brazen attitude as he shrieked in disbelief, “Did you say Fuchs? As in, the Fuchs who live in the neighboring territory?! My pops’s house has become our retainer?! ”

His “pops”? Was this not the same person as his grandfather? And did that mean they hadn’t always been our retainer then? They’d served us for decades

as far as I knew. Though they were a barony themselves, they still pledged allegiance to us. In fact, they were more dedicated to us than to the royal family, which was why people sarcastically referred to them as the Hounds of the Walts. Their association with us just felt so natural to me that I couldn't understand why he was so surprised.

*Although, come to think of it, why are the Fuchses so devoted to us? Even Novem is no exception. I've always found it kind of strange. I mean, our families have been like this at least since I was born.*

Marcus seemed similarly gobsmacked by the revelation, though Fredriks did not.

"What's the issue?" Fredriks grunted. "We moved up in rank, so naturally our relationship with them changed. They're the ones who wanted this."

"Don't speak such nonsense!" Crassel snapped. "Have you any idea what we owe the Fuchses for all they have done for us? I'll have you all know that if they hadn't chosen to reside in the lands neighboring ours, you wouldn't be sitting here right now!"

Marcus shared Crassel's view and rounded on Fredriks. "What is the meaning of this? I'm certain I told you that we were deeply indebted to them and that you should treasure our connection to their house!"

"That's why I told Fiennes to lend them a hand and help them gain higher ranking," Fredriks said coolly. He didn't seem to favor the Fuchses as much as his predecessors did.

Fiennes promptly folded his arms and nodded. "Yes, and I did. They proved stalwart allies and helped us out when needed, so I paid them back as was fitting for their service." Like Fredriks, he showed no special attachment to the Fuchses.

As I listened to their exchange, I couldn't help but find the whole thing puzzling. Exhaustion started to creep in on me again. In fact, the sounds of their voices were growing more distant.

"Lord Lyle?" called a voice—one that didn't belong to any of the men here. "Lord Lyle, I'm finished now."

My eyes slowly cracked open. “Huh...?” Apparently, I had fallen asleep while sitting in that rickety chair. The fatigue must have done a number on me because it had been no light nap either.

I rubbed my eyes and lifted my gaze to find Novem’s face hovering in front of me. She looked refreshed, having finished wiping her body and cleaning her face. Her hair was still a little damp, and she looked even more beautiful than she normally did.

Novem smiled at me. “You must have been exhausted. I washed your underwear with warm water and hung them up to dry. They should be ready for you by tomorrow.”

“Oh, sorry to trouble you with that.” I lifted myself to my feet, swaying. Novem quickly moved in to offer me some support, guiding me back into the room.

Was everything I saw just moments ago nothing more than a dream? I had little time to wonder because Basil’s voice soon trickled into my ear.

“Hold on a minute. Don’t tell me this girl’s surname is... You know, I thought something was off. Maybe it’s the aura around her, but...it kind of reminds me of my granny.”

My grandfather jumped in and commented, “She certainly has grown since I last saw her. She’s Baron Fuchs’s second daughter. Yes, it’s all coming back to me now. I never dreamed that she would end up being Lyle’s fiancée, though.”

“Whaaaaaaaaa?!” Basil shrieked.

Despite how earsplitting his cry was, Novem didn’t seem to have heard a thing.

I slapped a hand over my face, reconciling the truth of the situation. It hadn’t been a dream after all. My eyes wandered to the blue Gem hanging from my neck.

“Nope. Definitely not a dream,” I murmured.

Novem tilted her head. “Is something the matter, Lord Lyle?”

There was so much I wanted to confirm, to make absolutely certain of, but

the fatigue was too severe. I was even more exhausted now than I was mere moments ago. Even walking was tiresome. I never dreamed I would be this worn out on my first day.

Once Novem managed to lead me to my bed, I flopped down and fell right asleep. The last thing I heard was the soft lilt of her voice as she pulled my comforter up around my shoulders.

“Good night, my lord.”

## Chapter 4: Ignorant

When I awoke the next morning, I was still heavily fatigued, and I had to fight to keep my eyes open as I ate breakfast. The food the inn provided didn't look the least bit appetizing—and that was putting it nicely—but at least it was warm. And since my stomach was so empty, it tasted good enough for me.

Novem watched me scarf it down, seeming relieved. "You looked so exhausted last night, but it seems you're doing much better today. You're not nearly as pale either."

She'd been right at my side to help me get ready from the moment I opened my eyes this morning. She'd assisted me with washing my face, brushing my teeth, and even combing my hair. Frankly, she'd done just about everything for me.

Basil's thunderous voice had boomed through my ears at numerous points, mainly instructing me not to lean on her too much. He was particularly concerned about her. He wasn't alone; Crassel, Sley, and Marcus also revered her. Fredriks and the other later-generation house leaders, however, made no complaints about her subservience. The Fuchsses were already our retainers during their lifetimes, so it was only natural to them.

"I still feel like I haven't fully recovered, but I'm at least feeling better than yesterday. So, uh, what were our plans for today again? We're going shopping before we leave, right?" I asked.

"Yes. I would like to purchase some essentials before we depart."

The belongings I'd brought with me were by and large things Zel had prepared for my use, but that wasn't to say I already had everything I needed. In contrast, Novem had come fully equipped. The only "essentials" we needed to buy were ones for me.

"I would like to buy everything we can here and get you a proper weapon as quickly as possible." Novem's gaze wandered to my hips, noting the absence of

my beloved saber, which Ceres had destroyed. Considering the sad look in Novem's eyes at the very mention of a weapon, she must have already heard what had happened.

*I guess it would be pretty stupid to walk around with nothing but my bare hands to defend me.* As I considered what weapon I might pick up, the first thing that sprang to mind was another saber.

"I wonder if I could find one similar to what I had," I mumbled.

Novem pulled a face. "Provided you're not looking for one with a sharp edge, I think you could find something. Though I couldn't really speak for the quality... Around these parts, Auran seems to have the best selection of arms." She gave me an apologetic look, feeling guilty that she wasn't being more helpful. Novem was a spellcaster, so I couldn't really blame her for not knowing much about weapons.

Among the nobility, you had to be a special sort of person to refer to yourself as a mage. Yes, nobles could use magic well enough, but very few were so proficient that they could wear such a title proudly. Novem's specialty was healing magic, though she was skilled in other schools as well.

"I guess as long as you have a staff, there won't be a problem," I said.  
"Meanwhile, I'll be useless without a weapon myself."

"Not at all. You will be plenty useful."

"Really? Aren't you the more impressive one between us since you've got a Demonic Tool with you?"

I glanced at the staff lying beside her. Despite it being the Fuchs' family treasure, it was simple and unadorned. It was constructed from rare, expensive metals, but the solid silver color made it look bland. Unassuming though it was, several different Arts were inscribed on it. Normally, a person could use only one Art themselves, but Demonic Tools allowed you to use several more. I had no doubt that such an item would fetch an exorbitant price if she were to sell it.

"I still have a long way to go. Even in regards to magic, I'm not nearly as skilled as you, Lord Lyle," she said. "Everything about you is incredible."

"Somehow, it just feels like flattery rather than a compliment coming from

you.”

Five elements and two aspects—these were the foundations of all magic. To elaborate, the five elements were fire, water, earth, air, and lightning. Then there were the two aspects: light and darkness. Each person had their own strengths and weaknesses among these, but in general, you could manipulate any and all of them. Being able to use them and actually mastering them, however, were separate matters.

Novem was exemplary in that she was equally skilled in every single school of magic. It was hard not to view a compliment from her regarding magic as merely false praise.

“There’s nothing for you to worry about. I know you can do anything you put your mind to.” Novem smiled eagerly at me. “I promise I’ll do my utmost to keep up with you.”

“Such dedication. What a good, honest girl. Meanwhile, our ‘successor’ here has eyes like a dead fish and is absolutely worthless,” Basil grumbled in my ear.

From the moment he discovered that she hailed from House Fuchs, Basil had developed a noticeable bias for her. He’d stated numerous times how much more precious she was than me. It made me question if this barbarian really was my ancestor at all.

To sum up what Basil and the others had said, House Walt owed the Fuchsses an extraordinary debt for all they’d done for us. That was why Basil and some of the others couldn’t accept that the Fuchsses were being treated as mere retainers. Crassel and Marcus in particular seemed to owe them a lot for their support, which was why they’d been hounding me incessantly to take good care of Novem. Crassel had actually scolded me for how I treated her.

“Lyle, my boy,” he said, “couldn’t you be a little more...? Well, couldn’t you treat her better? It’s all too obvious how useless you are. She clearly can’t rely on you. No one can.”

*Okay, hold up. It seems to me that I’m not the only one who’s been relying on the Fuchsses, considering how many generations feel indebted to them.*

Sadly, I couldn’t argue with them since Novem was with me. I had little choice

but to pretend not to hear them.

"So we're going to go through Rembrandt to get to Auran..." I sighed. "I guess we'll have to see if we can look for a traveling merchant who's going that far. But wouldn't it be better to travel just the two of us? That'd be faster, right? I feel like we ought to buy some horses for ourselves."

No sooner had I spoken than Fiennes jumped in. "Oh, Lyle, don't tell me you're the type who doesn't know the value of money. Horses are expensive, I'll have you know. Not to mention how much you'd pay for the upkeep. And you do realize that you actually have to take care of them, right?"

Marcus sighed, exasperated. "The boy has no sense for how much things cost. I really can't blame his family for driving him out at this point."

"That's not a terrible idea," Novem replied, "but if possible, I think we should tag along with a merchant caravan. We'd stand out more if there were only two of us, which would make us an easy target for bandits and monsters alike. Besides...we don't really have the spare coin to buy horses."

"Oh...uh, really?"

Apparently my offer was a bad one after all.

"How can you not be aware of something so basic?!" Basil interjected. "This kid really grew up under a rock. In my day, Walt boys were more wild and free. That was their charm!"

Ugh, he and the others really had been insufferable since I woke up.

Once I finished breakfast, Novem and I set out to do our shopping. Much to my chagrin, I wasn't spared my ancestors' scathing commentary during our outing.

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It was several more days before we reached the next city. This one sat on the edge of the Walts' territory and was a central hub connecting Vice to the other neighboring regions. That was reason enough for them to build a tower nearby, providing the city with additional defense. There were also far more soldiers present here than in other cities.

The sun was starting to descend over the horizon by the time we arrived. The merchants thanked us for our contributions; we'd stepped in to assist them at one of the towns we'd stopped by on the way here. More precisely, Novem had skillfully handled what they needed. My contributions were minor...or rather, nonexistent, honestly, since I'd only stood by and watched for the most part.

"We thank you for your services. Much to our fortune, you didn't have to pit yourselves against monsters, but we'd like you to take this payment all the same, to compensate you for your labor." The merchant held out a large copper coin, which I accepted.

"Thank you," Novem responded on my behalf. I was still puzzled and trying to follow the exchange, so I was grateful she stepped in.

"Mister, you sure are lucky to have a girl like this who shows such consideration. I envy you," said the merchant with a glance at Novem.

"Uh, right..." I muttered.

Marcus, who'd been irritable with me for several days now, immediately cut in. "Come on, this was your chance to earn some brownie points with her. Say something, for heaven's sake! Can't you at least muster up something like, 'Yeah, she's really too good for me'? You are so worthless!"

"You only want him to say that 'cause you always felt restless 'til you used that line on Ma. You knew she'd never let you hear the end of it otherwise," Fredriks grumbled. "Tsk, honestly."

*Ugh, what's the problem with these guys? Are they really my ancestors? I would've expected them to be a little bit more—I don't know—solemn?*

For whatever reason, I couldn't bring myself to accept them. They were clearly a more troubled bunch than history had suggested.

"By the way," said the merchant, "your destination is Auran, right?"

I nodded.

"Is there something the matter there?" Novem asked.

The merchant frowned and said, "No, it's just that many people seeking to become adventurers head there, so I thought I might warn you first. Most work

there is for mercenary bands. A lone adventurer or two might find it a rough place to start out. Plus, it's right by our border. They're always short on people."

He knew we were looking to become adventurers, which was likely why he'd volunteered this information. The gist of it was that we'd find no shortage of work, but we'd be risking our lives in the process.

"There's a territory under development near the capital," the merchant continued. "Darion's the name of the place. They've got plenty of work fit for novice adventurers, from what I hear. I know it's not my place to say this, but you might be better off heading there instead. I hear the outskirts have been crawling with bandits as of late, but Darion itself is a secure city with a good liege lord looking after it. They're also very generous with adventurers."

I glanced at Novem. She studied my face and hesitated before saying, "I suppose you're right. Judging by what you've said, perhaps Darion would be a better option for us."

I nodded. If Novem agreed with the man, then that was probably our best course.

"Why're you leaving the decision up to her?!" Basil roared in my ear. "You some kinda spineless worm? Decide for yourself, boy!"

The merchant added, "In that case, you should head to Central from Rembrandt. The caravans heading directly from Vice to Central are too congested; you'd have trouble finding a seat on one of them."

I didn't really understand his reasoning. So there were other caravans heading there from Rembrandt, then? And we should hop on one of those?

"Th-Thank you. I appreciate all the information," I said haltingly.

He smiled and nodded. "Good luck. I'll be praying for your success."

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We found another group of merchants to travel with on our way to Rembrandt. Though it was evening when we arrived, the place was booming with activity as Novem and I walked the streets looking for lodgings. Rembrandt

was different from the other cities we'd been to; it was massive, and impressive buildings dotted the landscape.

In the midst of all the hustle and bustle, I found a plaza which hosted a stone monument at its center. I wandered closer to find names inscribed on the surface. I reached out my hand, my fingers tracing over the hollowed-out letters that referred to Sley Walt, the third generational head of our family.

Novem paused to read the text written on the monument, then dropped her gaze, as if she wanted to speak but was struggling inwardly.

"Rembrandt's miracle? Banseim's Hero, Sley Walt? What the heck is this?!" Sley squeaked in disbelief.

His son explained, "Father, remember? You died in an enormous battle. Your achievements there led to our victory, and in turn, the people treated you as the Hero General. You were known as Sley Walt, the man who created a miracle for Rembrandt."

I would have thought Sley would be proud to hear all of this, but if anything, he seemed annoyed.

"What? That's how they remember me? That doesn't sit well with me at all. Miracle my ass. That whole situation was Banseim's fault to begin with. I guess this is a prime example of how the victors are the ones who get to write history."

I never dreamed he'd actually dislike the way he was remembered. Judging by what he said, behind Banseim's victory were a number of unrecorded (and probably inconvenient) truths. But it also occurred to me that talking to those who were long since dead was, in itself, unnatural. I moved away from the monument. Novem fell into step beside me.

"I am certain you'll become as impressive as Lord Sley someday. Have faith in yourself, Lord Lyle," she said. She must have thought I was feeling down on myself, hence the attempt at reassurance.

I had no idea how to respond to her.

Sley, on the other hand, gushed, "Aww, how sweet. She's basically complimenting me." He was on cloud nine.

*Is this man really the Hero General Sley Walt?* I couldn't help but wonder. He was far too different from the image in my head. I thought he'd be a solemn warrior, but that ideal was quickly crumbling before my eyes.

The two of us, Novem close at my side, set off to find the area one of the merchants had mentioned, where most of the inns were centralized.

"Lord Lyle, this inn still has some openings," she said, pointing to a signboard outside.

Inns lined the streets along here, with one on every corner. Obviously, this place saw heavy foot traffic, so it was little wonder why most already had it posted on their signboards that they were full up for the night.

"I guess this place is as good as any. I won't be so entitled as to ask for a bath, but it'd sure be nice to have a shower at least," I said.

Novem's face fell. "Oh, my apologies. This is one of the inns where you have to borrow warm water to sponge bathe."

From within the Jewel around my neck, Basil's voice boomed loud enough to rattle my skull.

"You're far too spoiled, boy! You know, back in my day, there was no such thing as an inn room with a bath attached!"

Crassel sighed. "Don't tell me you're just reacting out of jealousy."

"They became more common during my generation," Fiennes said after clearing his throat. Apparently, accommodations differed dramatically over the years. "We also had Demonic Tools, a most convenient invention, and we had large converters that could turn magic stones into energy. Using those enabled us to have hot-water baths."

"Baths were still expensive in my time," grandfather chimed in. "But it seems they've become more common in the days since. Although, going by what Novem said, it seems they're still pretty pricey."

Basil hummed with envy. "Oh, that sounds incredible. You men sure lived in pleasant times. It was a lot tougher back when I was alive."

Fiennes chuckled. "Life has become more convenient, to be sure, but there's

much more that hasn't changed one bit. Wars are as common as they ever were."

I froze in place as I listened to their back-and-forth. Novem stooped in front of me, peering worriedly up at my face. Seeing her so up close made my heart pound.

"Lord Lyle?"

"Uh, oh...it's nothing. We should hurry and get inside, right? It-It'd be a real problem if they f-filled up."

She smiled at me. "Indeed."

As I studied her face, I couldn't help but feel like dead weight; my own ignorance was holding her back.

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Later, I found myself pulled back into the Jewel, inside that room with the round table. All the historic leaders were huddled around it, staring at me with unreadable expressions. From what they told me, this room was only an illusion. I was asleep in the real world, and it was only my consciousness that had wandered inside the Jewel, conjuring up the view I saw before me. At least, that was my interpretation of their explanation.

The atmosphere in the room was heavy as Basil Walt announced, "I've thought it over carefully, and I've come up with my own theory to explain what's happening with Ceres—"

Before he could finish regaling us with his revelation, Crassel interrupted, "Oh, before we begin, don't you think it would be wise to come up with some rules for our conversations? We're all related to one another. Fathers and sons, you know. It makes it hard to know who is referring to whom. And we seem to be guzzling Lyle's mana dry."

I frowned. "I knew it. You guys talking to me is draining me. I had a feeling that was the case."

Somehow, it finally all made sense. I'd been feeling incredibly fatigued recently, and these noisemakers were the ones responsible. Their incessant

babble was sapping all the power I had. They were nuisances, frankly.

“Shut up, the lot of you!” grandfather howled. “What’re you going to do if my grandson collapses from all this?!”

He was stepping in on my behalf to yell at them, but his shouting only seemed to tap me of what little energy I had left. I was already in a bad enough position. Whatever my Art was, it was also continuously eating away at my mana.

My house’s historic leaders only manifested through the Arts they’d left behind in the Jewel. It wasn’t that their actual souls were sealed inside. It was simply that a part of them had been transmitted to the Jewel when they recorded their Arts. That answered a lot of my questions, namely about why they all still looked in the prime of their lives.

Sley repeatedly slammed his hand on the table to silence everyone. His eyes were glued to Marcus as he said, “See? We need to stop chattering like this among ourselves, otherwise Lyle won’t have a drop of mana left to sustain him. Then he really will collapse.”

Accurate as his assessment was, that didn’t mean I had to like it. It wasn’t as though my mana pool was small. Did they really need to treat me like a fragile desert flower?

“We should decide on a representative,” Sley continued, cupping his chin. “It would benefit all of us to have one person take charge. And I nominate you, Marcus.” Despite it being his proposal, Sley was giving the floor to his son instead. The other six leaders soon agreed with him, though. To me, it looked like none of them wanted to be stuck with the job, so they were merely using this as an opportunity to pawn it off on Marcus.

“As long as I don’t have to do it.”

“Hah, as if you’d even be able to.”

“I’ve got no complaints.”

“A fine idea, I think.”

“Well, the position does suit him.”

Marcus pushed his glasses farther up his nose, trembling with rage. Yet, for as

infuriated as he was, he also seemed resigned to his new position.

“Incorrigible. You’re pushing all the work off on me? Well, I suppose someone does need to do it.” He shrugged, reluctantly acquiescing, and without missing a beat, he made his first suggestion. “We can decide upon the particulars of these rules later, but I do agree that calling each other ‘father’ and ‘grandfather’ and such will only add to the confusion, both for us and Lyle. I’d like to take this opportunity and propose we refer to one another by our respective generational titles. What do you think?”

“Sure. I don’t see why we couldn’t do that,” Sley—or rather, the third generational head—replied, nodding in agreement. He was being as detached as ever; he probably couldn’t care less what they called one another. “As long as it makes things easier, I don’t care.”

Fiennes—the, uh, sixth generational head—crossed his arms and nodded as well. “Much as we might look the same age right now, we are from different generations. It would be easier to simplify things this way.”

Basil—I mean, the founder (boy this was getting exhausting already)—seemed none too concerned about this particular detail. He was lazily digging his pinky into his ear as if he were fishing for wax. “Who cares? Just wrap this up already. Don’t forget I have something I wanna talk about.”

“I personally see no reason why we can’t call each other by our respective names instead.” Crassel—the second generational head—glanced sidelong at our founder. “But if everyone else thinks this is the easier way to handle it, far be it from me to argue.”

“I’m sure that would make things simpler for Lyle as well. I support your proposal,” said Brod, the seventh generational head. His foremost concern was my well-being.

The fifth generational head—Fredriks, that is, just to be clear—propped his elbow against the table and cupped his chin. “Don’t care either way.”

Phew. That only left the fourth generational head, which was Marcus.

“In that case, I will henceforth be referring to each of you by your respective generational titles. I would also request you keep your commentary to a

minimum so that we don't unnecessarily expend Lyle's mana."

I still felt they were inadvertently disparaging me. I dropped my gaze to my lap as I grumbled, "I don't think my mana pool is *that* tiny. It's only because both the Jewel and my newly awakened Art are draining me that I've got nothing left..."

The fourth head chuckled before curtly replying, "Even with that in mind, your mana pool is still small. The smallest, in fact, if we were to compare you to myself and the others present. Though I do realize part of that is because we've appeared here in our prime, when our power was at its peak."

Having a decent-sized mana pool was the one thing I prided myself on—until he shot me down cold.

The seventh head averted his eyes and cleared his throat. "Ahem, well, Lyle is still a growing young man. I'm sure he'll continue to mature, and his mana pool will grow." He sounded so uncertain, like he was banking on a futile hope.

*Wish he'd have a little more faith in me.*

Nonetheless, even I had concerns. "I'm pretty sure it won't grow at all no matter how much I train, actually. Any increase in its size from here on out will be marginal at best..."

I was about to ask him if there was anything I could do about this newfound problem, but our barbaric founder shot out of his seat and cut me off before I had the chance.

"Enough of your yappin'! You've all said your piece. Now let me talk!"

The fourth head adjusted his glasses as he said, "We do still have other topics to cover, actually, but very well. Go on, then. I only ask that you use an inside voice instead of shouting."

Everyone's eyes turned to the founder as they waited for him to speak. He crossed his arms over his chest, plopped back into his chair, and closed his eyes. A few seconds passed before he opened them again.

"Lyle, I would like to confirm it with you one more time."

"Y-Yes?" He sounded so serious that I gulped even as I nodded.

Each of the Walts' historic house leaders had a unique disposition. Our founder in particular had a feral air about him, looking every bit the savage that he sometimes acted, which made me instinctively shrink back.

"You mentioned your sister started having an atmosphere about her, like she was perfect at everything, and that's when everyone started to pay more attention to her, yeah? Did she seem to be strangely bewitching, despite her young age? Almost like she was charming those around you?"

I recalled my memories of her and nodded slowly. Although she was still young, people typically described Ceres as a beauty rather than as a cute girl. Men were already seeking her hand before she'd even made it to her tenth birthday—and not just your average guy, I mean. These were scions of rich and prominent households. Some were even knights who'd made a name for themselves. My parents had turned them all down, but I couldn't count how many of them refused to give up so easily and still tried to pursue her. Ceres was aware of the impact she had on people. She used it to her advantage and manipulated them.

"Then we have our answer!" He slammed his fist down on the table, confident that he'd solved the mystery. "Your little sister Ceres is...a Heretical God's Child!" No sooner did he announce this than he crossed his arms over his chest and held his head high.

The other heads regarded him coldly as they one by one lifted themselves out of their chairs.

The first to stand was the fifth head. "I assume we're done for now? In which case, I'm out." He spun on his heel and headed for the door behind his chair. There were a number of them throughout the room, corresponding with the number of seats at the table. Each one was different.

The fourth head watched as he left and said, "We'll discuss the particulars of this arrangement another day." He sighed. "What a waste of time this was."

"H-Hey!" the founder called after them, panicked by their dismissal.

"Here I was genuinely curious about what you had to say...and it turned out to be a load of crock," the second head grumbled as he followed everyone else's example and headed for his own door. "That Heretical God nonsense is

just a fairy tale.”

The sixth head forced a smile as he rose to his feet. He glanced my way and waved. “Well, Lyle, I’m sure you’ve still got plenty of questions yourself, but we’ll have to call it here. Get some good sleep, because things’ll start getting busy come tomorrow.”

“Sorry about all this,” said the seventh head as he clapped me on the shoulder. “But if we kept going, it would only be a bigger drain on you. Tsk. Our founder got all fired up over nothing.”

He shot a cold look at the founder, and he wasn’t the only one; the fourth head was glaring at him too.

“Indeed,” said the fourth head. “Everyone is free to take their leave.”

The third head snuck a glance at the founder as he said, “The whole Heretical God’s Child thing did kinda come out of nowhere. But I *do* think there’s something fishy going on with your sister.”

Once everyone vacated the room and slipped through their respective doors, the only person left sitting at the table with me was the founder.

His face grew red with rage as he shouted, “You bastaaaaards! Get back here and listen to what I’ve got to say!”

I could understand why he wanted to yell, but I rather wished he wouldn’t since my mana was already dwindling. Nor did I care for the change in the atmosphere. A Heretical God’s Child was indeed something from a fairy tale. In fact, the Heretical God was like the darkness to the Goddess’s light, and with that darkness, the Heretical God would shower a human, thereby making them into what was referred to as the “Heretical God’s Child.” But that was mere myth, one that—much to the exasperation of myself and the others—the founder was referring to as if it was reality.

“I, uh...gotta get up early in the morning, so excuse me.” I rattled off an excuse and extracted myself from the Jewel. As I left, I heard a bellowing voice echoing behind me.

“You’re turning your back on me too?! You could stand to give me a listen at least!”



## Chapter 5: The Chosen One

The next day, we set out from Rembrandt toward Banseim's capital, Central. The caravan the merchant had tipped us off about traveled a wide and well-maintained highway, and their trips were planned at fixed intervals.

Six horses traveled with us, each with an expensive-looking Demonic Tool hanging from its neck. Three Arts were inscribed onto them: one to augment the horse's stamina, one to elevate its speed, and one to help them recover from exhaustion on the road.

Together, these horses pulled a wagon with another passenger car linked to it, one with plenty of open seats. The ceiling was constructed in such a way that it had ample room for storing luggage or other goods above during the trip. As for the wagon itself, the wheels had been enhanced for the road, and they looked far more pricey than those you'd spy on any normal merchant wagon.

This was the perfect vehicle for travel; it ran smoothly along the highway and got you to your destination several times faster than walking there yourself. Alas, its convenience meant that it cost a pretty penny to buy passage. Or so I'd heard.

Novem must have bought said tickets on her own, because as we arrived, she held out one for me. "My lord, please be absolutely sure you don't lose this. During the trip, we can show this ticket to secure lodging along the way." As if to emphasize the importance of this, she held the ticket firmly with both hands as she waited for me to take it.

"Say, uh, how much was this?"

Her lips thinned. Was it really that hard for her to answer?

"It cost...several gold coins," she said finally.

*Huh.*

I glanced down at the ticket. I had trouble fathoming how a little slip of paper could cost several gold coins. Part of my ignorance about money came from the

fact that I'd never had an opportunity to use it while I'd lived at my parents' estate. And, predictably, a voice in my head shrieked at this revelation.

"D-Did she say several gold coins? To ride on that thing? Just because it'll get you to Central in a few days?!" The founder gasped in disbelief.

The sixth head explained, "In truth, it's probably only this cheap because they have so many people paying to board. The cost of upkeep for a caravan like this must be enormous. They have to maintain the horses, the tools, and the wagon itself, on top of labor costs and bodyguard fees."

"Then people ought to just walk!" howled the founder.

It was only yesterday that he'd berated me for being ignorant enough to suggest we walk there on our own, but now he was changing his tune. He and the others spoke not from a place of logical reasoning, but from their opinions based entirely on their respective (and very subjective) values.

The seventh head sighed. "Look around. The horses even have Demonic Tools attached to them, and they have specialized bodyguards on horseback keeping apace with the wagon. Not only does this make the trip much safer, but it also reduces travel time. I would argue that, for what they're getting, a few gold coins is cheap."

There was a short pause as the fourth head fell into quiet contemplation. After a moment, he said, "But it is surprising to me that Novem here had that much money on her. I know she's the second daughter of a baron, but still..."

I shoved my ticket into my shirt pocket. Novem visibly relaxed. She took my hand and pulled me along.

"We only have a few more minutes or so before they set off. Let's find our seats quickly." The way she smiled at me seemed to indicate she was genuinely enjoying herself.

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The wagon was altered in such a way that any shimmying or shaking was kept to a minimum. The plush seats were comfortable too, making for a far less tiresome journey than I'd pictured. That wasn't to say it was a joyride, of course. When I glanced out the window, I caught a glimpse of the bodyguards

who traveled along beside us.

Once we arrived at the next town, that would be it for the day. We would have to rest there before resuming the trip.

Novem must have been exhausted, because she'd nodded off and slumped against my shoulder. She was so close I could pick out the rhythm of her breathing, which was in itself endearing. A few strands of her hair were pasted on her cheek, her skin covered in a thin sheen of sweat.

Perhaps I'd really worn her out these past few days. I felt terribly guilty. When I started this journey, I'd honestly thought I could make it on my own, but maybe I would've been completely lost without her. I figured letting her use my shoulder as a pillow was the least I could do.

Meanwhile, the voices continued to spill out from the Jewel. This time it was the second head, who was shocked by the speed of the caravan.

"Demonic Tools are amazing. Back when I was alive, the only thing we had were Jewels. We never could've dreamed that one day we'd be able to inscribe Arts into rare metal like that. And despite the horse's quick pace, they can go like this for hours."

By rare metal, he was referring specifically to a type of metal imbued with magic. When adventurers delved into the depths of a dungeon, they would sometimes find such metal. It didn't matter whether it was iron or copper; so long as it retained mana, it was considered a rare metal. That upped its value dramatically. People began inscribing Arts on it, which gave them easy access to those Arts whenever they wanted. The major difference between them and Jewels was that this new invention allowed you to inscribe whatever Art they desired.

"Hmph, why do these bodyguards look so puny?" grunted the founder as he scrutinized the men riding on horseback outside. "In my day, you could find more impressive men than that just about anywhere you looked. But these men look like skin and bones—hardly any meat on 'em!"

Naturally, he had to launch into a tirade, bragging about how much better his generation was. Everyone thought their generation was the best. The sixth head, who soon joined the conversation, was no exception.

"In my day, the men looked more grim and intimidating. It was a rough time, after all. If they'd been as complacent as these men, they'd have bit the dust quickly."

The seventh head scoffed. "My generation was harsher than yours. Our neighbors were all pressing in, trying to invade us. Any man who survived all that was impressive indeed."

*I really wish these guys would stop trying to one-up each other.*

"What're you boys talking about?!" the founder snapped, refusing to back down. "Unlike you spoiled aristocrats, in my time, it was all about physical strength—"

Annoyed at their endless bickering, I glanced outside to take my mind off of them. I had to admit, I was a bit happy we'd be traveling in this caravan for several days. I enjoyed watching the scenery outside. I could even spot mountains in the distance—and rivers too! It all looked so different from the boring view I'd gotten used to gazing at through the bedroom window of my family's estate. I didn't think I'd ever tire of watching it all race by as we moved briskly down the highway.

My only wish was that I could see all of this under different circumstances, preferably without the annoying commentary of my house's historic leaders echoing in my head.

"My generation was the bleakest!"

"I think mine was far more grim than yours."

"Yes, I know. The second head went through trying times, both because of me and the founder."

If the way they were droning on was any indication, I wasn't going to be able to enjoy this trip in peace. Their noisy banter also had the added effect of draining my mana.

I glanced up at the ceiling briefly and decided to rest my eyes.

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Several more days passed after that. We arrived in Central, and I disembarked

with Novem's luggage in my hands as I gazed upon our country's capital for the first time in my life.

"It's...squalid."

"This place sure has changed, but the atmosphere hasn't," muttered the founder with a hint of nostalgia. He'd grown up here in Central. He came from a long line of bottom-ranking court nobles and was the third son in his family. "It just goes to show you that some things do stay the same, even after over two centuries have passed."

When I first left my family's estate, the sprawling city around me was cleaner and more beautiful than what I was seeing now. There had been less people milling about, but rather than seeming lonely for it, the place had felt more lively. If I were to sum up Central in a single word, I'd use "crowded."

The traffic was particularly bad near the gate where wagons and people came to and fro, kicking up dust. Unfortunately, the dirt stuck right to my sweat, leaving my skin feeling gritty. I had to clamp a hand over my mouth, lest I choke on the filthy air.

"Lyle, how long are you going to loiter here?" asked the fourth head. "Hurry up and get a move on—find yourself some lodging. It's been a long journey. I think you can afford to splurge a bit and get yourselves a decent room for a change. And don't forget that you need to buy tickets so you can leave for Darion tomorrow."

Following his command, I grabbed Novem's hand and pulled her along. I headed first for the ticket counter. There was a line of people already, so we had to wait a while for our turn. Once it came, we purchased our tickets and set off to find a place to stay.

The traffic was terrible. I had to hold Novem's hand the entire time to keep us from getting separated. As I pulled her along, I echoed the fourth head's suggestion.

"Novem, since we already got our tickets, I say we stay at a decent place tonight. We'll have to get on the road again tomorrow, so...I think we should rest while we can."

In truth, I was the one who wanted to relax, but the way I'd framed it made it sound like I was doing it for her benefit. Nonetheless, she smiled at me.

"I appreciate your consideration. I'll cover the cost."

"Huh? Uh...no, I should do that," I said. I was about to fill her in on how Zel had given me money for such expenses, but she cut me off with a shake of her head.

"I appreciate the sentiment, really, but I have more money than you do right now. Once you're more well-off someday, I'll be happy to let you treat me."

I had no choice but to nod silently.

Exasperated, the fourth head grumbled, "Lyle, zero points."

"Novem is such a wonderful girl," said the third head dreamily. "I'll give her a hundred points. She deserves full marks, I say. And while we're on the subject, why is someone as incredible as her tagging along with someone like Lyle? It's his looks, I assume? She doesn't look the shallow type to go the extra mile for that alone, though. This truly is a mystery."

It was a mystery to me too. Though, frankly, what I wanted right now was someone—anyone—to comfort me. Novem's radiant smile was like a knife that pierced through my heart, and my ancestors' scathing words carved out even deeper wounds. Was I really as terrible of a person as they claimed?

For the first time in a while, I ate a luxurious dinner, soaked in a bath, and stretched out on a fluffy bed. Not that I got to enjoy it much, because as soon as I fell asleep, I was back in the roundtable room with the founder seated across from me. I was in my chair while he was perched on the table, legs crisscrossed under him as he glared down at me.

"You're so pathetic I almost wanna cry. Are you really my successor? You're so weak and wishy-washy. All you do is cause poor little Novem more trouble."

I could tell by his tone, if not his words, that he was irritable. Lately, even I'd begun to fully realize just how unreliable I was. There was nothing I could say in my defense. That only incensed him more.

"At least defend yourself, you puny wallflower!"

I sighed. “I’m not doing that because I know there’s nothing I can say. If you don’t have any business with me, can I leave?”

His nostrils flared. “You telling me this doesn’t piss you off at all?! You could at least try to say something—swear you’ll show me what’s what! Anything! Why do you act like such a Goody Two-shoes? You bore me, boy!”

*Uh, yeah, well...I’m not exactly here for your entertainment.*

“Um, so what was it you needed?” I asked.

Our resident savage went silent for a few moments before peeling his gaze from me and muttering under his breath. He clearly disliked conversing with me, yet he insisted on butting into my business constantly. I wasn’t good at dealing with people like him. Not that I was particularly good at dealing with any type, mind you.

“I didn’t get to say it before, so I figured I’d tell you now. Not that anyone will believe me... I was born about fifty years after the founding of our country. Former soldiers like my gramps managed to live long lives back in those days, so I got the opportunity to hear things straight from his mouth.”

Three hundred years ago, prior to Banseim Kingdom’s founding, the Centrus Kingdom ruled over the entire continent. Alas, their royal family was rife with bribery and embezzlement, and the corruption of the ruling class only grew more serious as time went on. At the time, the man who’d eventually become king of Banseim was a liege lord. The country itself was split into two fiercely warring factions: the loyalists (the royal family’s supporters) and the traditionalists (the aristocracy’s supporters).

“The way my gramps told it, it almost sounded like they were locked in a dream. When asked what their motivations were—why they split into loyalists and traditionalists and fought each other—he said they had no idea. Why do you think that is?” the founder asked solemnly.

“Uh, maybe because their passion for freedom had cooled—”

“Wrong! It’s because of the Heretical God’s Child!”

*So we’re going down this road again, huh?* But I decided to keep my silence and listen to what he had to say.

"Have you heard of the Courtesan Beauty, Agrissa? People talk about how she could bewitch men, but that's no exaggeration. She really did. Many a soldier fought in her name. But when it was all over, if you asked them why they'd done it, they'd tell you they had no idea. There were a bunch of men like that. Punishment was lax 'cause the victors would soon realize she'd been responsible for pitting them against one another."

From what I'd heard, Banseim Kingdom was left severely weakened in the wake of overthrowing Centrus Kingdom, so it seemed more likely to me that no one had time to bother executing soldiers here and there for minor offenses. As for the Courtesan Beauty, I'd heard of her before, but it was merely a minor footnote in history, one incident that happened among dozens of others.

The modern view of the woman in question and her role in history was not that her presence had caused Centrus Kingdom to rot from the inside, but rather that the corruption within the kingdom had given birth to the very existence of courtesans like her. I knew that because I'd read as much in a book.

"Isn't that just one of many other reasons why Centrus fell?" I asked.

The founder sniffed at me. "You think I wanna believe this crock either? But I'm telling ya, it was crazy times back then. Wouldn't surprise me if she was the whole cause. It was a gruesome civil war, where fellow countrymen slaughtered each other by the thousands, or maybe even hundreds of thousands. I bet if you tallied up all the sorry souls who croaked outside of battle, the number'd be even more staggering. And you know what kick-started that madness?"

"Let me guess. The Heretical God's Child?"

I'd heard that many had been killed or died due to the selfishness of the Courtesan Beauty.

"It wasn't just a pretty girl that sparked all the change. There was also the Invincible Commander who somehow bested an army of ten thousand men by himself—an archmage who could make an entire island float. Those two have a tendency of showing up at critical points in history, causing the world to descend into chaos. It's as though they each make such an impact on the environment and people around them that they shake up everything to the very foundations."

The founder continued, “When the Heretical God’s Child appears, she hails the coming of an age where many men are fated to die. And this time, it might be your sister’s the one. I’d never have dreamed someone from my line would be chosen—imbued by the Heretical God’s malevolent power.”

The founder folded his arms and closed his eyes, groaning to himself.

I immediately shook my head. “Come on. There’s no way that’s possible.”

He jammed a finger in my direction. “You’re proof that it is! What sane man would drive his only son from his house? I don’t care how worthless you are. Most leaders would still find a way to train you up and make a proper leader out of you. But y’know, in a way, you’re a lucky one.”

“Lucky?” I cocked my head.

Frustrated with me, he started raking his hands through his hair as he bellowed, “Open your eyes, boy! Yes, everyone at your estate was bewitched by her, and you were treated like crap. But they still raised you, and you escaped that house with your life! Given the circumstances, it wouldn’t be surprising at all if you’d ended up dead. It’d be easier for them to dispose of you once they’d decided they had no need for you. Get it now?”

Now that he mentioned it, it was true I could’ve been killed at any point. In fact, Ceres had shown every intent of murdering me when we fought.

As I listened to him, I found myself rubbing my temples. “B-But...huh?” My head was spinning now. I couldn’t get my thoughts in order.

“Finally realized your situation, huh? You were lucky to have survived that. *Lucky*. Well, okay, maybe not so lucky in some ways. I mean, you did have the Heretical God’s Child born into your family, and if that’s not rotten luck, I dunno what is. She and her predecessors have a habit of distorting even the very environment around them. We’re talking about a person blessed with the power of the Heretical God; common sense is no longer in play. Understand what I mean? And you accepted the poor way you were treated, didn’t ya?”

Actually, he was right. I did. I thought I was in the wrong, that I needed to become strong and study more so that I could regain my parents’ acceptance. I thought the reason no one spared me so much as a glance was because I was

such a disgrace.

"I'm tellin' ya, the Heretical God's Child is real. When I was alive, everyone grew up hearing about them."

I dropped my hands from my head and peered up at his face. "Then...it wasn't my fault? This is all on Ceres?"

"Hell if I know. Watching you pisses me off. I can see how someone could steal your position right out from under you, at least based on the way you've acted. But I don't know squat about this Ceres girl. The only reason I can even talk to you like this is because that old man Zel hauled you into his home and you started manifesting your Art. I wasn't even conscious before then."

"O-Oh, I see... That...makes sense." I deflated.

My depressed reaction seemed to infuriate the founder all over again. He crossed his arms and snapped, "Anyway, what're you gonna do now, boy?"

I stared up at him and tilted my head. "Uh, I'm...going to become an adventurer?"

"That's not what I'm talkin' about! I'm warning you that Ceres might be the bad seed that turns this country upside down. The fighting that ensues may even spread beyond these borders to the rest of the continent. What'll you do if that happens, huh?! In case it's not clear, you've got Novem's precious life in your hands!"

His tone was so menacing that I felt too intimidated to speak, instead opening and closing my mouth much like a fish gasping for air. It took a few moments for my brain to process what was going on, but once I did, I finally managed to blurt out, "I don't know what to do."

Even I knew how pathetic I sounded. *How do I want to handle this? Or better yet, what can I even do?* I couldn't come up with an answer.

Infuriated by my indecisiveness, the founder shot up and hopped off the table. He kept his back turned, refusing to look me in the eyes.

"Just seeing your face gets under my skin. Try using your brain for a change!"

I outstretched my hand toward him, but any words I might have thought to

speak died on my tongue. The founder marched away, violently yanking his door open and disappearing through it before slamming it behind him.

I was the only one left in the room now.

“I-I can’t help it,” I protested to no one in particular. “I don’t know what to do. What’s the right answer? Please, someone tell me...”

A few tears trickled down my cheeks.

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“The city is finally in view, Lord Lyle!”

The following day, we boarded another caravan to travel from Central to Darion, the neighboring city. It was a far shorter trip than the one we’d taken from Rembrandt and was all the more pleasant for it.

Novem wore a cheerful expression, while I looked as miserable as I’d felt since my conversation with the founder. Novem had noticed my mood and had been showing extra consideration for me, but that had an unfortunate consequence.

“Get yourself together, stupid boy!”

Yes, once again, the founder was buzzing in my ear, rebuking me for my attitude.

“Lord Lyle? I’ve noticed something has been off with you ever since we arrived in Central. Did something happen?” Novem asked.

I shook my head. “I-It’s nothing, really. I was just thinking we won’t be able to travel again for a while after this, and this trip was my first time ever getting to ride in a caravan. I kinda liked watching the changing scenery, so...I’m a little sad it’ll all be over.”

She smiled warmly and said, “In the course of trying to achieve your goals, I am sure we will travel to other locations in the future as well. Darion is a good place for novice adventurers, but those hoping to climb the ladder have to travel elsewhere to do so. Many of them leave Darion after getting enough experience under their belt.”

Something about what she said struck me as odd. The first time we heard about Darion, she’d been as clueless about the place as me. Yet suddenly she

was acting like an expert.

“What happened?” I asked. “Last we talked, you didn’t know anything about Darion.”

Her cheeks flushed. “When I went shopping in Central, I asked around. Darion is apparently pretty famous, and a lot of the merchants I purchased from offered information as a way of thanking me for my patronage. Not that they told me anything special; most people knew all of this already.”

“She really does have a good head on her shoulders,” the second head murmured with a sigh of admiration. However, his tone quickly shifted when he added, “Meanwhile, our boy Lyle here is...well, you know.”

Sick of them lobbing insults like that my way, I plucked up my courage and said, “Novem!”

“Yes?”

I grabbed her by the shoulders, drawing her close. I wanted to be sure my feelings got across to her.

“I’ll admit, I’m kind of useless right now... Okay, completely and utterly useless. But I swear to you, one day, I will make something great out of myself!”

She grinned and nodded, placing a hand over my arm. “I know that. I know one day you’ll accomplish amazing things. Until that day, I will be right beside you, watching happily as you grow and mature. Let’s both give it our all, my lord!”

“Y-Yeah!”

The house leaders residing in my Jewel weren’t our only audience; the others seated in the caravan were staring at us as well. Their probing gazes felt like daggers to me. It was probably all too obvious to anyone who looked at us that Novem was a dedicated, incredible girl, while I was a useless deadweight.

A man seated behind us, who looked to be almost twenty, clicked his tongue and mumbled, “Show-off.”

Almost in unison, the founder also tasked and grumbled, “Weak promises like that don’t mean squat. If you’re a man, let your actions speak for ya!”

No matter what I did, it pissed him off. I was half-tempted to yank the Jewel from my neck and chuck it out the window.

## Chapter 6: Adventurers' Guild

To the east of Central was the territory the royal family ruled over directly, but if you followed the highway from Central west, you'd find yourself in Darion. Darion was the closest neighboring city, with its own liege lord to rule over it. It was a convenient location, but other highways were already being established, which weakened what value Darion had. For a time, it had become desolate.

That changed with the installation of a new liege lord, who soon put his reformation plans into action. Construction was underway all over the city to expand its borders. The word "deserted" hardly fit Darion anymore. If anything, the place looked alive with hustle and bustle. Indeed, Baron Lobernia's city was a hub of activity.

As I drank in the sights, my house's historical founders weighed in with their own opinions, each generational head taking turns and speaking in order from the founder to the seventh.

"This place is more alive than I was led to believe. Back in my day, this place was the envy of all; money just found its way here as if by magic."

"An unsurprising development after they added a highway linking it directly to Central. Being smack dab in the middle of the country next to the capital will do that. If you look at a map, the territory is much smaller than that of other lords, but it's been more than enough for Darion to flourish."

"Once you become a baron or higher, your expenses multiply. Depending on the circumstances, you can make a pretty good living as a baronet and receive preferable treatment from whatever house you pledge your loyalty to. The bigger your lands get, the harder it is to manage them. If anything, ruling over a baronetcy is much easier."

"That's rich coming from the man who pushed off the title of baron onto me... Anyway, I'm sure the lord here has his work cut out for him too, but since they've been passing it on for generations, I'll bet they've got their own group

of retainers to support them. I doubt it's more than they can handle."

"Being close to the capital makes Darion a key hub for traffic. If only they'd labored a little harder in the past few decades, then maybe they would have been able to expand their city more."

"No, that's not necessarily true. Since they are so close to the capital, it means good people can easily leave to go there instead. They must depend on the capital for a lot of support as well. Considering how important it is to keep good relations with Central, perhaps the liege lord here has it harder than we think."

"House Lobernia, huh? Not sure if it was the previous lord or the one before that, but I spoke with him several times. Struck me as naive and spoiled."

Each of them had their own values, influenced by the differing time periods they'd lived in.

After passing through the gate, the caravan came to a stop, and passengers began to disembark. Novem and I were navigating the narrow aisle to the exit, luggage in hand, when a man suddenly cut me off, smacking into me without a word of apology. I froze as I stared at him.

Behind me, Novem whispered, "Lord Lyle, there's a bunch of other people behind us waiting. Let's hurry and get off."

"Y-Yeah, I'm going."

Although the servants at our family estate had seemed to loathe me, they'd still made way for me to pass. That was why I was so stunned by how this man acted. I had no idea if this was par for the course with normal civilians or not, and as my mind reeled trying to grapple with the shift in my environment, all I could do was numbly shuffle along.

Once we climbed out of the caravan, I set my luggage down and stretched.

"Nice to be outside after being cooped up for hours," I said.

Novem glanced at me and smiled, picking up my things.

The second head cut in and warned, "Lyle, there's a lot of traffic through here. If you want to stop to catch your breath, save it until you're in a better

spot to do so. And while we're at it, don't set your luggage down so carelessly. Have a look at your surroundings."

I surveyed the area. There were children nearby watching us carefully. Their clothes were in tatters, their eyes watchful and wary. There was also a short man who was scanning the crowds around us.

"Ah!" I gasped.

I'd also located the man who'd pushed his way in front of me on the caravan moments ago. He'd put his luggage down and was locked in conversation with someone. The short man who'd been scrutinizing the disembarking passengers made his move, slipping right by the other man and relieving him of his luggage.

This place was lively, yes, but not all of the clamor was necessarily positive. Witnessing that incident taught me quickly that this was no place to let your guard down.

Exasperated, the founder said, "Protecting your belongings from thieves is the most basic of basics. You really don't know anything, do you? Tsk, tsk. The Walts sure are slacking on their education."

"Lyle's the heir of an earldom with an incredibly impressive lineage!" quipped the seventh head, in what I could only assume was an attempt to defend me. Although, the more he spoke, the less convinced I was that he was doing a good job of it. "It's only natural for someone of his personage to leave the small details to the lesser men around him."

"Problem is, there is no one else around him," the second head reminded him. "And now that he's been driven from his house, he's no longer an heir either, remember? In his situation, lacking basic common sense like this could be fatal."

The man had a point, I had to admit.

"Sorry, Novem. Let's hurry along," I urged. "It's already late. We'll head to the Guild tomorrow morning."

I took my luggage from her and started at a brisk pace. This place wasn't as bad as Central at least, but there was still plenty of dirt in the air. The smell was awful too.

Novem nodded and fell in step behind me.

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The next day, Novem and I left our things behind at the inn while we looked for Darion's Adventurers' Guild. We began making our inquiries on one of the busier streets, where we soon learned that one of the impressive buildings in the distance housed the Guild.

A group of three offered us this information. One of them was an older boy with short brown hair. He was covered in leather armor, and a sword hung at his waist. Mere seconds after Novem got the question out, he pointed us in the right direction. Novem must have thought to ask him because his equipment suggested he was probably an adventurer as well. At a glance, Rondo—that was his name—looked to be either a knight or a soldier, but considering he was in the company of two others, it was easy to guess he was an adventurer.

"See that there? That's the Adventurers' Guild here. It's actually pretty huge for a city this size."

The petite girl with him was carrying a wooden staff, her long, wavy green hair cascading past her shoulders. In light of the robe she was wearing, I assumed she was a mage. She looked willful and proud, but when she spoke, her voice was soft and gentle.

"We only came to Darion a couple of months ago. Actually, we became adventurers back in our hometown, but there wasn't much work to be found there. We somehow scraped together enough coin to pay for passage here. Looks like you guys are newbies too. You made a wise choice picking Darion to start out. You'll find plenty of work—missions, that is—here." She grinned. "Name's Rachel, by the way."

Rachel's guess about us being aspiring adventurers was right on the mark, so I nodded and confirmed her suspicions.

The third member of their group was much taller than his companions and carried a spear in his hand. He looked almost like a delinquent, especially with the short mohawk he was sporting. Ralph was his name, and at the mention of their hometown, he became nostalgic.

"Yeah, this is a nice place to work. We became adventurers back home, but the only work we could find were little errands or helping out people we knew. There were only a few missions we could pick up; the rest were all requests to dispatch monsters. Definitely feel more like adventurers now than we did then, since there's a lot more options for missions!"

Rondo and Rachel were kind enough to give us more info about the Guild itself as we walked toward the Guild.

"It's going to cost you to register yourself with the Guild. Granted, you can always borrow the money from them to do it. But then you'd better prepare yourself for them to take what you owe from whatever you earn."

Novem glanced between them and asked, "Do you all plan to continue working at the Adventurers' Guild here?"

Rachel shook her head. "Nah. We make enough to put food on the table, but we're gonna aim for more than just that. Figure we'll save up money here to get proper equipment. If you don't have a Demonic Tool, people think of you as low-ranking adventurers."

Really? Not having a Demonic Tool put you at the bottom of the hierarchy? It quickly occurred to me that I didn't have any such tool, but then I glanced down at the Jewel hanging around my neck. Unfortunately, it interfered with Demonic Tools, rendering them incapable of producing whatever Arts had been inscribed on them. I felt tempted by the idea of discarding this necklace in favor of a Demonic Tool.

Ralph grinned and lifted his spear high into the air. "That's right! We've got our sights set on something better! Once we finish up here in Darion, we're gonna go somewhere we can fight more monsters. We'll get ourselves more allies and then head for Baym! Once we get there, we'll aim to become the best of the best!"

Rachel averted her gaze, embarrassed by his declaration, in part because it had garnered the attention of other people around us.

"Well, there you have it," Rondo remarked, chuckling. "Our ultimate destination is the adventurer capital. But before that, we want to get some more experience here in Darion and grow. Like my companions said, we also

need to get better equipment and recruit more allies, but our true objective is to become first-rate adventurers.”

Rachel stole a glance at Rondo’s face, her cheeks coloring.

The way Rondo spoke was decidedly different than Ralph, even though the two young men shared the same dream.

“I hope you two will give it your best shot too,” said Rachel. “See? The entrance to the Guild is just up ahead.”

The building in question was three stories high and vast. The entrance was large enough that wagons were freely entering and exiting the place. Those walking nearby looked more like merchants than adventurers, though, and the first floor resembled something of a market. To my admittedly untrained eyes, it looked as though adventurers and merchants were buying and selling raw materials they’d recovered from monsters.

I pointed a finger in that direction and asked, “Um, why is the first floor of the building like some kind of market or warehouse?”

Everyone suddenly froze in place, Novem included. I could hear sighing from within the Jewel around my neck.

*Was it really that weird of a question?*

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Inside the guild, we made our way to the second floor where Rondo continued to fill us in on how it all worked.

“Raw monster materials are valuable resources, but the Guild doesn’t purchase them directly from adventurers. Occasionally, you may find a request asking for specific materials, but that’s a separate matter. The only thing they generally handle is the red stones you’ll find inside monsters’ bodies—Demonic Stones.”

“Demonic Stones have plenty of practical applications, you know,” Rachel declared proudly. “Hm, I think the simplest way to put it is that it’s basically a source of energy. Some Demonic Tools require them for power, and craftsmen also use them as well. Naturally, they’re a must-have when making a Demonic

Tool, so there's no demand shortage for them. They're the bread and butter for adventurers, you could say."

Ralph gave me a pointed look, as if he couldn't believe how ignorant I was, and added, "That's why the Guild only cares about Demonic Stones. Frankly, overseeing Demonic Stones is their main objective. I won't say managing us adventurers is only an afterthought to them, but it's definitely not their main priority. The whole reason that the Adventurers' Guild has grown into such a prominent organization like this is because they own the rights to Demonic Stones. Still, it's a real drag for us adventurers having to split up all the raw materials we get when killing monsters and trying to sell each piece off individually to interested buyers, so the Guild provides us with a convenient place to do it all in one go."

"You musta noticed there's a public bath right next door, yeah?" Rachel said. "They prefer you not to come here covered in blood, sweat, and grime. That's why most guilds are built right next to bathhouses."

"A decent explanation, if a bit oversimplified," commented the second head. "But he's slightly off the mark. There are Adventurers' Guilds spread throughout the continent, but it's not as though they all belong to a single organization."

"Lyle," he continued, "you'd best keep that in mind; no country or territory recognizes them as an official organization. They're a big enough threat to those in power because of their monopoly on Demonic Stones. Governments see them as a nuisance. Alas, they are a necessary evil, and someone does have to oversee the Demonic Stone trade. They may all employ the same basic rules for the most part, but each Guild is its own independent organization that cooperates with local authorities."

To sum up his rambling monologue, the Adventurers' Guild was not one single, enormous organization but rather a cluster of independent ones that acted together.

"I hate the Adventurers' Guild," seethed the seventh head. "It's a collection of bandits and mercenaries. That's all it is. They're supposed to keep tabs on the people they employ, *and* they're supposed to answer to local authorities, but they hide behind the weight of their monopoly and act with impunity. It haunts

me to think my beloved grandson is about to align himself with those rogues!"

Novem scanned the area even as she listened to Ralph's explanation.

At the reception counter on the second floor sat three receptionists. Each of them looked distinctly unique, and the lines that formed before them varied drastically in length.

"Lyle, you don't have any kind of weapon with you?" Rondo asked. "Doesn't look like you have a knife or anything."

I scratched my head. "Uh, I normally use a saber, but I don't have one right now. I was thinking about buying one later."

I'd already used a third of the money that Zel gave me during our trip here. Novem had been covering most of our expenses by this point, and if not for her aid, who knows how much I'd have left. The one thing I was fairly confident about was that the little bit we had left probably wouldn't cover the cost of a weapon.

Ralph nodded, seeming to sense what I was thinking. "I getcha. Yeah. Weapons sure are expensive. Rondo is a lucky bastard since he already had his own before we started."

"It's something my family gave me when I left. A farewell gift, if you will," Rondo said, furrowing his brows at his friend. "Besides, everything else I got for myself, didn't I? You're the one who blew all your pocket money. That's why a weapon was all you could afford."

Rachel cupped her chin and glanced at me. "A saber, huh? I'm not going to tell you it's a bad choice, but are you really hung up on it being a saber? If you plan to buy rather than have something forged, I think a short sword would suit you just as well. Spears are great too, but you could also copy Rondo's style and use a double-edged blade. Even if you can't cut through something, you can still bludgeon it over the head with the flat of your sword. What do you think?"

I'd tried out different weapons before, but my heart was set on a saber. I felt like it was the only thing I had left after Ceres stole everything else away. It was a reminder of the warm memories I'd once enjoyed with my family, if only because I'd gripped it everyday while training in hopes that I might someday

win their recognition again.

The house leaders residing in my Jewel seemed to intuit what I was feeling. Despite the rules we'd established against them speaking out on a whim, the founder flouted them and shared his take.

"There aren't any big, powerful monsters on the outskirts of this city, right? I think you'd be just fine with a weapon made of wood or stone here. Your fists might even be enough. 'Sides, I don't think you'd be able to handle a two-handed weapon anyhow."

"Lyle, I'd recommend a bow," the second head suggested, apparently preferring a ranged weapon. "Once you get used to wielding it, you can even fight with it in close-quarter combat."

"You sure about that?" asked the third head languidly. "I think he'd be better off sticking with what he knows."

"Considering the cost of a saber, why not opt for a short sword instead? There's no need for you to have a saber right this minute," said the fourth head.

The fifth head was apparently completely disinterested in the conversation because he didn't even bother to speak up, so the sixth head voiced his opinion next.

"The spear is a safe choice. If possible, a halberd would be best."

"If you were still at the estate, I'd tell you to take a rifle from my collection, but alas," lamented the seventh head. "Honestly, no one seems to appreciate how useful guns can be."

Come to think of it, the seventh head did have numerous types of guns hanging up on his bedroom wall when he was still alive. Were they still in operating condition after all these years? But even assuming I'd thought to bring one with me, where would I buy the ammunition for it? No matter how convenient he thought guns were, they presented too many obstacles.

It was then that I realized something—my house's historical leaders had values that sometimes radically opposed one another, and I also had to question whether their input was really optimal for my situation to begin with. It wasn't very helpful to consult them about things only to get wildly different

answers from each of them.

“Uh, um...” I stuttered, trying to think up a reply to Rachel’s question. “I’ll think about it. Right now, we need money before I can buy anything.”

Rondo grinned at me. “Good response. Nothing wrong with making a decision based on someone else’s input, but the most important thing is whether you feel comfortable with it or not. Of course, when your decision happens to be realistic, that’s great, but sometimes it’s not.”

As we chatted among ourselves, another group, glowering, clambered up some stairs and passed right by us. They were the unsavory types my grandfather had mentioned before, resembling thugs more than adventurers. Their bad attitudes managed to sour Ralph’s mood, but Rachel shot him a look and he relaxed his shoulders.

“These types weren’t here when we first came,” Rachel whispered as she eyed them. “But we’ve started to see their ilk around here more and more. It was one at first, then two, and now they seem to be taking requests as a group of five. Oh! Before I forget... Rondo, Ralph, we should go pick up a mission too.”

Rondo spun around and headed toward the bulletin board, which had various pieces of paper pinned on it. He waved a hand as he went, saying, “Good luck, you two.”

Novem bowed her head to them before turning back to me. “Lord Lyle, why don’t we go take care of our paperwork? It seems like we can register as adventurers at the counter over there.”

Of the three receptionists at the counter, the one on my left had blonde hair, blue eyes, and a blindingly brilliant smile. Nameplates sat in front of each of them. Hers read, “Santoire Maillet.” Considering she had a last name, she probably hailed from a decent family. Most of those lined up in front of her were young men. Her line was also the longest.

The woman in the center was middle-aged but with a good physique. Meletta—the name indicated by her placard—was swiftly dispensing with the paperwork. Her line was moving steadily. Those waiting for her assistance consisted of women and battle-hardened adventurer types. Her line was the second longest.

The line on the far right was the shortest. A beefy, muscular man sat behind a nameplate that read “Hawkins.” Through the fabric of his shirt, you could tell he was chiseled. He had tanned skin and red hair cropped short. He was easily the fiercest looking of them all.

Having assessed each of them, I started toward the center, judging the middle-aged woman to be the safest option.

I barely made it two steps before the second head interjected, “Lyle, I’d pick the one farthest to the right if I were you—that intimidating man. Whatever you do, you’d best not go to the left. And that’s not because I think it’d be rude to pick a beauty like that when you have Novem with you. I simply think she’d be a terrible choice. The woman in the middle isn’t awful, I guess, but what you need right now is the receptionist on the right.”

I hesitated, thinking over his suggestion, and finally picked the one on the right. Part of the benefit of choosing him was that his line was the shortest, but the bigger reason was because none of the other house leaders chimed in to contradict what the second had said.

Novem stared at me in shock. “I didn’t expect you to pick this line. I was certain you’d go with the woman in the middle.”

“Yeah. That’s who I was going to pick at first.”

She smiled. “Well, I was actually going to recommend the man on the right as well. He seems the most courteous, which is exactly what we need since we’re new at this.”

Surveying our choice further, I noticed that while he did look intense, he conducted himself with a smile. Novem was right to call him courteous.

“Well, then that settles it,” I said.

We made our way to his queue. The fact that his line was the shortest gave the impression that maybe there was a problem with him—hence why people chose the other two—but the biggest problem was actually the beauty to the left, Santoire.

I glanced over at her. The man she was currently dealing with had shabby equipment. While I couldn’t judge whether he was attractive or not, he clearly

wasn't Santoire's type; she'd worn a smile with him at first, but she rapidly began to lose all interest in him.

"You have completed your mission, I see. I shall hand over your reward then. But first, the loan you owe the Guild is adding up, isn't it? I'll make sure what you owe is taken from your payment."

At the mention of his loan, the man panicked. "H-Hold on just a second. My friend is injured. I need money to pay his recovery fees. Could you maybe limit how much you take out to just ten percent this time?" he pleaded.

Santoire didn't look the least bit interested in his excuses. She continued filling out some paperwork as she replied, "I've already written it down, so I'm afraid it can't be changed now. Anyway, here is what you're due." She placed a silver coin and silver plate down in front of him.

The man continued pleading, unwilling to give up so easily, but that only incensed those who were stuck waiting behind him.

"How long are you gonna keep this up? Can't you see you're upsetting the poor girl!"

"Yeah, hurry up and get a move on!"

"Sannie, is he giving you too much trouble?"

While those behind him heated up in her defense, the man bit his lip in frustration and took what she offered. Then, as if fleeing, he scrambled out of there as quickly as he could.

The next person to step up in front of Santoire was apparently exactly her type. Her attitude with him was noticeably different. He was wearing quality garments and looked like a professional adventurer. The man planted a piece of paper on the desk between them—one he'd apparently retrieved from the bulletin board—and informed her that he was looking to take on a new mission.

"Sannie, the sun's barely up, and already you've got weirdos trying to pick a fight with you. You really have it rough. If you need anything, just say the word. I'll be right over to help."

"Thank you so much," she said. "Oh, and about this request. I'd suggest you

skip it. The reward they're offering is below normal market value. We have similar missions like this with a better payout available."

"Really? Man, you're always saving my hide like this." He chuckled.

After watching the whole encounter, my main takeaway was that women could be terrifying.

The second head's voice filtered into my ear from the Jewel around my neck.

"That Santoire girl is bad news. She's slow as a snail, and her people skills stink. Lyle probably looks handsome enough she'd be nice to him, but she also strikes me as the type who brings trouble with her wherever she goes. Best to give her a wide berth."

The third head snickered. "It is pretty textbook to have a beautiful receptionist handle new adventurers, though. Too bad reality isn't so sweet. Hey, Lyle, you're up next, bud."

Indeed, my reality was a man so ripped that he looked like he was wearing a muscle suit under his clothes. He was *buff and intimidating*. Yet when he looked up at us, he smiled.

"Oh, are you beginners? Here to register yourselves as adventurers?"

"Th-That's right," I replied.

Hawkins nodded and promptly pulled out some paperwork and equipment. As he worked, he added, "If you're registering together, I would recommend applying to form a party right away. Is that all right with the two of you?"

At the mention of "party," I tilted my head in confusion.

Novem advanced a step, standing shoulder to shoulder with me as she answered, "Yes, please do so. As for the registration fee..."

"The rules of the Guild are five silver coins per registrant, which would mean one gold coin for the both of you. If you're unable to pay upfront, you may borrow the money from the Guild. Be warned that there is interest if you go that route, so you will ultimately pay about six silver coins per person if you do."

Novem fished around in her wallet and produced a gold coin, which she passed over to Hawkins.

"We'll pay upfront," she said.

"Thank you. Now then, there are some columns on this paper you need to fill out. I would like you to do it yourself, if possible, but are you able to write? If you need me to do so in your place, that's fine too."

We each took one of the documents he held out and began writing in our names with the provided ink pens. There were questions about our birthplace and whatnot—the stereotypical questions you'd find on these sorts of forms—and we quickly went through and answered each one. Once we were finished, we handed them back to Hawkins.

He glanced them over and nodded. "You both have lovely handwriting, Mister Lyle Walt and Miss Novem Fuchs. So you hail from Vice? Ah, yes, I know where that is."

Hawkins paused to scribble something on our documents. I'd been on tenterhooks the entire time, wondering if he might mention something about our last names. Much to my surprise, he said nothing, instead launching into an explanation.

"Allow me to give you the rundown. Starting now, the two of you will be adventurers, and Darion's Adventurers' Guild will be registered as your home location. If you wish to change home locations to a different branch, you will need to submit a Move-Out Notification form. Once approved, you will need to take that form to the new location where you wish to register and submit a Move-In Notification form there. Though there are some exceptions, in general you are only able to take on missions from your registered home location."

Hawkins looked us straight in the face as he relayed all that information in an easy-to-digest manner. He paused briefly to confirm we understood before moving on. It quickly became clear that Novem and the second head had been wise to suggest Hawkins.



"Next, I should explain to you how Guild cards work. These are plates made of rare metal. Please, don't ever lose yours. I don't care if you pass out in the middle of a dungeon, make sure it doesn't swallow up your card. Your details as an adventurer are recorded on this throughout the course of your career. These are only offered to you on loan through the Guild, so please do not think of selling it off. You'll incur penalties if you do. In the event that it does go missing somehow, please submit a request for a reissuance as soon as possible. You will be charged for that, however, so if at all possible, try not to misplace it."

He placed four plates down in front of us. When I inquired why there were so many, he explained that each person had two and would have to smear their blood on them to officially register. One copy would be entrusted to us, while the other was kept secure at the Guild. Hawkins also reiterated that information about us would be engraved on the card. When an adventurer died, a horizontal line would appear across their name. That allowed the Guild to keep track of casualties.

"That's a convenient little tool they have," commented the fourth head. "I assume it's a type of Demonic Tool. Too bad it's limited to this kind of use. If this sort of technology became more widespread, I think it'd be more beneficial for everyone." The fact that his interest was so piqued indicated that no such thing had existed in his time.

The founder, on the other hand, failed to see what was so impressive about these cards. "Yeah? But the only thing it can do is tell ya if someone died or not. Besides, if this thing really does record everything like this guy says, they're gonna run outta room to write on it pretty quickly."

Actually, the information was stored not on the surface of the card itself, which was about the same size as the palm of my hand, but rather *inside* the card. I tried explaining as much, but the founder still didn't seem to grasp the concept.

"Lightly prick the end of your finger and make sure the blood makes it onto the cards," Hawkins instructed as he handed us each a needle. "As for your names, we'll be engraving those on the cards ourselves. Oh, and once you're finished, you can wipe off the blood with this cloth and apply this ointment on

your finger."

Novem took the needle and lightly pressed it against the tip of her finger until a bead of blood began to swell. She then smeared it on the silver Guild cards. I followed her lead and did the same. I felt a slight twinge of pain as the needle broke my skin. After I'd wiped my blood on each plate, they began to emit a rainbow-colored light.

Once Hawkins confirmed we'd followed his instructions, he placed our documents on a tray and lined up the Guild cards on top before leaving his seat. He carried them out the door behind him. We watched his hulking figure recede as we wiped the blood from our fingers.

"You know, he's not at all like I'd have expected when I first saw him. He's very polite and kind," I said.

Novem nodded in agreement. Once she finished cleaning off her own finger and applying ointment to it, she reached over to do the same with mine. Apparently, she felt my way of doing it was too half-hearted, which was why she'd stepped in.

"Yes, it's good for us that his explanations are so detailed and easy to understand. There are a few questions I would like to ask. There's still much I don't know about adventurers."

Novem's top-class education unfortunately hadn't covered the ins and outs of being an adventurer.

The second head eavesdropped on our conversation and commented, "Such a wonderful girl. Very prudent and thoughtful. She's more than adequate to be Lyle's bride, no?"

The word "bride" instantly evoked reactions from the other house leaders, particularly because the Walts had certain qualifications when it came to marriage. If a woman didn't meet those, then she wasn't eligible to wed a Walt man. Each of our house leaders had remained faithful to those rules over the years.

Meanwhile, the third head's attention was drawn to a small signboard on top of the counter.

"Huh, they've got something intriguing going on here. See? It says, 'Interested in having a veteran adventurer offer you guidance?'"

I glanced at it, and Novem noticed me looking. She followed my gaze.

"So this caught your attention as well? It's been weighing on my mind since I spotted it earlier. It would be a valuable opportunity for us, having a veteran show us the ropes. Especially since we're still new at this."

The signboard mentioned this was a service for novices provided by recognized Guild veterans. There were two program options, each lasting for a three-month period. The first just involved basic guidance in Darion, while the second offered a specialized instructor who could even aid in battle.

For the former option, the fees incurred would be paid with each successful mission, amounting to the instructor taking half of the total reward money. That was a huge portion, admittedly, but considering we didn't know the first thing about adventuring, it'd be a big boon if we had a Guild-recognized adventurer to advise us.

The latter arrangement had the same three-month term, but it required a down payment of twenty gold coins. I was a little shocked at how ridiculously expensive that was. Perhaps the service was so significant that it warranted such a price tag, but I didn't know enough about the value of these things to judge one way or another.

"Since we don't really know what we're doing at all, it'd probably be a smart idea to have someone who does instruct us. How about we apply?" I suggested.

My house leaders were split on it.

The founder huffed disinterestedly. "I don't see any point in somethin' like that. You're just gonna go out, beat down some monsters, and walk back to the city, yeah?"

"I think having someone knowledgeable assist you is a wise choice," said the second head, who was more in favor of the idea than his predecessor. "Far better a choice than trying to resolve everything with brute force like some fool we all know."

"What was that?!" the founder roared back.

Ignoring their squabbling, the seventh head cut in with his own very different viewpoint.

“Even assuming this person is someone recognized by the Guild, no doubt it’ll be some lowlife who’s only slightly ahead of the rest of his ilk. But I’ll bet you anything he’s no less unsavory than his peers.”

“Please, be quiet, all of you,” interrupted the fourth head. “It was only yesterday that we decided we would keep our chatter to a minimum. Moreover, there’s no harm in hearing more about this program before we make our final decision on it. Lyle, I would like you to confirm the finer details of this arrangement and whether you’re able to cancel at any point should you choose to do so.”

My fingers brushed over the Jewel around my neck as I glanced at Novem and suggested, “Actually, how about we ask Hawkins for more information first?”

“Yes, good idea. It would be best to learn everything we can about it so that we can make an informed decision.”

Only seconds later, Hawkins reappeared and took his seat at the counter. He placed down the tray he’d been carrying, which now had only two plates. One had Novem’s name engraved on it, while the other had mine. There were also a couple of pamphlets entitled *Adventuring 101: Basics for Beginners*.

“Apologies for the wait. Here are your Guild cards. This pamphlet here will give you a rundown on the basics. Please be sure to glance through it. It explains how to accept missions and what manners are expected of you.” He flashed a smile at us.

We took our respective cards and the pamphlets before pointing at the little signboard on the counter.

“Um, would you mind explaining a bit more about this mentorship program?” I asked. “Specifically, the basic option.”

The smile never left Hawkins face as he launched into another explanation.

“They teach you the foundations, such as how to accept missions the Guild posts, as well as how to mentally prepare yourself before setting off to do your work. While you get ready to set out, they’ll give you a rundown on how to

defeat monsters, as well as how to extract materials from them.”

So, as was advertised, you’d get a mentor to show you the basics for three months. Most mentors were apparently in their thirties, had houses of their own, and had carved out a space for themselves here in Darion. By employing locally, the Guild ensured no mentor would be foolish enough to do anything that would make them an enemy of the Guild.

Once Hawkins finished relaying that information to us, Novem asked, “Would you mind telling us a little more about this second type? The specialized one.”

“It goes without saying, of course, that the mentors in this part of the program are also recognized by the Guild, but on top of that, we’ve picked only our absolute finest to offer newbies like you guidance. These specialists don’t merely operate around the perimeter of Darion, so they’re a great option for those adventurers who wish to make their fortune a little farther from the city’s borders.”

Novem nodded thoughtfully but continued pressing him.

“I assume the more expensive cost is representative of how much more involved their mentorship is, but why exactly is it so much steeper than the basic option? The time period for both is exactly the same.”

Unbothered by her questions, Hawkins politely elaborated.

“The biggest difference is the level of ability and specialization this type of mentor has. Among all those the Guild has recognized, these elite adventurers are able to handle some of the most fearsome of monsters, such as orcs. Their considerable prowess in battle is the reason why it costs more than the other option. In the basic program, since fees are taken directly out of your mission reward, the mentor you have overseeing you may change from day to day.”

In general, once novices learned the basics, they’d start scrounging up what money they could themselves and find comrades to join them. Then, as a larger group, they would split the cost to cover hiring a specialized mentor. That was how most people were able to afford this more expensive option.

Having heard all Hawkins had to say, I made my decision.

“In that case, put us down for the basic—”

Before I could finish, Novem had already fished out her wallet and produced twenty gold coins. She put them down on the tray in front of us. I had to do a double take, but sure enough, there were twenty coins there.

“Uh...? Um, Novem?” I squeaked.

Hawkins was similarly gobsmacked by her actions.

“Um, Miss Novem? Wouldn’t it be better to go with the basic type, given how new you both are?”

Despite garnering protest from both of us, Novem promptly shook her head.

“No,” she answered. “If our mentor is going to change by the day, that will make it impossible to establish any rapport. Besides, I am positive having one of the Guild’s best guiding us will be a far better source of encouragement for Lord Lyle. I consider it an investment for the future. I have only one question: if we determine that this person doesn’t live up to our standards, are we able to cancel?”

Although still a bit flabbergasted at the abruptness of it all, Hawkins managed to nod. “Assuming you have a legitimate reason for doing so, the Guild will refund your money. Although, all those in the specialized part of the mentorship program are proficient enough to ensure you won’t have to consider that. Having said all that...are you sure about this?”

Before I could suggest we think it over first, Novem cut me off by bobbing her head and saying, “Absolutely. It’s a necessary expense for us.”

Once Hawkins realized that she’d already made her mind up, he gave up trying to talk her out of it and began the process for finalizing our admittance into the program. First, however, he started by giving us a few warnings.

“I will accept your fee, then. It will be registered with the Guild as a formal request for a veteran adventurer to offer you guidance. The two of you will be the final judges of their performance as a mentor, though. The finer details of all that is something you’ll learn in due time, I’m sure, but if you have any questions later on, feel free to ask for clarification.”

I hadn’t expected that. It seemed we would be the ones to make the final call on how well this person fulfilled their duties. They certainly couldn’t afford to

slack off. Still, I had to talk to Novem about all of this.

“Novem, are you sure you’re not going overboard here? You’re the one who told me how precious money is.”

“My lord, we know next to nothing about being adventurers, and there are only two of us. Money may be important, but so is learning the basics and getting them right the first time. Having an excellent mentor will help us do just that. Besides, this is only a small upfront investment for your future, nothing more.”

True, there was much to be anxious about since we only had each other to rely on. I had no choice but to nod in agreement with what she said.

Hawkins kept his gaze fixed on us as he remarked, “It seems you’ve thought it through and made up your minds. Now, we at the Guild will select someone who will best suit the two of you. It will require some preparations on our part, so I must ask you to return the day after tomorrow at eight in the morning. You will meet your mentor then, and assuming both sides agree to the arrangement, your mentorship will begin that day.”

While I was in a confused daze, Hawkins wrapped up the proceedings with an almost feverish haste. He launched into the particulars, explaining everything to Novem while I could do nothing but look on numbly. My inaction naturally prompted commentary from the gallery inside my Jewel.

“Hey, is it just me or is Lyle being worse than normal right now?” muttered the third head. “I mean, he looks totally worthless.”

The founder grumbled, “What he looks like is a parasite attached to poor little Novem.”

## Chapter 7: Mentally Broken

After wrapping up our business at the Guild, we did some grocery shopping. It was a bit early for lunch, but we went ahead and ate out anyway before we made our way back to the inn. Naturally, the moment we were settled in, we started reviewing the pamphlets Hawkins had given us.

An awkward silence settled over the room. Or, at least, it would have seemed silent to anyone else; I had my house's historic leaders buzzing in my ear, making me anxious. Having already scanned the contents of the pamphlet, they were having a conniption about it. I say "they," but the primary culprit was the founder.

"Don't cause trouble for others,' huh? That's the kinda advice you give kids, not adventurers!"

"Do you have any idea how many people out there can't even follow that basic kind of advice?" the second head interjected, sounding utterly exasperated. He didn't even try to placate his predecessor, opting instead to ridicule him. "If this sort of thing were so simple that a child could do it, then we wouldn't have bandits and thugs and the like. And while we're on that topic, maybe you should look in a mirror before you say things like that, you witless fool."

"Are you tryin' to say even a kid is smarter than me? Fine, let's take this outside!"

"We can't go 'outside,' remember? And if you've gained some self-awareness, then please demonstrate it by shutting your mouth. You're going to sap Lyle of all his mana and make him pass out."

While I appreciated the second head trying to be the voice of reason, he made it sound like I was some kind of delicate maid. In truth, I'd honed my body, and I had a bigger mana pool than most my age. It only looked pitiful to their eyes because they were each around thirty years old, putting them in the prime of their lives. At least, that was what I wanted to believe.

"Well, in many things, it's the basics that tend to be the hardest to master," said the third head, chuckling to himself. He was clearly trying to placate the other two who'd already started making digs at each other. "Besides, there are lots of kids out there who feel the urge to do something once they're told not to. Adults aren't much different. Even I'm no exception—I did some stuff way back in my day. Stuff that I can never take back." His tone turned melancholic at the end, which was rare given how detached he always sounded.

Novem finished browsing her pamphlet and carefully tucked it into her newly purchased bag. Even though she'd finished reading the contents, it seemed she intended to keep it on hand for future reference.

"I've grasped the basics of undertaking missions, as well as what rules and manners are expected of adventurers," she said, "but there is still much we won't know until we actually do the work ourselves."

I shared her sentiments. Yes, the pamphlet contained rudimentary guidelines and tips, but that was all there was. "Don't cause trouble for the residents of Darion or the Guild. Don't upset the person who submitted the mission through the Guild. Rule violators will be punished." That was basically all it said. If they did pen down all the particulars of being an adventurer, they'd probably fill enough pages to have an entire book.

I finished reading the pamphlet as well and set it to the side on the bed I was already sitting on. Novem pulled a face at me, grabbed it, and stowed it away in my bag. My eyes followed her, and the question that had been weighing on my mind finally found its way to my mouth.

"Hey Novem, about that money..."

I barely got those words out before the men inside my Jewel intervened to stop me.

"Lyle, wait!" interrupted the fourth head in a panic. "Hold on a second. You can't ask that. No, I mean, I get why you're doing it, but you can't make her talk about it. It'll only make you and the rest of us feel terribly guilty."

The founder, meanwhile, was as clueless as I was. "What's the problem?" he demanded. "The girl's got a ridiculous amount of coin on her, sure, but House Fuchs is a barony now, yeah? Not so strange for her to have so much on hand

then, is it?"

From the quizzical look on his face, the second head appeared to be of the same mind, though he looked none too pleased to be agreeing with his predecessor.

"True," the third head muttered. "You do have a point. If they're a barony, then..." He trailed off as he gasped in realization.

Up until the end of the second head's rule over House Walt, the Fuchsses had occupied the lowest seat of the nobility as mere knights. Their fortunes improved somewhat during the third head's rule when they were raised to the status of baronetcy. While it had taken the third head a moment to arrive at his epiphany, the historic leaders who'd succeeded him were already on the same page.

"Don't tell me," the third head muttered to himself in a mixture of disbelief and consternation.

Novem looked conflicted as well as she glanced at me and answered, "Please don't worry about the money. It wasn't earned through illicit means."

That only stoked my curiosity more. Not knowing why the other house leaders seemed reluctant to elaborate or let me ask the question, I couldn't help but blurt out what popped into my head.

"Did your house give you that money?"

"Lyle, don't you dare ask that!" the sixth head roared. "Listen, boy, you need to think before you speak!"

Novem looked the most unsettled I'd ever seen her since our trip began. It finally dawned on me that they were right; I'd asked something inappropriate. I opened my mouth to reassure her that she didn't have to say anything she didn't want to, but she beat me to the punch.

"I did receive some financial aid from my parents. I didn't think it would be enough, so I sold off all of the furniture and clothes that had been prepared for my engagement to supply extra funds. I...couldn't bear to trouble my family any more than I already had."

“I suspected that was the case,” the seventh head muttered. “Her previous engagement to Lyle and status as a baron’s daughter may sound impressive enough, but she’s only the second eldest. It struck me as odd she was carrying so much money around with her.”

The other leaders soon noisily joined the conversation, ignoring the fact that their chatter would be a drain on my mana.

“Hold it,” said the founder, a tremor in his voice. “Hold on a second here. What you’re tryin’ to say is...little Novem here sold off all the stuff her family’d prepared for her marriage and then tagged along with Lyle? And has been using every last coin she’s got to her name for his sake?”

The second head was noticeably shaken as he commented, “Y-You know, in my day, families put a lot of effort into preparing a bride’s trousseau. As a girl, aren’t those items pretty important? Or have the times changed that much since I was alive?” He seemed eager for the others to chime in and reassure him it was a generational gap.

Alas, the seventh head bluntly dismissed his suggestion. “A decade has admittedly passed since I was alive, but in my time, a woman’s trousseau represented all the assets she possessed. They’re very important, especially for a woman who hasn’t yet married. I suppose...Novem must care a lot about Lyle if she went as far as to sell hers off.” He lapsed into thought while the others around him erupted in a fuss.

“How can you fools act so damn calm about this, huh?!” snapped the founder. “Pops, I can’t say how sorry I am that my descendant is giving yours such grief!”

This “pops” person wasn’t actually his grandfather but rather a member of House Fuchs who’d looked after him, as I understood it.

“Oh, sworn brother of mine,” lamented the second head, who felt similarly indebted to the Fuchs. “I am truly, truly sorry. I swear I will find some way to set this right.”

“Ahh, Sis really lucked out with some amazing descendants,” the third head remarked—presumably referring to a woman not related to him but part of House Fuchs, like the other two. “And to think my own descendant has done nothing but heckle hers. At this point, the only thing we can do is have Lyle put

in his best effort to repay her.”

To be perfectly frank, I was the only one of our number who didn’t actually feel indebted to the Fuchs. My historic house leaders, on the other hand, each owed them for some reason or another.

The fifth head, who’d been silent up until this point, clapped his hands noisily to silence the others. Once they quieted down, he said, “Nothing to be done about something she’s already sold, and it was Novem’s choice to pawn the stuff off. If we’re to make sure her efforts don’t go to waste, then Lyle needs to aim to be the top adventurer in the Guild. That’s the only thing he can do now. Besides, if he starts earning enough money, he could always buy her a new wardrobe and furniture. Let’s have a more productive conversation instead of moaning and groaning.”

“Yes, well, it’s the wardrobe and furniture she’s already sold that’s the problem,” the fourth head insisted. If the topic was money, he became more talkative than usual. “We’ve established that she’s the second daughter, yes? But she *was* slated to marry into an earldom like House Walt, which is well above her normal station. I suspect her family must have ensured her belongings were of appropriate quality. Who can say what kind of fortune they must have spent to acquire such things.”

Spurred on by that line of thought, the sixth head fell into quiet contemplation before offering his impressions. “Her family had several years to spend funding this venture. If we consider that they would’ve tried to collect items that appealed to Novem’s taste while also maintaining a level of quality expected from her new position... Well, needless to say, the arrangement may have been a bit financially overwhelming for a mere barony.”

His words only increased the horror that the founder, the second head, and the third head—and I as well at this point—already felt. Now that he’d spelled out in no uncertain terms how much I’d not only inconvenienced Novem but her family as well, the founder erupted in a screaming fit.

“G-Get your ass outside and start taking down monsters! Sell what you can! Strip those monsters down and pawn off everything! You gotta cobble together whatever coin you can, boy. If...if you start now, then maybe you can still buy

back her—”

“Not possible,” interrupted the seventh head. “The monsters described in the pamphlet that infest the local area won’t fetch much of a price. Even if he scrambled, his efforts would amount to little more than a drop in the bucket.”

The way they were squawking back and forth was rapidly depleting my mana. I could already feel the exhaustion weighing me down. It was only a little past noon, and already my mind was becoming sluggish and my thoughts disorganized.

“Lord Lyle, are you all right?” Novem asked worriedly, having noticed my state. “Please don’t concern yourself. I did all of this of my own volition. Besides, if selling off all of my bridal assets means I’m able to help your dreams come true, then I have no regrets at all.”

All that did was pour oil on the proverbial fire.

“Stop it, Novem!” wailed the third head. “I’m drowning in guilt already! Oh, what an amazing girl this one is. She’s really wasted on Ly—”

His voice cut off, and suddenly, I couldn’t hear anything from inside the Jewel. It seemed my dwindling mana had reached its final limit. I, meanwhile, had reached an emotional one. I felt completely useless, and the house leaders hadn’t missed the opportunity to pelt me with criticism once again. On top of all of that, here was Novem, sacrificing herself for my sake.

I couldn’t take it anymore.

“Why?” I demanded.

“Sorry?”

“Why do you go that far for me? You realize my parents completely abandoned me, don’t you?!”

“But I...”

I knew I was lashing out at her unfairly. She’d done so much for me, and I was repaying her kindness with misplaced spite. But I couldn’t stop myself now. The tears were already welling in my eyes.

“Having come this far with me, you surely get it by now. I don’t know

anything. I can't do anything by myself! Whatever it is you expect of me, you're only going to be disappointed. So why dedicate yourself to me, huh? My parents ran me out of the house. No one's ever going to pay me any attention. It's...it's pointless doing this for a guy like me!"

As I erupted in tears and roared at her, Novem just watched me. Her expression was earnest, and she had a hand pressed over her chest. Once she saw an opportunity to respond, she said, "You're an amazing person, Lord Lyle. Even after you were ostracized by your family at the Walts' estate, you still strove to improve yourself. You did everything you could. Instead of fleeing, you tried to face the problem head-on, did you not?"

She was probably referring to the way I stood my ground against Ceres. But unlike Novem, I *did* see what I'd done as basically running away.

"The end result is the same," I insisted. "I lost to Ceres, and my parents gave up on me! Everyone else was disgusted with me too. I'm a stain on House Walt, they say! A total failure! If I was such an eyesore, maybe it would've been better if I *did* run away sooner. I struggled in vain 'cause I thought one day my efforts would pay off. But look. It was all meaningless!"

The words I screamed at Novem were ones I'd kept locked away deep inside. I was terrified—terrified of Ceres, of the way my parents abandoned me. And ashamed too. I was also worried that the other people around me would walk away. Desperate for recognition, I kept up with my sword training and honed my magical abilities. I studied by myself, flipping through books to shore up my knowledge. Not that it mattered. It was all meaningless in the end.

"Even if you sacrifice everything you have for me, it still won't amount to anything. I have absolutely no value. Get that through your thick skull already. And...don't make me feel any more pathetic than I already do!"

Even I realized how cruel it was to say such a thing after how much she'd done for me. But if hurting Novem was enough to convince her to abandon me, then that would probably be the happier route for her in the end.

My thoughts were still in a tangle. My emotions weren't faring much better either. If things weren't bad enough, I was completely out of mana and mentally broken to boot.

I plopped back onto the bed, having stood at some point while I was yelling at Novem, and dropped my gaze to my lap. Tears streamed down my cheeks.

*This is pathetic*, I told myself. But even though I knew that, crying was the only thing I could do.

Novem left her seat and made her way over to me, gently wrapping her arms around my body. My face was practically buried in her ample breasts.

“I have been watching you,” she said.

“Huh?”

I tried to move, but her arms held fast. While I couldn’t get a good look at her face to gauge her emotions, her voice was soft and gentle.

“I watched you the entire time,” Novem reiterated. “I can’t count how many times I saw you at your family’s estate, working hard all by yourself. Sometimes I called over to you, but you were so immersed, desperately trying to improve yourself, that you didn’t seem to have a spare moment to spend on me.”

Her words dredged up memories of the past. She was right; I spent every minute of every day on training and reading books, perpetually convinced that none of it was ever enough. I was probably loath to waste even a minute talking to other people back then. Reflecting on it now, I should have been more cognizant of my surroundings.

“Besides,” Novem went on, “you reached out to me at times when we were younger. This was many years ago now; the other kids had gathered to play, and I was ostracized, left to play on my own. But you would always call over to me. There were other instances too. I was so happy when the topic of our engagement came up. I swore to myself that I would support you in your future endeavors.”

“Many years ago, huh? My memory from back then is so fuzzy that I don’t really remember. I guess maybe I did do something like that.”

I had a vague sense that what she’d described really had transpired, but after my tenth birthday, I’d found myself in such a harsh environment that everything before then turned into a blur. Perhaps that too was a side effect brought on by Ceres’s strange influence. And since I couldn’t perfectly recall

what Novem described, it sounded more like she was talking about a stranger than me.

"You *do* have value, Lord Lyle. I believe that from the bottom of my heart."

"How could I have any value when no one would ever look at me?" I grumbled back.

"I looked at you," Novem reminded me. "And from this day forward, I will always be at your side."

"Everyone else said that too before they abandoned me! They looked at me, *then* decided to turn their backs! What's wrong with you? Ceres is clearly superior to me! You should just pick her side like all the others... Why humiliate yourself by hanging out with a guy like me? A guy who lost to his own little sister."

Her embrace was still strong as ever, holding me in place. Before she spoke, she leaned down so that her words trickled directly into my ear. "Lord Lyle?"

Sulking, I reluctantly snapped, "What?"

"Whatever kind of person you are, I will still be by your side. I have been in love with you for many years now. I won't ask you to return my affections. I only ask that you allow me to offer mine. That is more than enough for me."

"Novem, I..."

"In my eyes, you are worthy of my dedication. And that's my choice to make. That also means that you *do* have value as a person. Yes, House Walt is important, but you're no less important to me. So, Lord Lyle, let's strive together this time for a better future."

The tears came harder as I squeaked out, "Okay." At least this time they were happy tears.

When was the last time someone needed me or even wanted me as strongly as Novem did right now? I couldn't recall a single instance, not at the moment, anyway. And as Novem cradled me in her warm embrace, keeping me tucked against her voluptuous chest, I drifted into sleep.

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“No one notices poor Lyle, boo-hoo!”

Inside the Jewel, I felt my cheeks heat up as three men stood atop the round table as they danced. The third head was in the middle with the second head and founder flanking him. They were all swaying as they paraphrased the words I’d spoken earlier in a singsong.

“But little Novem’s at your side, woo-hoo!” sang the second head.

The founder belted out, “What’ve you got to be sad for, you fool? Don’t take her kindness for granted!”

It was almost like they couldn’t decide whether they merely wanted to poke fun at me or lambast me for my behavior.

The fourth head watched them with a look of exasperation. As he pressed his index finger against the bridge of his glasses, pushing them up his nose, his gaze turned to me. He cleared his throat. “Ahem, well, I think you get the point. It would be best if you tried to be more confident in yourself.”

Everyone else regarded me tepidly. Apparently, during that embarrassing exchange only moments ago, they could still watch what was happening even though I couldn’t hear their commentary. The humiliation was so overwhelming that my cheeks turned as red as the ripest tomato. I covered my face with my hands.

“You’ve got it all wrong,” I insisted. “I only said all that because my mana ran out, and my emotions got the best of me. It’s not like I’m that way all the time.”

The founder wasn’t inclined to believe my excuses. “You think you’re embarrassed? All we did was watch, and we still feel like cringin’. You oughta take a page from Novem’s book, boy. What’s wrong with you? Blubberin’ like a newborn babe!”

No one else really bought my defense either. While the fourth head busied himself trying to coax the three on the table to get down and return to their seats, the seventh head—my grandfather—chimed in, attempting to back me up.

“I bet you must’ve been feeling pretty lonely, eh, Lyle? Don’t forget, though. You’re not alone anymore. And you need to get stronger.”

He was right about that. I wasn't alone. I had Novem with me now, and when I awoke again, it would be a new day. We'd finally have an official instructor to oversee us, and we could start operating as legitimate adventurers. There was no point waffling anymore.

"I realize that," I said. "I know I need to work hard from now on, and I also need to repay Novem the debt I owe her."

The sixth head glanced at me. "Ahem, Lyle, it seems you still don't quite grasp your situation. By saying you're not alone anymore, we don't mean that you should look after Novem as if she's your charge. We mean you're a family."

I stared at him. "Huh? Um...by family..."

"Make her your wife," the fifth head said bluntly. He sounded irritable, but like usual, he remained aloof. The only difference now was that his words were more commanding, as if he wouldn't brook any dissent. "I will be frank. You will find no one better than this girl. Not to mention, she sold her precious bridal wardrobe and furniture for your sake. Abandoning her isn't an option. And you don't hate Novem, do you?"

"N-No. I-I like her."

The third head nodded, back to his usual detached self as he remarked, "You and her seem to agree on that point, which means there should be no problem with your union. Not that there's any traditions for you to follow since you've been disinherited, but since you *are* the rightful heir, you could always start fresh somewhere and continue the family line. Anyway, it'd be pretty tough to find another bride. Especially if you are conscious of our house's rules, which are admittedly strict. I personally think it's a good idea too, since I'd like to see some of the Fuchs' blood mixed with ours."

"If you'll remember, I personally searched for a fitting bride for you," the second head snapped at him, hackles raised. "Have you any idea how difficult it was finding a woman with the proper qualifications?"

The seventh head was also in favor of this proposal. "Well, the two of you *were* engaged, and she has gone out of her way for you. The Fuchs have been loyal retainers. I'm sure they will continue to be as well. Lyle, you had better make Novem happy. If you want to demonstrate your sincerity, that is the best

way to do it.”

“Indeed,” agreed the sixth head with a nod. “Well, even if she didn’t meet our house’s requirements, none of us would stop you from marrying her. If anything, those requirements are a hindrance.”

He was referring to House Walt’s rules—the hefty qualifications they placed on the heir’s future bride. These rules were created during the founder’s time, and each successive generation had held fast to them. Yet one man among our number was cocking his head in confusion—the founder himself.

“What’re you guys yammerin’ on about? What marriage qualifications? Tell me, what moron came up with such an absurd idea?”

From what I knew, those very traditions had begun with the founder. But if his confusion was to be believed, perhaps the stories were mistaken. My gaze swept across the faces seated at the table, landing on the second head, who was clenching his fists and trembling with quiet fury.

“You miserable excuse for a father,” he hissed. “You have some nerve!”

The third head nodded to himself, as if this solved a mystery that had lingered in his mind. “Aha, so that’s it. I didn’t have my grandfather pegged as the type to make such stiff rules. Which makes me wonder... Didn’t anyone bother to verify that these rules were legitimate? I guess I should be more surprised that you guys all continued to uphold them.”

The fourth head regarded his predecessor with a look of envy. “Must have been nice, having the second head go out of his way to prepare a bride for you. I had to handle our house after we were abruptly upgraded to a barony, which came with all manner of trouble. It pushed back my marriage as well.” He sighed dramatically.

“I had a feeling that was the case,” murmured the fifth head as he gazed at the founder. “It always struck me as odd that we kept such archaic rules. Not that I could’ve gotten rid of them; everyone around me would have kicked up a fuss had I tried. In fact, the opposite happened—an additional rule was added while I was leader.”

The expression on the sixth head’s face soured as he noted, “There was some

overlap in the rules as well, and with each generation, they were adjusted in such a way as to convince the family that these traditions were justified. I'm more curious about why our founder here doesn't seem to remember them."

The seventh head glowered at the founder, the disgust plain on his face. "I'm embarrassed to call you my kin."

Meanwhile, the founder's head jerked back and forth as he glanced between his descendants, panicked. "Wh-What're you talkin' about?!"

"You," blurted the second head, speaking for every man present in the process. Even I was shocked to learn that the founder knew nothing about the rules set forth by our house. I'd always believed the conditions required of a future Walt bride were personally laid out by our founding father, who had raised us to the status of liege lords to begin with.

"Brainless fool, you're the one who created those cumbersome house rules," continued the second head. "Take a look in the mirror, why don't you? I expect you'll find in your reflection a completely witless imbecile with a blank, dumbfounded expression on his face to match the empty air between his ears."

Sweat beaded across the founder's brow as his gaze bounced from face-to-face. "You gotta be kiddin' me. Y-You're sayin' I made those rules?! I don't know anythin' about any house rules!"

If he wasn't the one responsible, then who was?

While that question weighed heavily in my mind, the second head scrambled out of his chair and dashed after the founder, who fled as if his life depended on it. Not a single one of the other leaders intervened on the founder's behalf.

"Come on, let me punch you! Let me knock you right in that ugly mug of yours!" howled the second head.

For his part, the founder sensed he held at least some blame in this. He didn't meet the criticism with his usual bluster and instead tried to bargain. "Hey, wait! Did you forget?! I'm your father! And what're the rest of you sittin' around for? Help me!"

I suspected that everyone else present at the round table was of the same mind, save for the culprit in question.

*Just shut your mouth and let the second head smack you already, I thought.*

# Chapter 8: Perpetuation of Tradition

According to Walt tradition, there were six requirements for a future bride. There were originally only five, but a further rule was added during the fifth head's reign. The first five already made it difficult for the future heir of that generation to find himself a partner, so the rules were arguably far too strict.

To illustrate, allow me to list them for you.

1. The girl must be physically attractive.
2. She must be healthy.
3. She must have a good constitution.
4. She must be intelligent.
5. She must have clear skin.

As mentioned earlier, the sixth rule was added during the fifth head's generation, when the house was still a barony. It was important at the time for the leader to have a partner with respectable skill in magic, hence the final rule.

6. She must have exemplary magical abilities.

There you have it, the six rules that constitute House Walt's requirements for a future bride. It was a tradition held sacred from its creation during the founder's rule, and any woman who couldn't fulfill them was considered unqualified. Or so I'd always been told.

Incidentally, you were not to mention that rules two and three were practically identical. House leadership was even troubled over how to distinguish between the two, but they seemed to settle on rule two insinuating that a girl should not be sickly and rule three indicating that her body itself should be durable enough to bear children.

Each generation had struggled under the burden of these traditions since their very creation. The founder claimed he didn't remember setting forth any such rules. Apparently, their existence was an accident born of

misunderstanding, which brought to my mind just one question...

“Is it just me, or is something seriously wrong with our house?”

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Back in reality at Darion’s Adventurers’ Guild, we were escorted to a room on the third floor where we were to pay our respects to our newly appointed instructor. She had short, curly purple hair and wore casual clothes. Where exposed, her sun-kissed skin bore a number of scars. Judging by her lack of equipment, she must have thought we’d only be doing introductions today.

Hawkins politely introduced her by saying, “This woman is a veteran adventurer of Darion. She’s been working in the field for over a decade now, and we’ve even directly requested her for work. You can rest assured she’s adequately skilled and experienced.”

“Name’s Zelphy. More importantly, I guess it’s true what they said. You newbies really do intend to employ me just between the two of you, huh?” It took her only one glance to surmise we were complete novices. Our equipment being what it was, perhaps I couldn’t blame her for that. We still had yet to purchase proper gear.

“I’m guessing that little miss there specializes in magic? And you, boy, are the frontline type of fighter? Looks to me like you have a pretty good balance between the two of you, then. I can tell you’ve trained yourselves up pretty good too. Say, where’d you learn to fight, hm?”

As she scrutinized us, Hawkins cleared his throat. “Ahem, Miss Zelphy, as an adventurer yourself, I should think you’d know it’s a bit inappropriate to dig into people’s backgrounds like that.”

“C’mon, sir, don’t get so grumpy with me.” Zelphy’s response indicated she had no desire to question Hawkins’s authority. “I only asked to get a better feel for what level my two new pupils are at. Now, I fully intend to do my assigned work, but...before I do, let me see if I actually want to take on this particular request, yeah?”

Wait, so instructors had the option to decline a request like this? I cocked my head in confusion.

"If you're thinking that an adventurer has to take on any and all missions merely because someone is paying them, you've got another thing coming," Zelphy said. "It's basic practice to only take on a request you can actually complete. Better for yourself in the long run not to even touch one that looks like a failure in the making."

In other words, it was paramount to be aware of your limits and exactly what you were and were not capable of.

From inside my Jewel, the second head chimed in, "She's right about that. It's common sense, but that's exactly why it's so important. Personally, I think this instructor sounds quite promising."

Zelphy turned to us and held up three fingers as she rattled off a list of conditions for her employment. "First, no complaints about the way I do things. Second, no being fussy about the kinds of missions we take. As for the third..."

From the perspective of an instructor, the first two were non-negotiable because the moment their pupil didn't comply, the whole arrangement crumbled.

"Third one is this. At the very least, you guys gotta find one more person," Zelphy continued. "Normally, a group focuses on bolstering their numbers by gaining more companions before they ever even think about hiring a personal instructor like this. But as things stand, it's just the two of you right now. If you plan to continue this adventuring thing, you're gonna need some allies. You *have* to seek out some other people to join you."

Hawkins stood up straight, his shoulders back, and nodded along as Zelphy spoke. "It's true that with three members, your chances of survival will increase as well. Besides, for most missions, it's best if the group undertaking it has at least three or more members."

I'd never stopped to consider recruiting more companions. Maybe they were right that this was a necessary step.

"Numbers simply mean power," explained the sixth head. "If you're going to stick with being an adventurer, you're inevitably going to have to add more companions to your party. I don't see any cons in agreeing to her conditions. In fact, this is a prime opportunity. You can get Zelphy's input while you try to

recruit more people into your party.”

That did sound promising. Zelphy might have a different perspective on future companions than we did, and she had enough experience she wouldn’t make the rookie mistakes we would without her guidance. As it stood, we basically had no working knowledge of being adventurers, so having a veteran to weigh in would be invaluable.

I glanced at Novem, who met my gaze and nodded. It seemed we were both on the same page.

“Very well then,” I conceded. “We will follow your way of doing things, and we won’t be picky about what missions we take. However, we would like to ask your advice when it comes to finding more people to join our team.”

Hawkins nodded.

Zelphy’s brows rose high on her forehead as she blurted, “I was sure you two had to be some kinda nobility, but you’re awfully receptive to all this. As for your request, I’ll be chiming in with my two coppers anyhow, whether you like it or not. Since you’ve agreed to my conditions, I’ve got no reason to turn you down. Hawkins, sir, I’ll be taking on their request.”

Hawkins promptly nodded and passed Zelphy an envelope with what looked to be paperwork tucked inside. Some pen and ink were provided on the nearby desk, which Zelphy made use of when she scribbled out her signature. Once she was done, she handed the papers over to Hawkins, then turned her attention back to us.

“Well, with that outta the way, I’ll start with your first important lesson. We’ll begin with a little lecture. Sir, if we could have this room to—”

Zelphy didn’t even finish before Hawkins replied, “Yes, I understand. Be sure to let me know when you are finished. I will take my leave for now to process this paperwork.” He offered a smile as he turned to the door. “Good luck to you both,” he called before he disappeared into the hallway.

Once he left, we sat down directly across from Zelphy, a desk in between us.

“Think I already made this clear, but I’ll be teaching you guys the basics today,” said Zelphy. “And I’ll be giving you a basic outline of what I plan to do

from now on."

"Before we do all that, would you mind me asking one thing?" Novem inquired.

"What's up?"

"You indicated that it was rare for complete beginners like us to opt for a specialized instructor. But I would think sons of nobility foraying into this field would be doing the same, no?"

Outside of others like me who'd been driven from their homes, the average noble's son would still have the requisite finances to fund a private instructor. It seemed farfetched to claim that none of them delved into adventuring as a pastime or, at the very least, as a way to escape their house.

A grin teased the corners of Zelphy's lips as she explained, "This city's a convenient place for newbies. Yeah, maybe there are some people like you've described, but most of those with change to spare go to places with bigger Guilds. But see, Darion's the only place around these parts that has a system for dispatching instructors like this. No one else is doing anything like it, so the Guild figured, why not here in Darion?"

"Basically, she's also saying that Darion's not a great place for more advanced adventurers," the third head observed from within the Jewel. "That makes sense. Those who have cash already would head to a bigger city to become adventurers. Anyway, this instructor system intrigues me."

I had no idea what he found so intriguing about it.

Zelphy, oblivious to his commentary, stated, "Ordinarily, adventurers will team up and gather people until they have five or six members, then they'll split the cost, each paying three or four gold pieces so they can request a specialized instructor. Though, some just hop into a veteran party instead to train themselves up. This is all to say that yeah, it's rare to have only two people like you guys."

Once she dispensed with that digression, Zelphy returned to teaching us the basics about being an adventurer—or, more accurately, the kinds of things that were common sense for *most* people. That included the manners listed in the

pamphlet we were given before. Things like being punctual, completing the mission as listed, and avoiding bearing arms against the citizenry.

Zelphy then went on to say, “The first month generally consists of doing miscellaneous errand-type missions inside Darion. There’s lots of odd jobs, such as helping out with construction as well as some other similarly menial ones. Those are perfect for getting familiarized with the basic flow of adventurer work. They’re also the kind of missions most people take to eke out a living while they save up to buy proper gear for venturing outside the city gates. Doesn’t look like you guys really need to do that, though.”

True. Novem had her family’s treasured Demonic Tool. I didn’t have any weapon at all, but if push came to shove, I could always call upon my magic in battle.

“Anyway, we won’t be venturing out of the city to take down monsters until our second month together. As for the third month, I know of a pretty harsh place I can take you two to have you fight. Before we get to that point, though, I’d like you to have at least one more person in your party. But first...do you two have any plans to eventually leave Darion?”

I nodded. “Yes, in the future, we plan to go elsewhere.”

Zelphy nodded thoughtfully. “In that case, it might be best for you guys to find other adventurers who don’t plan on sticking around. Some among the novices here plan to return to their home regions and work once they have sufficient experience and skill under their belts. It’d be a real pain if you had to split up with your companions when you decide to pick up and move on.”

Novem furrowed her brows. “Um, I understand the logic behind increasing a group’s numbers. It also makes perfect sense to look for others who plan to leave Darion in the future. But...should we not be concerned with the quality of our future companions?”

“Quality is a matter of perspective that changes depending on what you attach importance to. Besides, you’ll find there are some people who may be skilled but come with a bunch of baggage. Like, they might be chronically late, sloppy with their work, that kinda thing. They might not be cooperative or sociable, but they’re decent in a fight. Let’s assume you’ve got that as an

option, and the complete opposite as well—someone who's conscientious but lacks fighting prowess. Who'd you pick to be on your team?"

The answer was clear to me; I'd pick the latter. Novem, however, didn't share my position.

"I would reject both on account of them each falling too far on either extreme."

Zelphy chuckled.

*Wait, is that kind of answer even an option?*

"You are pretty much right on the money," said Zelphy. "You got it. Either one of them would be a problem to have on your team. But sometimes you already have strong people on your team, and what you really need is someone who has a good head on their shoulders. Meanwhile, some parties lack enough power that they're willing to overlook the unsavory behavior of one of their members. To some degree, anyway."

She then added, "It all boils down to what kind of person you guys need. But I should say this: as long as someone is reasonably earnest, they'll prove a decent addition provided they equip themselves and learn the basics of fighting. That's the kinda place Darion is. The lord that rules here keeps a tight ship, so any dangerous monsters are dealt with by either the knights or soldiers."

If the regional lord prioritized weeding out bandits and monsters to keep the peace in his lands, that would sadly mean that there wasn't much work for adventurers. It did mean that the citizenry could live their lives with peace of mind, though. Darion's lord seemed to keep a firm rule over his land.

Zelphy chased away my thoughts when she abruptly said, "I figure saying this will only make you anxious, but if you're already considering your future, I'd better get it out in the open. See, I'm a veteran only when it comes to Darion. I consider myself pretty skilled too, but I have no idea if what I'll teach you is gonna help when you go to other places. The kinda skills an adventurer needs changes based on where they're at. In places like Baym, people of my ability are a dime a dozen."

To boil it down, if we were going to search for promising new members, we

had to look for people that suited us and our future plans.

The third head commented, “Well, everything has a time and place—that goes for tools as well as people. I do think she’s right about one thing, though. It’s important to find someone who complements the needs of your team.”

The third head was historically known as the Hero General, but judging by his remarks these last few days, I saw him less as honorable and more as calculating and underhanded.

Zelphy grinned at us. “Well, you can’t go wrong with the basics no matter where you end up. I’ll make sure to drill those into you. You’d better give the matter of your future companions some thought. In the meantime, though this won’t be necessary for a bit, you’ll need to do something about your weapons. Novem, you’re fine since you have your staff, but Lyle, let me ask you: what kinda weapon are you skilled at using?”

*I guess I really only have one answer, don’t I?*

“That’d be a saber,” I answered.

Her expression clouded over. “A saber, huh? Can’t you work with anything else? Like dual blades? Sword and shield? Even a spear’d be fine.”

“I guess a saber is out of the question, then?”

“Not necessarily,” she replied, frowning. “It’s just that those sorts of weapons are more for appearances most times, left to hang from the hip as an accessory rather than an instrument of battle. Plus, if you buy one that’s too chintzy, it’s liable to break on you. If you’ve got your heart set on a saber, I’m not gonna stop you. Just know there’s not very many shops in Darion that carry them. I think even the cheaper ones tend to be on the pricey side. You may run into money issues if you have to afford a backup in case the first one breaks.”

We’d already discussed the weapon issue to some degree with Rondo and his companions. A saber wasn’t the only weapon I could use. I’d learned the basics of other arms as well, but when it came down to deciding which to opt for, I waffled. Consulting my house’s historic leaders wouldn’t prove very fruitful, unfortunately, since they’d all offer different answers. I couldn’t turn to them.

“Well, for the time being, I’ll have you completing missions here in the city.

When I've got some free time, I'll show you around to the shops. Be sure to get your equipment in order when you can."

Zelphy then gasped and added, "Oh! That's right. I almost forgot one more important thing. Beginners like you often fall flat on their faces. I was no exception. But remember, your body is the key to your livelihood. This goes for the odd jobs you'll be doing soon, as well as later missions, but make sure you rest periodically. There's too many idiots out there who push their bodies to the breaking point. You do these little errand missions for four or five days, then take a break for a day. Even when you start heading out to kill monsters, make sure the day after you get some downtime. And don't forget that you need to use those days to replenish your supplies and repair your gear. Got it?"

Novem and I nodded. I had to admit, I was a little anxious about how far I could make it as an adventurer even with her instructing me. It wasn't like I had any special attachment to the profession to begin with.

Zelphy deposited a sheet of paper onto the table. "Well, with that outta the way, how about we take on our first mission? This one's a pretty big pain in the ass, and most adventurers try to avoid it if they can help it."

I glanced at the page she was referencing. "Um, Miss Zelphy, that paper indicates our mission will be 'gutter cleaning'?"

She grinned. "Yep, you got it. They're pretty filthy, so they need a good cleaning from time to time. That's why the Guild posts these missions directly. The types who turn their noses at missions like this refuse to ever take on this kinda work for the rest of their lives. That should make it a valuable experience for you two. Get me?" She glanced smugly between the two of us. "What? Don't tell me you're gonna claim this kinda work is beneath you?"

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After entering one of Darion's roadside gutters, which was more like a large drainage canal, I quickly became coated in mud. I'd donned water-resistant leather workwear to do the job and had tied a cloth tightly over my face to act as a mask. Much to my chagrin, it didn't shut out the stomach-churning stench that permeated the air.

I thought I'd be climbing in here and scooping out the muck with a shovel,

leaving it on the side of the road. Unfortunately, anything we dug out we had to pile into a wheelbarrow. There were other adventurers who'd taken on the same request, and each one of them were taking turns, dumping their loads in the designated spot before climbing back into the gutter.



"L-Lord Lyle, allow me to switch places with you," Novem begged.

She was currently assisting Zelphy, who was playing the role of observer. That basically meant she was still wearing a mask like me but wasn't doing anything more than watching as I worked. Zelphy refused to let her participate on account of her being a girl. Not that Zelphy was alone in her position. The historic house leaders in my Jewel were adamant that Novem not be subjected to this sort of work either.

"Novem is such a nice girl," the founder declared wistfully. "Meanwhile, boy, you're slackin' on the job. C'mon, get that shovel movin'!"

As he pelted me with complaints, I continued scooping out mud from the gutter. Sometimes there'd be some trash hidden amid the goop, giving off a nauseous odor.

"People don't treat the gutters very well," Zelphy said. "It's full of garbage, vomit, and even literal shit. You'll find all kinds of 'goodies' if you dig around. That's why no one wants to touch this kinda work."

Now that the mystery behind the stench had been solved, the sixth and seventh heads were aghast that I was being subjected to such grueling labor.

"I can hardly believe she'd foist this kind of work on you! You may be an adventurer now, but you've got a proper pedigree!"

"I knew it! This is exactly why I hate adventurers. Lyle, return this woman to the Guild immediately and switch her out for someone else. You shouldn't be reduced to this!"

Disinterested in their squawking about status and the like, the fifth head asked, "And what do you mean by 'proper pedigree,' huh? Remember, this boy's been driven from his home. He's got no choice but to do this kind of stuff if he's going to make it on his own from now on."

"Exactly," said the third head, snickering. "Back in my day, we had to do fieldwork too, you know. I'd fear for his future if this is all it took to convince him to throw in the towel."

The sixth head snapped back, "Don't be ridiculous! Lyle carries the royal blood

of the Centrus Kingdom within him!"

To refresh, the Centrus Kingdom was once a powerhouse that unified the entire continent. Banseim's founding had a ripple effect, fracturing Centrus's remaining territories and giving birth to the countries that now existed in its place. It was a huge revelation to hear that I carried ancient royal blood, yet any surprise I might have felt was dampened by the knee-deep sludge I was shoveling out of the gutter.

I kept my lips firmly shut as I wedged my shovel into the muck, hauling up another load.

"Royal blood of the Centrus Kingdom?" the fourth head echoed, his curiosity clearly piqued. "I thought every last member of their royal line was snuffed out. But judging by what you're saying, someone must have survived, hm?"

Irate, the seventh head roared, "Obviously! The nobility has worked tirelessly to refine their lines for the use of magic. Naturally, the Centrus Kingdom's royalty was no exception, being the most exalted of them all. What fool would knowingly deprive mankind of such an asset? My wife, Zenoah, was a descendant of the Centrus royal family as well! If the world was as it should be, then Lyle might have even been granted a duke title—"

The third head snorted with laughter at the mere suggestion. "Emphasis on 'if.' Right now, he's an adventurer cleaning out gutters, remember? Honestly, Lyle could use more worldly knowledge, so maybe this whole experience is actually necessary for him. That instructor of his, Zelphy, seems to think it's only natural that he does this kinda work, so I think he should follow her advice."

"I can't believe a member of our family secretly has such an impressive heritage," murmured the second head, mystified by this news. "I suppose that means all my efforts weren't spent in vain, then?"

The fifth head, on the other hand, didn't share everyone else's joy. He scoffed, "Why do we have such troublesome blood running in our veins? If anyone should be mixing with descendants of ancient royalty, it ought to be the Banseim royal family, not us."

"All I can really say is the timing was bad," said the seventh head. "The Centrus royalty held a grudge against Banseim and kept their distance. It wasn't

until my generation that they finally made peace with Banseim and married off one of their daughters to the royal family, at which point a number of issues arose. Zenoah's marquessate family rose in rebellion. Thus, the royal family couldn't accept the bride, nor could they afford to execute the insurgents. That was why they offered her to me. Zenoah perfectly fit the rigid requirements dictated by Walt tradition, so I desperately worked to win her favor. Our plan was to eventually have Lyle or his son marry a member of the royal family, thereby achieving duke status in the process."

This was breaking news about the secrets of my birth, but despite being the center of the conversation, I was still industriously chugging along with my assigned task of shoveling gunk.

"Hey, with that posture, you're never gonna make any progress," the founder barked at me. He'd been listening to their conversation, but that didn't stop him from finding an opportunity to fire potshots at me. "Hm, so this boy really does have ancient royal blood in his veins?"

I gritted my teeth in anger at his constant antagonizing but kept my attention focused on the work in front of me.

"Hey," the fifth head murmured after a long pause, as if he'd had an epiphany. "If both he and that sister of his have royal blood from the Centrus Kingdom...doesn't that mean they share the same bloodline as Courtesan Beauty Agrissa?"

I could hardly believe what I was hearing.

"Well, you see..." the sixth head said haltingly. "She wasn't actually a bad person, you know? And the only remnants of the royal bloodline were her descendants, after all."

The founder howled, "See, I knew it! Now we have proof that this Ceres girl is the Heretical God's Child. If she's really Agrissa's descendant, then it's not at all out of place for her to likewise be imbued with the Heretical God's power!"

The other mens' reception of this revelation was, frankly put, stone cold. They were still sore over the strict traditions the founder had started, and not one of them were buying into his babbling about the Heretical God. He'd basically lost all credibility with how he'd reacted to the news about the Walts' bridal

requirements.

“Yes, how wonderful,” the second head hissed icily at him. “At least we all have a full understanding of Lyle’s predicament now. He carries within him the blood of ancient royalty and, had circumstances not gone awry, was in a solid position to become duke. Though, I suppose that’s a foregone conclusion now.”

The seventh head, it seemed, had planned for one of my children to marry into the royal family, thereby elevating our house to a dukedom. The second head had a point; if not for my dismissal from the house, I probably would’ve been a duke.

“It’s a moot point since he’s an adventurer now,” the third head interjected candidly. “None of that matters anymore.”

Dejected though he was, the sixth head frustratedly muttered, “Unlike you lot, this boy is *actual* nobility.”

The third head sniffed, chafed by the insinuation. “That’s a bizarre statement to make. The rest of us are ‘actual’ nobility too, you know. Not that I can really claim we have superior magical prowess, but even I was able to use several schools of magic easily.”

“What?! You could use magic?” the second head squeaked in surprise.

“Sure. Although the fourth head was much better at it than me.”

The fourth head sighed. “I could use minor spells like Fire Bullet and the like, yes. My wife was far more talented at it than me, so claiming any level of proficiency would be presumptuous.”

In modern Banseim, only those of baron rank or higher could use magic. Lesser nobles might be able to cast spells to some degree, but their abilities were so weak as to be practically nonexistent.

In the meantime, I started to feel lightheaded, my mana dwindling thanks to my house leaders’ heated discussion.

“Lord Lyle! Please, you need to take a break. You must! I’ll work in your stead!” Novem shouted at me. She’d noticed my deteriorating condition and was worried.

Even Zelphy was looking at me with a measure of concern in her eyes, though hers wasn't for my condition so much as for my future. "You have less stamina than I thought. I know you're probably not used to this kinda work, but I'd like you to put more of an effort in. Guess I'm gonna have to really pile on the hard labor so you can build your endurance..."

She was acting like I was some kind of wilting wallflower, but the reason I was feeling so faint wasn't due to physical exhaustion—it was my depleted mana pool. I'd honed my body, despite how it probably seemed to her. I wouldn't deny that I wasn't accustomed to this kind of work, but still...

"C'mon boy, get yourself together! I'm not about to let you make our cute little Novem wade through this muck!"

The founder was hounding me as he usually did, but this time I thought, *If you're that worried about her getting dirty, then shut up and stop draining me.*

# Chapter 9: The Barbarian's First Love

Adventurers should not be adventurous.

Zelphy taught me those words. Perhaps there was some accuracy to them. Part of being an adventurer was nailing down what you were capable of and what you weren't, and avoiding pushing yourself above your limits. It wasn't a bad mantra to live by for that reason, but I also felt it was a bit too rigid and, as a result, tedious. That particularly applied to the current situation I found myself in.

"I-I'm finished."

It had become a daily routine for me to spend all morning doing backbreaking manual labor missions while Zelphy idly kept watch as I saw them to their conclusion. If I was unlucky, I might have to do the exact same type of mission twice in one day. There was no using magic; I had to use my natural strength to lift heavy objects and stack them. In fact, this lifting work was the most common of the tasks I got stuck with.

"Good work," said Zelphy. "Now go get your assessment from the overseer."

The overseer who dished out orders at the scene would provide adventurers with a piece of paper. This document, which would need to be later submitted to the Guild, had a score based on how well the adventurer in question had performed. There were five different marks, ranging from A to E. Generally, if you could acquire Grade C or higher, that meant you'd satisfied the person who'd originally submitted the mission through the Guild.

That wasn't good enough for Zelphy. Grade A usually meant the mission giver would grant you a handsome bonus, but it was so high a payout that people only gave up to Grade B so as to avoid additional payment. Thus, she expected me to earn Grade B every single time.

I obeyed and trekked to the overseer, who promptly handed me an assessment with a grade stamped on it.

"You really worked hard today," he said. "Here you are, a B."

I thanked him as I accepted it and headed back over to where Zelphy was. She peeked at my paper and grinned when she saw the result.

"C means you only get seven large copper coins. B means you get eight large copper coins. Might seem small to you, but that difference adds up over—"

She was cut off when a man bellowed in the distance, "You gotta be kiddin' me! Why the hell did you give me Grade D?!" A hulking adventurer had seized the poor overseer by his shirt collar. This belligerent man was well built and had a menacing look about him to boot. He perfectly fit the stereotype that adventurers were a mere collection of hoodlums.

Zelphy strode over to him. "Because he probably saw you were slacking on the job. You were pushing your work on others, yeah? You're lucky you didn't get an E for that, which is what most people would've given you."

Although the overseer seemed like a normal citizen, he didn't look the least bit intimidated. He had Zelphy to turn to, after all, since the Guild had sent her here explicitly to keep an eye out.

Zelphy treaded closer to the man. "Hey," she snapped.

"What's your prob—?"

No sooner had the man turned his fiery gaze toward her than she seized him by the arm, forcing him to release the overseer. She slammed her fist into him, and even though he was twice her size, she had him on the ground in seconds with her foot pressing down on the back of his head. Her hands were still on his arms, twisting them back behind him so he was pinned in place.

"W-Wait a sec here! All I'm sayin' is that my grade doesn't make any sense! Gaaaaah!"

Zelphy didn't bother to let him finish before she broke his arm. Everyone else watched silently as a ghastly crack echoed. Zelphy finally released him, though not before slamming her foot into him and sending him flying.

The founder erupted into mad cackling as he watched. "That's it? Pretty pathetic for someone so beefed up." Personally, I didn't see anything even

remotely humorous in what was happening. “This Zelphy lady has some real skill.”

“Did you really think I didn’t notice how little effort you put in?” Zelphy asked. “You really should’ve been grateful he didn’t award you an E. What’s more disgraceful is that you dared put your hands on the mission overseer. Are you trying to bring shame to the entire Guild?” Her voice had dropped low, carrying an unspoken threat as she chided him.

“Well, if the missions coming into the Guild were to decrease, adventurers would lose their way of life here,” the second head noted thoughtfully. “And since the Guild dispatches so many people to do missions, they probably need veterans to act as observers like this.”

The fourth head was less receptive to that line of reasoning. “She’s already got one mission by accepting her role as their instructor. It hardly seems right she can simultaneously take on a job as an observer at these sites as well. She’s *supposed* to be instructing Lyle. They paid a hefty sum for her services, after all.”

Actually, Novem was the one who paid for Zelphy, and she was currently off doing other work more appropriate for a girl. Her handwriting was impeccable, so they were taking advantage of her skills by having her pen things on other people’s behalf. Unlike my work, the pay for hers was determined by how well she comported herself with the clientele.

Zelphy instructed some other adventurers to carry off the belligerent man before she turned back to me. “Sorry ‘bout that. No matter what we do, always gonna be idiots like that about. Those kinda thugs are increasing in number lately, which makes my work observing even busier.”

Having seen how she’d handled that man, I swore right then and there I’d be careful not to ever provoke her like that.

“With that out of the way, you should get that document of yours back to the Guild so you can collect your fee. We’ll call it a day here. Make sure to show your face on time there tomorrow.”

I heeded her words and made my way to the Guild. When I arrived, I saw Novem waiting for me, having already finished her mission as well. She was on

the second floor, near the reception desk, chatting with someone. As I got closer, I noticed it was Rachel, gripping a wooden staff in her hands. The two were laughing together as they talked. Not wanting to interrupt them, I steered myself to the reception counter instead to retrieve my payment.

As usual, Hawkins's line was noticeably shorter than the others, and he processed any paperwork he was handed at an impressive pace. It didn't take long until I was called up. I handed him my Guild card along with the paperwork stating the grade I'd earned for my latest mission.

"Grade B, huh," Hawkins remarked. "I see you have been working hard, Lyle. This is your payment—eight large copper coins. Please check that the amount is correct, and then you may go."

Eight large copper pieces sat in the tray on the counter. Adults were able to make about ten to fifteen large copper coins a day, from what I'd heard. But even with that in mind, it was absurd to me that the Guild played middleman to field these requests and recruit workers. They earned their own portion of the profit while doing none of the work, save for sending people off to complete requests. I knew grumbling about it to Hawkins would yield no results, but it was still hard to stomach having so much shaved off the top of my reward money. Don't get me wrong; I knew that was simply how the system worked, but it didn't mean I liked it.

"Thank you," I muttered.

Hawkins sensed my displeasure. "The reason you only receive this much as your reward is because we have taken some of the payment on your behalf to pay city taxes. Adventurers are unique, you see. Unlike the citizenry, they aren't permanent residents here. That's why, each time you complete a mission, we have to take some percentage of it for taxes. Of course, I will admit, the Guild *does* retain a portion of it for themselves as a handling fee."

I forced myself to accept it and grabbed my money from the tray before making my way over to where Novem and Rachel were. I was exhausted, having once again completed a mission with work I wasn't accustomed to doing. I was eager to hurry back to the inn, take a bath, and get some food in my belly so I could lie down.

"I can tell you must have worked hard, Lord Lyle. I'm sure you must be exhausted as well, so shall we hasten back to the inn and eat?" Novem asked.

Rachel glanced at me. "You're in good spirits."

"Yeah. I guess, more or less... By the way, Miss Rachel, were you also doing transcription work today?" I asked, a bit surprised she'd do those sort of missions.

Rachel nodded and smiled as she explained, "Rondo and Ralph are the ones who put their bodies on the line, fighting up close and personal. Going on long expeditions even around here inevitably means facing some kind of bothersome monster. Since they fight beasts head-on, they end up more taxed than me. I can handle only one day of rest afterward, but the two of them need an extra day."

"And that's why she was doing transcription work here today," Novem added. "She's eager to save up as much as she can as quickly as she can."

It seemed to me like she was pushing herself. Even if she wanted more coin, there had to be a better way to do it than skipping out on much needed breaks.

"You don't intend to add more members to your team?" I asked. "Miss Zelphy told us that there's safety in numbers."

Rachel made a face. "Yeah, we are considering it. It's an option for sure, but... See, the three of us are all from the same village, and we're each trying to aim for something bigger than this. We eventually want to become adventurers of the Free City of Baym. That means we'd prefer people with the same kind of goals in mind. Darion is a great place for new adventurers to gather, but since it *does* provide consistent work and an easy place to live, a lot of people decide to settle here."

Come to think of it, the city did seem to be expanding in size. The work I did today was, in fact, to help build new defensive walls. Darion was ever in need of more laborers, so for young adventurers, it was a great place to make a permanent home. If there was work aplenty, food on the table, and no need to overtax yourself to make a living, even I'd opt for that.

"Even those looking for something greater still differ on where or how far

they want to go. After we leave Darion, we plan to make a more dedicated effort of finding companions to join us. We'd of course invite anyone before then if we found someone who'd be a good fit."

Everyone had their own motives for becoming adventurers and moved accordingly. It wasn't my place to weigh in on the way Rachel and her companions decided to do things.

"Oh, all right then."

Rachel suddenly turned her attention back to Novem. "Sorry to change the subject, but Novem here sure was amazing. I heard she's only started transcription work these last few days, but her penmanship is beautiful and easy to read! That's actually what we were talking about before you showed up."

Novem came from a barony, and as the second daughter, she'd had a strict upbringing. It was only natural for her to be talented at reading and writing, so transcription would be a piece of cake. Yet she grew flustered by Rachel's effusive praise.

"M-Miss Rachel, um, that's not something you need to..."

"Can you believe it? She earned eleven large copper coins today alone! Not only is her work impeccable, but she's fast too. The clients are satisfied, and she gets huge lines of people waiting for her. I'd love for her to tutor me if—hey, Lyle, are you okay?"

I was staring hard at Novem. She'd told me that she only made six or seven large copper coins a day.

"Now, Lyle," the sixth head interjected diplomatically, "it's not like she was lying to you so she could pocket the extra change for herself. She did it for you, knowing the backbreaking work you were doing outside while she worked in an office."

The seventh head cleared his throat. "Ahem, he's quite right, you know. Plus, she's the one who paid twenty gold coins for your instructor. I don't see any issue in something as innocent as her underreporting her earnings to you. And...you know, she only did it for your sake."

I managed to keep my cool...until the founder barbarically butted in.

"Just what I'd expect of little Novem. Meanwhile, a certain someone I won't name has his undies in a bunch 'cause he made less than her doing manual labor, never mind the fact that it's his own fault for not putting in the effort to get a better wage." He sighed dramatically. "Almost brings me to tears, thinking this boy is my descendant."

I took off running and fled the area. Tears pricked at my eyes, and I didn't want either of the girls to see me cry.

"Lord Lyle!" Novem cried after me.

"Hey, what's going on?!" Rachel squeaked.

Their voices echoed behind me, but I slapped my hands over my ears and continued pumping my legs, trying to put distance between myself and them.

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I tottered absently along one of Darion's deserted streets. I'd run around blindly after fleeing the Guild, so I had absolutely no clue where I was. The roads here were narrower than the city's main thoroughfares, which could indicate I was heading into an unsafe neighborhood.

I didn't really care about that right now. I understood Novem had underreported her pay out of concern for my pride. The revelation was just bad timing. I was already exhausted for a number of reasons, so getting hit with a cruel dose of reality at that point was more vexing than I could handle.

It seemed like ever since I left home, I'd been nothing but useless. No, if my family was to be believed, I'd been no better back then either. I hated myself for being so mediocre.

"Dammit," I hissed.

Worried voices found their way to me from within my Jewel. Unfortunately, the founder's was also among them.

"What's the problem? Boy's supposed to be an adult, but he still sucks like a child. You gotta actually make your way in the world before you've got any right to mope about it. The way you are now, boy, you're too worthless to be wasting

time pitying yourself!"

"Put a sock in it already!" roared the second head. "You've got some nerve, always chiming in to constantly belittle others when you hardly amounted to anything yourself. Now, Lyle, I know this ruffles your feathers, but you also need to—"

I immediately unfastened the chain that housed our family Jewel.

"L-Lyle!" the seventh head squeaked in protest.

"There's no point...in keeping this stupid Jewel," I muttered to myself.

The founder snorted, unimpressed. "Yeah? You wanna get rid of it? Then hurry up and toss it aside, boy! It's not like we want to waste our time teaching our Arts to some ignorant little crybaby like you anyway! Go on, throw it away!"

Normally, a family treasure like this Jewel would impart all the Arts that its former users had inscribed into it. Mine had failed to fulfill that role thus far, instead providing constant unnecessary commentary from the peanut gallery, thereby draining my mana even further. They were a nuisance. Part of it was also that I was in a foul mood and exhausted.

My fingers squeezed around the Jewel. I reeled my fist back, ready to fling it as far as I could, but as it left my hand...

"Ouch!"

It smacked right into a girl with red hair who'd stepped into the narrow street with me.

"S-Sorry!" I panicked and scurried over to her. The necklace had landed a short distance away, but the voices from it still filtered into my ear as if they were right beside me.

"Lyle, I hate to tell you this," began the third head, "but since you're the current owner of this Jewel, your magic is inextricably linked to it. Even if you leave it somewhere, you'll still be able to hear us. Throwing it away means you lose any benefits it might have while still suffering our commentary. Personally, I think it's best if you hold on to it."

Great, so I was screwed no matter what. Didn't that qualify this necklace as a

cursed object then?

Negative as my thoughts were, I apologized to the young girl again. Her eyes were focused on my necklace. When I studied her closer, I noticed a cord around her neck with a red Gem dangling from it. She was also wearing a short skirt and a cropped apron. Her whole ensemble was covered in frills, and her legs were adorned with snug-fitting thigh-high socks.

“Ow, ouchie,” she grumbled. “Great, and I have work in a few. Look at what you’ve done.”

“I-I’m really, really sorry.”

“As if an apology is enough to— Hey, are you crying?”

The tears had started falling without my notice, and I quickly wiped my eyes. The girl snatched my necklace up and handed it back to me. She clutched the red Jewel hanging around her neck and peered at me. “Isn’t this thing precious to you? Mine’s one that was passed through the family.”

As I stared back at her, I felt a sting of jealousy. Jewels didn’t ordinarily *speak* to their owner. They were supposed to exist only to impart the Arts that were contained within them. A Jewel could only teach you the first level of any given Art, but that was still preferable to this accursed piece of junk I had.

“Mine was passed down too,” I admitted. “I just lost my temper.”

This girl was slightly shorter than me, but she kept her back straight and conducted herself with an air of dignity and poise.

“Then don’t go around throwing it! Or, if you’re going to fling things around, at least make sure it won’t hit anyone first. You’re lucky I was your victim. If it had been someone else, they might have beaten you senseless,” she huffed.

“I’m sorry.” My shoulders slumped. I dropped my gaze to the necklace in my hand—the bewitched object that had somehow found its way back to me. It was that much more of an eyesore now knowing that even if I discarded it, I would still hear them. My mind started spinning, trying to think of ways I might destroy it completely.

The girl eyed me. “If you feel guilty about it, then...hm, yeah. Why don’t you

come to the place I work at?”

“Huh?”

“I’ll make it worth your while,” she said as she puffed up her chest proudly. Her waist-length hair curled in odd angles at the bottom, and her purple eyes had an intimidating look about them. Her body, meanwhile, was toned and well-balanced. A light, soapy scent wafted off her milky white skin, indicative that she’d just finished showering before setting off to work.

“My name is Aria Lockwood,” she said, by way of introduction. “I work at a place just up ahead. If you agree to tag along with me, I’m willing to call this water under the bridge. And while we’re at it, I’ll even throw something in on the house.”

With a start, I suddenly realized there was more foot traffic in the area. Most of them were men, and the more I studied my surroundings, the more I realized women in the streets were beckoning passersby to enter their workplace. I’d blindly fumbled my way into a dubious area, from the look of things.

“M-My name is Lyle Walt,” I stuttered. “B-But I don’t have very much money —”

“Do you have some large copper coins?”

“Yes.”

“Then you’ll be fine. Come with me.” Aria grabbed me by the hand and pulled me past the ostentatious establishments that lined the street.

As my eyes drank in all that surrounded me, my cheeks began to heat up. Some of the women were wearing provocative outfits as they tried to flag down potential customers from the crowd of men who traversed the street.

“Lyle!” squeaked a panicked voice from inside the Jewel. It was the fourth head this time. “Have you forgotten all about Novem? She sold off all her bridal assets for you, remember?! You mustn’t piddle away your earnings on something as shallow as prostitutes! Won’t the rest of you men say something to—? Bwah!”

He went silent, his strangled cry suggesting someone had punched him. I only

had to wonder for a split second who would be barbaric enough to do such a thing before it became readily apparent that the founder was the culprit.

“What’s your problem?” demanded the fourth head.

“Aria... Aria Lockwood,” muttered the founder. “And she’s got a red Jewel. Th-There’s no question; she’s gotta be Miss Alice’s descendant! I just know it! The resemblance is uncanny. This...this must be fate.”

His voice went from a mumble to a frantic cry. Meanwhile, the other heads and I were left too dumbstruck to respond. The second head managed to recover before the rest of us and ask the same thing we all wanted to know.

“And who on earth is this ‘Alice’ person?”

The founder snapped, “Alice Lockwood, of course! My first love!”

*Yeah, I hate to break this to you, but I don’t think anyone has any idea who that is.*

Like my predecessors, I was still too shocked to react properly to this new information.

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Back at the Guild’s reception counter, Hawkins and Zelphy were chatting together.

“How is it with Lyle?” Hawkins asked.

Zelphy chuckled and said, “Pretty good when you consider most former noble brats turn their noses at the kinda work I’m making him do. He’s more dedicated than most, I’ll give him that. I’ve got no complaints at least. Although he does scowl most of the time.”

“But is that really enough reason to have you keeping an eye on him, Miss Zelphy? Should I interpret that as our liege lord is really that concerned about this boy?”

Zelphy plastered a grin on her face as she coolly replied, “Oh, sir, I’m just your run-of-the-mill adventurer. This has nothing to do with the regional lord. I was after some cash, so I decided to take up the mission to instruct these two. That’s all. These former noble kids have plenty of coin to spare, lucky for me.”

Plus they're still ignorant of the world, and they obediently follow orders, which makes it easy on me."

Hawkins shrugged. "My mistake. I forgot that's the cover story you are going with. Anyway, ignorant of the world and obedient, you say? Reminds me of a certain someone. Back when you first started, I seem to recall you making all kinds of mistakes." He snickered.

Zelphy dropped her gaze, lips pursed.

"By the way," Hawkins said, changing the topic, "Miss Novem is incredible. Her penmanship is beautiful, and she's polite with the clients. She's become so popular we have people lining up for her already. If she'd formally join as an employee, it would be a load off the rest of us."

While Zelphy listened to his effusive praise of Novem, her gaze wandered to a different counter where voices were growing louder and more erratic. Santoire—the blonde-haired, blue-eyed receptionist—was currently dealing with a group of undesirables. They invited her out for a drink, which she politely declined with a smile. It was clear to Zelphy that they were making a nuisance of themselves.

"Those guys," she remarked, "are among those who recently arrived in Darion, yeah? They don't have the best reputation, but what's the real story there?"

Hawkins began organizing his paperwork as he answered, "The Guild cannot arbitrarily share the personal information of other individuals. Now, here is your compensation for today."

Zelphy had earned herself a handsome reward for her work acting as an on-sight observer. Granted, she could have earned much more if she spent that time actually venturing out from the city limits and killing monsters.

*Since Hawkins didn't bother to deny it, the rumors about these guys must be true. But what to do about this? I'm a little busy with other things.*

Zelphy glanced at Santoire.

"Aww, I'm afraid I really can't. I'm in the middle of work, see," said Santoire.

The unscrupulous group of adventurers had added to their numbers recently, counting six whole people among their team now.

“C’mon, it’ll be fine. We got money to spare.” The man acting as their leader sported some respectable equipment, though it was clear to Zelphy’s trained eye that he wasn’t fully accustomed to wearing it yet.

*I’d like to look into these guys some more, but I’ve got an even bigger explosive in my lap right now. I can’t make the mistake of prioritizing the wrong thing.*

Suddenly, she turned her attention back to Hawkins. “Sir, isn’t that Santoire girl over there the daughter of one of the Guild’s top brass? That’s what I’ve heard. She’s got all kinds of bad rumors floating around about her, but you guys still keep her on as a receptionist?”

Santoire was beautiful, to be sure, but she was also something of a troublemaker. She would adjust her behavior with clientele depending on how well she liked their appearance, and at times, she would even flub the amount she was supposed to offer them as compensation. Newbies and those with ulterior motives flocked to her, while the more savory adventurers lined up to see either Hawkins or Meletta, who similarly worked with impressive speed.

“I cannot answer that question,” Hawkins said.

Zelphy chuckled. “Saying that is already an answer in itself, you know? I bet she’s just looking to get her claws in some big-time adventurer. This place does offer plenty of opportunities to find a potential partner. Guys have it easy. We girls really have to go on the hunt if we wanna find someone.”

Hawkins sighed at her. “What are you talking about? You’re already engaged. You’re only trying to earn some extra cash before the wedding, but you plan to quit being an adventurer soon, don’t you?” He gave her a pointed look, to which Zelphy merely nodded.

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It was several days later when Novem came to Zelphy for advice. She had another adventurer with her named Rachel. From the sound of things, Lyle and the two male adventurers from Rachel’s party were up to something

“suspicious.”

“I think I get it. So Lyle found out you’re making more money than he is, got his feelings hurt, and ran off. When he finally came back, he looked like he’d shed a huge weight off his shoulders, and he started inviting Rachel’s male teammates out with him.”

Novem nodded. Her concern had persuaded her to seek confirmation from Zelphy, but she already had a vague sense of what was going on. She simply didn’t want to believe it could be true.

“When I ask him where he’s going, he only gives me vague answers,” Novem explained. “It doesn’t seem like he’s wasting his money on anything, but once his work for the day is finished, he wanders off somewhere only to return hours later.”

Rachel chimed in, “At the same time Lyle is out there aimlessly doing whatever it is he’s doing, Rondo and Ralph disappear as well. When I confronted them about it, they admitted they’d been with Lyle.”

For her part, Zelphy wanted to chide the boys for not being more discreet. It was only natural for Lyle to have carnal desires, given his age. Having been confronted with the reality that Novem was earning more than he was, perhaps he’d spun a little out of control. Most men, when overwhelmed, turned to alcohol, gambling, or women.

“So Lyle’s been inviting these other boys out, and they’ve started disappearing off somewhere as well? I assume this means you’re in a relationship with one of them, Rachel? And what happens at night?”

Rachel was so visibly flustered by the question that Zelphy decided not to press her further.

“Fine, I got it,” she said. “It’d be simple to look into this, but I figure you girls already know what’s going on, don’t you?”

They both looked at her in disbelief, as if they weren’t ready to accept what she was insinuating, but Zelphy wasn’t surprised by this news. The male adventurers she’d grouped with in the past were much the same. Plus, it wasn’t all bad. It gave her peace of mind to know her comrades were getting their

needs met elsewhere.

“Deprive a man of his sexual appetite and who knows what’ll he do. Better for him to release that pent-up desire elsewhere. It’s not good if he’s cheating on you, though. If you want, I can tail them and give them an earful.” Zelphy mostly spoke in jest, but the looks in Novem and Rachel’s eyes were intense.



## Chapter 10: Aria

The shop in question was a pink paradise with girls in miniskirts that danced as they moved. It catered to a mostly male clientele. I'd come here alone my first time at Aria's bidding, but since then, I preferred to invite the only real acquaintances I'd made in Darion—Rondo and Ralph. Rondo was less willing to tag along at first, but Ralph wasn't about to let him wriggle out of it. All that was left was to guide them there and let them see the place for themselves.

When we arrived at the shop, it was already within Aria's work hours, and she grinned the moment she spotted me.

"Here again, I see. Welcome," she said, guiding us to our seats.

Rondo muttered, "Doing this kind of makes me feel guilty toward Rachel."

"You know as well as I do we could never bring Rachel to a place like this," Ralph said. "I only wish I'd known about this little hole-in-the-wall sooner."

Hole-in-the-wall was an accurate descriptor, given this place was off the beaten path and tucked inside a narrow street. The proprietor was even concerned with their disadvantageous location, utilizing any means at his disposal to try to attract more customers.

As the three of us settled in around a table, Aria brought some menus over.

"I'll have the usual," the founder said, even though no one in the outside world could hear him. On top of which, he was trying to order one of the more expensive items on the menu. It wasn't something I couldn't afford, of course, but it was still two whole large copper coins. Nonetheless, I figured I could afford to splurge a little here, since I kept the rest of my earnings tucked away in my savings stash.

"Um, I'll have the usual," I said.

Rondo nodded. "I'll have the same thing I had last time too. What about you, Ralph?"

"Hold on a sec. I plan to sample every single item on this menu, but I also kinda wanna have the same thing I had last time. Dammit! Guess I'll just have two then. I'll take this cake and this tart."

Aria smiled as she said, "That will be two daily specials, a chocolate cake, and our shop's famous frau tart set. As always, thank you for your business." As soon as she finished taking down our order, she turned and left.

A quick survey of the area revealed a number of other girls in short skirts. They kept smiles plastered on their faces whether they were taking down orders or delivering them. Their clientele consisted of all sorts of men, from adventurers to more intimidating types. Some of them would take the opportunity to observe the female staff, while others—notably, an adventurer with scruffy facial hair—happily savored the taste of their delectable pastries.

This place was something like a secret hideaway. The proprietor began by wanting to make his own sweets and selling them. The problem was that such shops had already popped up all over Darion, and he needed something to distinguish his business from the competition, which led to...well, this.

"Here you are. The daily specials you both ordered. As for you, sir," Aria said, referring to Ralph, "I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to wait a little bit longer."

Today's special was a pie filled with cheese and jam that went perfectly with the slightly bitter tea that came with it.

Ralph eyed my pie enviously and mumbled, "Maybe I should have gone with that instead."

Despite his hulking stature and intimidating looks, Ralph had an insatiable sweet tooth. He hadn't been able to enjoy such luxuries back home since his family was too poor to afford them. Once he got out on his own, most shops that provided such sweets boasted a largely female customer base. There were some rare occasions where he had access to sweets, but most of the time Rachel would gobble them down before he had a chance to. For him and other men like him, this place was their secret salvation.

This place did admittedly have a dubious-looking storefront, one which gave the impression it only catered to adult men. That actually worked in its favor, as men could proudly waltz right in without a second thought.

My heart had pounded wildly in my chest the first day Aria dragged me here, since I'd mistakenly assumed it provided a different kind of service. It wasn't until I got inside and caught a whiff of the sugary aroma permeating the air that I realized she'd only brought me here to treat me to some sweets.

In a surprising twist of events, the founder actually bid me to become a regular here. I debated bringing Novem with me at first, but this place was supposed to be a refuge for men. If female customers started showing up, their current clientele might feel less comfortable coming here.

"Ooh, this pie is delicious," Rondo said with a nod as he swallowed down a mouthful. He then paused, studying his plate. "But you know, looking at this logically, we sure aren't getting much for our money. I mean, I get it. This kinda stuff is expensive anyway, but still."

Freshly baked pies were divided into quarters, and one slice was sold with a beverage as a set. Two large copper coins did seem an awful lot for such a small meal, but sweet things were expensive no matter where you went. Ralph, meanwhile, had spent five large copper coins on his order today.

"Here you are. Your chocolate cake and our famous frau tart set. Please enjoy." As soon as she set down the rest of our order, she turned toward the door as a new customer walked in. "Welcome!" She disappeared off to attend to them.

Ralph's eyes lit up as he debated which dish to start with first. "This really is an amazing shop," he said. "Yeah, it's nice to fill your belly for only one large copper coin, but sometimes you gotta have some sweets! Now, let's see...which to eat first. Maybe I'll go with the chocolate cake!"

No sooner had the towering Ralph reached for the tiny chocolate cake than someone's petite hand shot out and beat him to it. This interloper grabbed his prized treat and took a bite out of it themselves.

"What do you think you're doing?! We're going to take this out...side..." Ralph shot to his feet, but the words died in his throat the moment he realized his cake thief was none other than Rachel.

She had grabbed his chocolate cake with her bare hands, and after wolfig it down, started licking her fingers clean as she stared at her companions. "Mm,

delicious. You boys have some explaining to do. Namely, why you decided to leave me out while you came here to enjoy yourselves.”

Rondo jumped out of his chair. “Uh, um, it’s not... Rachel, let’s talk. Ralph, say something to her.”

Ralph was in shock. Both because he’d had his cake swiped right out from under him and because he hadn’t wanted women to know about his sweet tooth. He’d sunk back into his seat and started silently forking his leftover tart into his mouth.

“Lord Lyle? What in the world is going on here?”

My head shot up. Zelphy was standing there, looking puzzled by the scene in front of her, while Novem looked at me with a mixture of bafflement and relief.

“Oh, uh, well...you see...”

The founder was likewise thrown off by their sudden appearance. “L-Little Novem! Th-This is all a misunderstanding! The boy’s got a perfectly good reason for being here. He’s gotta protect Miss Alice’s descendant, in case some lust-driven fools try anything funny with her!”

While the founder panicked, the second head calmly stated, “She cannot hear you. Besides, you are the one responsible for making Lyle come here even though he felt guilty toward Novem for doing it. You even got his acquaintances involved as well with your tomfoolery. Tsk, tsk. Now Lyle’s going to pay the price for *your* screwup.”

“You’re terrible,” the third head chided, aiming his criticism at the founder. “Absolutely awful.”

The fourth head had a more balanced view. “Well, you can’t really blame him. This isn’t the kind of place you can really bring a woman, given the clientele.”

I licked my lips and tried again. “Uh, so...w-we guys have things we like to talk about just between us. And we need a place that doesn’t stand out where we can meet up, so...”

Zelphy glanced at the menu. “I see. I thought this place looked like a café, but their main focus is sweets. Oh, this looks delicious. Girls, the boys seem willing

to treat us, so why don't we have a seat and order? I'm getting this entire cake for myself."

Her words shocked Ralph out of his stupor.

"A whole cake?" He gaped at her. "I haven't even ordered a whole cake myself!"

Rachel, meanwhile, plopped herself down and began making her own order. "I'll have this tart, and these three cakes. Oh, and for my drink, I'll have this."

A nearby waiter was penning down each item the girls had ordered so far. By herself, Rachel had already listed enough items to have a bill of eight large copper coins. A quick glance at Rondo revealed that he'd given up trying to argue the point. I turned my gaze to Novem.

"I'll have today's special. Oh, and a pie to take home with me as well," she said.

With that, my earnings for the day, as well as the extra cash Rondo and Ralph had saved up, disappeared in the blink of an eye. Strangely, Aria was nowhere to be seen during the whole fiasco. She'd been out here greeting customers only moments ago. Had she disappeared behind the counter while I wasn't looking?

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After treating the girls, we all headed back to our respective inns. Once we got through the door of our shared room, I couldn't stop the strange nervousness that seemed to consume me. It wasn't as if I'd gone somewhere particularly problematic. Why did I feel so guilty about it?

Novem took a seat on the bed. I stood there stiffly, waiting.

"Lord Lyle," she said finally.

"Yes?!"

In spite of how much she'd done to look after me, I'd kept something from her. I could apologize to her for that, but it wasn't like there was anything for me to feel bad about, right? That was the excuse I was thinking of using, anyway, until she held out a silver coin to me. I studied it, and when my gaze

returned to Novem's face, I noticed her smiling.

*This is terrifying.*

"Um, what's this for, Novem?"

"What you earn each day isn't enough to cover what you want to eat, I'm sure, and more than anything, that café has a mostly male customer base. If we were to go along with you, it would only make the other people there feel uncomfortable. I still expect you to bring me something home. All I ask in return is that you not go there every single day."

Instead of being angry with me, she was offering me money. How was I supposed to react to that? As I stared at her, dumbfounded, Novem smiled at me.

"You have been working hard every single day, so I'm sure you need somewhere you can relax. I, um...do know that there are shops that cater only to men? But, please, at least tell me where you're going from now on."

"What a wonderful girl," the founder said, pleased at her response. "Now there's no problem with us going to see little Aria—"

"Doesn't this only make it seem even more like Lyle is a deadbeat living off Novem?" the fifth head interrupted.

He had a point there. She was making more money than me, and she took care of the finances. Not to mention, she was the one who'd given me money to go off and spend however I wanted, almost like an allowance.

"It's not like I did it with any kind of ill intent," I said, trying to make excuses.

She smiled and nodded. "I know that. Part of the reason I'm giving you that money is to apologize for the trouble I caused. I hope you'll treat Mister Rondo and Mister Ralph with it on my behalf."

The way she handled the situation had the exact opposite effect; I was drowning in guilt over what I'd done.

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When I popped into Aria's shop the following day, she greeted me with a smile.

"Welcome!"

"Adorable as ever," the founder muttered wistfully from inside my Jewel. He was like putty whenever Aria was involved.

"I'd like to order a pie to go," I said. "If possible, I'd like to split it into two separate boxes."

She panned down my order. "Two separate boxes...got it. A gift for someone, I assume?"

"My schedule didn't match up today with the other boys, so I figured I'd deliver it as a gift. The other is for the girl who came here yesterday, Novem. She's, uh, my companion. Kinda like family, I guess."

As I struggled to explain our relationship, the second head sighed at me. "You could just be honest and tell her that Novem's your girlfriend."

Aria's hand froze. She peered at me and said, "So, um, hey. About yesterday...you had a purple-haired adventurer with you, right? Do you...know her?"

I tilted my head. I never dreamed she'd inquire about Zelphy, but I decided to be honest. "Yes, she's acting as my instructor currently. My companion and I are new at this, so she's teaching us all kinds of stuff."

"Oh, I see. Yeah..."

Relief washed over her face, but almost as quickly, she looked forlorn. She sensed my gaze, though, and quickly flashed a smile at me. "Sorry, I was just a little curious. I can at least treat you to a drink on the house today. You guys ordered so much yesterday that even the proprietor was over the moon."

I flashed back to the way the girls had inhaled plate after plate of pastries yesterday. When they'd decided to make a second order, Ralph, Rondo, and I had nearly cried.

*Actually, I'm pretty sure Ralph was crying.*

"We, uh, learned our lesson yesterday and won't be repeating that," I said.

"Well, try not to let it get you down. Let's both keep working hard." Aria's words were encouraging, and the smile she wore was so bright it was almost

blinding.

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That night, when I was summoned inside the Jewel, I arrived to discover the other house leaders circled around our despondent founder. Aria was the main reason for his gloomy mood. He was the one who'd pressured me into visiting her shop regularly, which had led to Novem finding out, which had led to her further walking on eggshells around me. The other house leaders had taken that as justification to condemn him for it.

The second head didn't even bother to mask his fury as he said, "So this girl resembles your first love and has the same last name, which likely means she's this Alice woman's descendant. And...what? You wanted Lyle to visit regularly so he could draw her attention for you?"

Despite being a bear of a man, the founder had basically curled in on himself. As the second head interrogated him, he nodded and admitted, "Yeah, that's right."

The fourth head paused to readjust his glasses. An eerie light gleamed off his lenses. "It wasn't mere pocket change he was spending there each day. And now, Novem is involved and, out of consideration for him, even offering him extra finances."

The founder glared at me. "That's because the stupid boy didn't bother to refuse her!"

"Not very mature of you to push the blame off on others," the third head remarked. He was no less detached and dispassionate than usual, but even his voice had a disapproving tone to it. "In fact, despite not making very much himself, Lyle dedicated what little he had to meet your request. Isn't it a bit uncalled for to pin everything on him when you're the real culprit here?"

Huh. I guess maybe I should have returned that money to Novem then. It hadn't even dawned on me to do that.

While I was reflecting on my own mistakes, the other house leaders continued to hound the founder.

The sixth head shrugged and shook his head. "Weren't you the one who said

he needed to treat Novem with the utmost respect? You really are a lowlife.”

Meanwhile, the fifth head stared at his son in disbelief. “Are those words really coming out of your mouth? Do you have any idea how much you...? No. Right now we’re talking about the founder. Even I think his attitude right now is unacceptable, especially given how much he constantly berates Lyle.”

“Indeed. He’s in no position to criticize Lyle for anything,” said the seventh head. When I first met him and my other predecessors inside the Jewel, he and the founder had been arguing. It probably didn’t help that their generations were the furthest apart, which only solidified his cold attitude toward the founder. “At any rate, do you care to explain precisely what this is all about?”

The founder rose to his feet and slammed his fists down on the table. I jumped in surprise, but the other leaders present didn’t look the least bit daunted.

“Enough already!” the founder snapped. “Let me tell you this here and now. If not for Miss Alice, House Walt as you know it would never have existed!”

Intrigued, the third head asked, “Which means she was one of your supporters, I presume? But I’ve never heard anything about House Lockwood backing us. They oversee a barony, do they not? In my generation, they lived in Central and served in a religious capacity.”

The seventh head nodded in agreement; apparently he also knew of the Lockwoods. “Yes, some kind of religious overseers. When it comes to ceremonies involving the Goddess, they plan everything and make all the arrangements. Although, it never seemed like they possessed much power themselves.”

The Lockwoods were religious administrators mainly involved in setting up ceremonies. They kept tabs on the implements used for these rites and were responsible for preparing whatever was needed. That made it strange, then, for Aria to be in Darion. Maybe she was only a distant relative of the main house, or maybe her surname was only coincidentally the same as the Lockwoods in the capital.

“Wrong!” the founder roared at us. “I...I wanted to marry Miss Alice, which is why I wanted to be independent. In Central, our family was at the bottom rung

of the palace nobility, and I was only the third son. I wanted to get out on my own so I could stand on equal footing with her! That's why...if not for her, none of you would've ever been born!"

The second head shot a cold look at the founder.

Judging by the founder's emotional outburst, coupled with the way he'd spoken up until now, I could assume he never got to marry this Alice person. That meant the second head, who was the founder's own son, was being subjected to the unpleasant topic of his father's first love.

"It's a little late at this point to be furious with you for holding someone else in your heart besides my mother. However, you mean to tell me that the whole reason you set out with that pioneering group was because you wanted to be independent? So you could marry your lover?"

The founder's face flushed. Personally, I didn't want to see a grown man with facial hair and a hardened look about him blush like a maiden in love.

"No! It's not like we were..." he hesitated. "I never even talked to her about it. Besides, by the time I came back to Central to get her, she...had already married into House Lockwood." The color left his cheeks, and he sank back into a gloomy state. I didn't even know how to feel, watching him deflate like that.

"If you never even spoke to her about your feelings, how'd you ever plan to marry her?" I asked. "Besides, wouldn't marriage kinda be off the table unless your houses discussed the impact of such a union between themselves to begin with?"

"As if this idiot would think to lay such groundwork ahead of time," the second head responded. "I'd be willing to bet he simply planned to charge into her house one day and beg them to give him their blessing. I'll bet her family was happier marrying her off the way they did, that way they were spared his stupidity."

As everyone regarded him coldly, the founder erupted again, shouting, "Whatever the case, I've been reunited with Miss Alice's descent, Aria! That's proof enough that my first love isn't 'over,' you understand? It's not! Meeting her was fate!"

"You're being silly," the third head said with a smirk. "Your first love *is* over, and this is all pure coincidence, not fate."

The founder slumped back in his chair as he cursed the rest of those present under his breath. Everyone else elected to ignore him and move on.

Still annoyed, the seventh head turned to me and said, "Lyle, that fool over there, disgraceful though he may be, is still the founding father of our house. If not for his Art, the rest of us would never have been able to use any Arts. This means that provided you can get him to impart his Art to you, the rest of us can impart ours to you as well."

The first Art recorded on this Jewel was one of the most basic types: a power-enhancing Art. While it was true that Arts were generally divided into the categories of frontline types, rearguard types, and support types, power-enhancing Arts could appear in any category. Physical enhancement was one of the easiest Arts to manifest and was a foundational part of Art usage.

The third head further elaborated, "Our specialty isn't in the explosive power that frontline types enjoy or the special strength the rearguard types exhibit. Support types revolve around enhancement, lifting the body's normal parameters to greater heights. When using them, you'll probably feel something like a ten or twenty percent boost to your normal power."

Support-type enhancements were supposed to be the most balanced.

The second head nodded in agreement. "Even if we were to teach you our Arts now, you would immediately drain your mana pool dry. I was hoping you would be able to use this moron's Art in order to beef up your mana pool temporarily to combat that problem, but alas..."

It seemed they'd actually given the issue proper consideration, which was why they hadn't bothered teaching me anything yet—namely because I wouldn't be able to use their Arts anyway in my current state. My biggest obstacle was that it would drain what little mana I had left.

The sixth head fixed his gaze on me. "Your own Art manifested and is still yet undeveloped. On top of that, you're already being drained by the link you have established to the Jewel. The number of sources tapping you of energy has increased and left you with little surplus for using what we have to teach you."

“Even with that in mind, the amount of mana you possess to begin with isn’t especially impressive,” said the fourth head as he turned his gaze back to our founder. “The surest, easiest way to solve that issue so that we can share our Arts requires you being able to use the founder’s Art, which we call ‘Full Over.’ It’s a convenient ability to have, one that all the historic leaders have used.”

I looked at the founder, who’d already averted his gaze and refused to look at me. “And why would I be fool enough to teach this helpless boy my Art, eh?”

My shoulders slumped. The other leaders were no less aggravated by his stubborn refusal and shook their heads.

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Three weeks had passed since Zelphy first accepted her role as our instructor. I wrapped up work as usual, and after turning in my official grade report, I was about to head off when Zelphy stopped me. We instead made our way to a café on Darion’s main street. There, I sat back in my chair and sipped on the drink Zelphy had treated me to and listened to what she had to say.

The café in question had a peaceful atmosphere. Perhaps this was natural given its location, with towering windows that made it easy to observe the people milling about outside. Even the wood of the tables and chairs was excellent quality, put together by a skilled craftsman.

“This place is pretty down-to-earth, so I like it here. They have some really good cake too,” Zelphy said, grinning as she teased me. She was wielding a tiny fork and cutting her cake into bite-size pieces before she elegantly tucked it between her lips.

Once we dispensed with the initial pleasantries, her face hardened.

“We’re taking a break tomorrow. I assume you have all your equipment sorted out. Make sure to have it equipped the day after tomorrow, and we’ll head out. It’s a bit sooner than I’d planned, but you’re strong enough to handle it now. Plus, you seem to have saved enough funds already.”

Having undertaken these errand-type missions daily, Novem and I had managed to stash away a respectable sum of money, which was the main reason Zelphy was ready to move on to the next step of our training.

Zelphy must have sensed my relief at finally arriving at this point, because she added, “Under normal circumstances, a group has to work anywhere from three to six months to save up enough to buy all the supplies they need. You guys already had the finances, so I’m sure you didn’t need this extra, but this is a good principle to keep in mind regardless. Adventurers always have to start from the ground up so they can get their gear sorted out. If you happen to lose some of the equipment, or one of your comrades is seriously injured, you can always go back to those types of low-difficulty missions to scrape by. Can’t hurt to have that in the back of your head.”

I nodded silently.

“Now, have you looked into the kind of monsters that show up around Darion?” Zelphy asked.

Novem said, “Yes. Slimes, for one, which can be found just about anywhere. There are also killer rabbits and other insect-type beasts as well.”

Soldiers and knights periodically patrolled Darion’s vicinity as well as their main highways, so it was a safe area by and large. The liege lord’s dedication to his duties meant that any dangerous monsters were quickly dispatched, maintaining peace in and around Darion. This did have the downside of decreasing the work available for adventurers, but it wasn’t necessarily all bad.

“Anyone can kill those types of beasts, long as they don’t panic. But we’re adventurers. Getting rid of them isn’t good enough. We have to strip them of their raw materials. That means you don’t want to damage them, otherwise the merchants will only offer you a pittance for them. You need to be conscious not to damage the most valuable parts as you take down each monster.”

True, killing them was easy. A group of adults could surround a beast and bash it to death, but there wouldn’t be much point if what precious materials the creature had to offer were ruined in the process.

“What’s important here is how you retrieve those materials and whether you have the right tools to do it. There’ll be a big difference in the coin you bring home if you don’t have the proper equipment. And the biggest problem with novices is that they have it in their heads that killing the enemy is all that matters. Anyway, once you two have everything you need, make sure you show

up in the morning the day after tomorrow at our usual time. And actually, come to think of it, bring extra equipment if you can.”

She'd already filled us in on what we needed for our first trek out of Darion. Novem and I had gone out on our days off to purchase anything we didn't already have. We were plenty ready for this.

“Anyhow, I'll teach you the finer ins and outs of all this when it's finally time to use them,” said Zelphy.

Finally, Novem and I were going to be able to leave Darion with Zelphy and do work outside the city walls. A huge wave of relief washed over me; I was finally starting to feel like a real adventurer.

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A number of stalls lined one of Darion's back streets. Aria, snugly wrapped in a coat, made her way over to one of them. A man sat there, three sheets to the wind, holding an empty wooden cup in one hand. His cheeks were flushed, his hair was long, and he had a noticeable five o'clock shadow even as he snored peacefully. His clothes were utterly filthy, indicating that he'd promptly taken a tumble in the mud somewhere.

The other nearby stalls hosted similar customers—citizens and adventurers alike knocking back strong spirits.

“You've got it rough,” said the owner of the stall in front of Aria. “But I'm afraid business is business. I'm gonna have to ask you to pay five large copper coins.”

Aria dug out her wallet from her coat. She was fortunate that her current workplace paid well. Many girls objected to wearing cute, frilly outfits and short skirts, which was part of why the proprietor offered such a handsome wage. Aria's biggest problem was her father, who practically drowned himself in alcohol each day while dabbling in gambling. She was the one saddled with settling his debts.

“I-I'm sorry about this,” she stuttered. “I only have three large copper coins to offer today.”

In truth, she had four in her wallet, but if she didn't hold onto one of them,

she wouldn't be able to afford food tomorrow.

The owner pulled a face at her, having heard this excuse before. "I'll put it on his tab, but you do realize he already owes nearly thirty large copper coins, yeah? And this isn't the only place he owes money, missy. You strike me as a good daughter, but even with that..."

She lowered her head. The owner's gaze was focused on her plastered father. It wasn't long ago that he'd been a baron—an aristocrat. Now he was nothing more than a jobless drunk, one who squandered his daughter's earnings on gambling and booze.

"I really am sorry! I swear I'll do something about what he owes," Aria promised.

The owner turned back to her. "If things keep up, you'll get sold off as a prostitute, y'know. You'd better do something fast before that happens. It's not easy for me either, seeing an acquaintance fall on hard times."

She passed the three large copper coins over to him, thanked him for his compassion, and grabbed her father's arm, looping it over her shoulder so she could pull him up. The stench of alcohol stung her nostrils. Worse yet, her father was heavy, not being in the right mind to support himself.

As she began to drag him off, the owner called after her. "You'd better be careful, missy. That dad of yours borrowed cash from some shady-looking people. He was apparently pretty persuasive, convincing them to loan to him, but if he's got such a convincing mouth on him, he oughta use it to get some real work for himself."

Aria smiled bitterly at the compliment, even as she hauled her father back to their home.

*I know things aren't going to work the way they are. But I also know that someday, father will get back on his feet again.*

After all, he'd been an aristocrat once, and he'd worked earnestly to fulfill his duties. At least, Aria wanted to believe as much. It was because of her father that the two of them had lost everything and wound up here, though. The Lockwoods had once been a prestigious house in Central. Now, they lived in a

cheap apartment in Darion, just the two of them scraping by.

Aria's father had embezzled finances, resulting in his fall from grace. Such a crime would normally warrant execution. Even the perpetrator's family couldn't escape some kind of heavy punishment. It wasn't until afterward that Aria had learned the truth. Her father hadn't been the only one to dirty his hands, which was why the incident was resolved behind closed doors. What she couldn't stand was the fact that only the Lockwoods had been punished for it.

"Father, we're almost home," she called to him.

He didn't respond. Every day he would take whatever money she had earned, lose it on gambling, and then guzzle alcohol he couldn't pay for. In spite of that, Aria held out hope that he would one day return to the competent man she'd once known.

## Chapter 11: Fitting Level of Strength

It was early morning when we arrived at the Guild, where other adventurers had already gathered in droves. As I stood at the reception counter, clad in my equipment, I surveyed the area. Something felt a little off to me. Since Novem was standing right beside me, I decided to ask her about what was niggling at the back of my mind.

“Why do adventurers need to gather at the Guild before they leave the city limits? Isn’t that kinda inefficient?”

“I assume because the Guild views it as an important custom,” Novem replied, not nearly as skeptical of this practice as I was. “And they *are* the ones who oversee adventurers. I think it’s also in their favor to make sure everyone venturing outside of the city submits paperwork beforehand.”

Zelphy, sporting her own armor, showed up in the midst of Novem’s explanation and seamlessly hopped into our conversation. “She basically got the gist of it. But it’s also easier for the Guild to keep tabs on people if they know where they’re going and when they plan to return. That way, if there are any problems, they can easily send someone out if they need to. Basically, it increases your chances of getting rescued should the worst come to pass. Their real objective, though, is that in case of an emergency—if the unthinkable happens—they’ll have an easier time searching for you.”

I clutched my Guild card in my hand as I remembered that the Guild also kept their own copy. Should the card’s owner pass away, the card was configured to cross out their name to indicate their death. That was an easy way for the Guild to keep a record of casualties.

“That does make sense,” the third head remarked from within the Jewel. “In a way, these adventurers who head beyond the outskirts of the city are almost like scouts, putting their lives at risk. If anything happened to them, it helps the Guild to know the spot of their death and how many were killed. I’m impressed. They’ve got a smart system in place.”

I more or less understood their motivations for this practice now too. From an adventurers' standpoint, it was a bonus that if they didn't return in their intended time frame, the Guild was likely to send someone out to help. That certainly was a good enough reason to stop by the Guild and submit paperwork before a long excursion.

I glanced at Zelphy. She was wearing leather armor that covered most of her skin. She carried a shield on her back and a sword at her side. These were apparently her weapons of choice in battle. She had a bag slung over her shoulder, as well as several small satchels positioned around her hips. It was clear from the state of her equipment that it had seen some use.

Zelphy slung a cloak over her shoulders, then paused to examine the two of us. I was clad in thick layers of clothing with leather armor fastened over the top. I wore gauntlets on both of my hands, and I had a saber and short sword hanging at my hip. Like Zelphy, I also wore an open cloak on top.

Novem's equipment was nearly identical to mine; she also carried a short sword and tools with her. The only difference was that, rather than a saber, she carried a staff—her family's heirloom.

"Looks like you're both ready, at a glance anyway," Zelphy noted. "We don't have the spare time for me to check your luggage. If it turns out you're missing anything, I'll put you back to work doing those errand missions, so just keep that in mind. Now, let's turn in our paperwork and hit the road."

Zelphy made her way over to one of the desks, plucked out the required form, and began filling in the necessary information. Namely, who was involved—what party, that is—where we were going, and when we planned to return. Simple enough to jot down and be done with. It seemed almost insignificant, but if the worst came to pass and our lives were on the line, perhaps we'd be glad we did it.

"I tried to pick out a fairly deserted place for us to go. If a place is too crowded, we'd be bumping elbows while I try to teach you guys the ins and outs, and that'd be a mess. We're in for a bit of a walk, but you'll just have to bear with it," Zelphy said after she finished submitting our paperwork.

With that out of the way, we left the Guild.

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It was a cloudy day. According to Zelphy, the sunlight would be overbearingly strong if it were a clear day, so this weather was actually preferable. The light curtain of clouds in the sky suggested it wouldn't immediately rain, but Zelphy still warned us to maintain caution.

Currently, the three of us were making our way down one of the highways near Darion. Zelphy's steps were careful, her eyes scanning the travelers and soldiers we passed as we went. The chances of us encountering a dangerous beast close to the road was slim, so it wasn't monsters she was looking out for. No, she was looking for a certain type of individual.

"There, let's try that one," Zelphy suggested as she produced a small bottle of medicine from her luggage. Or maybe "vial" was more correct, given its proportions.

The man Zelphy approached had sustained an injury to his foot. The cape hanging from his shoulders was also noticeably singed.

Zelphy raised a hand to the man in greeting as she approached. "Hey there, looks like you've had a rough time of it."

"More like a total disaster. I stopped for a rest, then these slimes came flying at me. They were hidden in the grass, and I couldn't see them approach. Thanks to them, my foot's stinging like it's been stuck with a bunch of needles."

Part of the man's pants were torn, revealing swollen red skin. Zelphy glanced at his injuries before offering him her vial.

"Here, use this."

He took it with a smile. "I appreciate it. If it's slimes you're looking for, you'd be best trying a few kilometers ahead. There's a whole swarm of them there. A lot more than the sorry bunch that attacked me earlier."

Having passed on that information by way of thanking her for the medicine, the traveler went on his way.

"I assume that medicine was a sort of 'fee' to purchase information?" Novem guessed.

That did seem to be the case.

Zelphy turned her gaze back to the two of us as she answered, “Yeah, but just know that not everyone will react the same way that traveler did. Part of the reason I had you buy so many cheap medicine vials was so you’d have them in case you got injured and needed them. Better to have plenty on hand if you’re giving them out to other people, right? And this way, we don’t have to go searching blindly. Not a bad trade if you ask me.”

True, rather than squandering valuable time by groping in the wilderness, it was probably considerably more efficient to do this.

As we continued on our way, we spotted some other young adventurers. It was a group of three we’d seen a number of times at the Guild by now. They were currently encircled around a couple of slimes.

“Hey! Don’t let them come this way!”

“Don’t ask for the impossible! I’ve got my hands full here!”

“Ugh, it’s got my leg... Dammit!”

The group were wielding knives and trying to combat the slimes, one of which had already lashed out and attached itself to an adventurer’s leg, gradually melting the skin. This was how slimes consumed their meals; they would latch onto an approaching creature and slowly dissolve their prey.

Fortunately, one of the other adventurers managed to drive their knife into the slime’s core. Yellow-green liquid began gushing out, spilling across the ground. With that one down, they had only one more to go. This one they stabbed repeatedly, completely butchering the outer layer of the slime’s skin.

“Amateurs,” grumbled the founder. “Coulda just taken it down with one good stab, but instead they attack like wild barbarians.”

Zelphy was of the same mind. “Tsk, how incompetent. I’m sure it’s probably because they panicked, being suddenly attacked by two of them, but they could’ve grabbed a stick and tied their knife to it to form a crude spear. That’d have been a better option than this. When you consider that one of them got injured on top of that, they’re going to be in the red even after they claim their reward.”

I watched the group, who were now rejoicing that they'd successfully conquered the slimes.

"Um, aren't you going to tell them that?" I asked.

Zelphy stared back at me. "Why would I do that? I'm instructing the two of you, not them. Besides, if knives are their weapon of choice, they're only playing at being adventurers. It's better for them to learn the hard way facing fewer dangerous monsters like those slimes."

In other words, a true adventurer would have the proper equipment before going out into battle, and they would engage the monsters in a way that wouldn't damage the materials they could later procure from it.

Still not entirely convinced, I furrowed my brows.

"Lord Lyle, I think Miss Zelphy is correct," said Novem. "They haven't tried learning to do better to begin with. If misfortune is what it takes for them to open their eyes, then so be it. And if they still don't get it after that, then that's on them."

"That seems a bit cold to me," I mumbled.

Novem's lips thinned, but she said nothing more.

"Well, then, are you going to jump in and save them?" Zelphy asked. "They are still wet behind the ears, but they chose to venture out of the city limits. You're still a beginner yourself. If you wanna call my attitude 'cold,' do it once you're a full-fledged adventurer. As long as those idiots keep playing at adventuring, they're inevitably going to get themselves killed. If you feel sorry for them and want to look after them, then I assume you're prepared to be in it for the long haul, yeah?"

Prepared to be in it for the long haul... Those words made me recoil. Couldn't we simply teach these newbies a more efficient way to take down their enemies and be done with it? They were injured too. We could at least give them medicine—

"Lyle," the second head interrupted, "if you saw someone starving, would you agree to keep supplying them with meals every day? Once you give someone something, they come under the false impression that you're going to keep

giving to them. That situation isn't beneficial to you or the starving man, in this case."

"You can't even make it on your own, so don't even think about trying to help others," warned the usually reticent fifth head. He was especially intent on emphasizing the fact that I wasn't a capable adventurer yet either. "Right now, your priority should be following Zelphy's directions. You're still learning yourself. If you're really that desperate to help others out, then focus on becoming capable enough that you can afford to do so. No use even talking about it until then."

My house leaders were of the opinion that I didn't have the luxury to be concerning myself with others, and honestly, I couldn't argue the point with them.

I forced myself to swallow back any complaints and muttered, "I'm sorry, Miss Zelphy. You're right."

Zelphy continued walking. I thought that was the end of it, but she called over her shoulder, "It's not that wanting to help others is a bad thing. But, y'know, you gotta think about the consequences of doing it. Otherwise, your sympathy could end up dooming the people you save."

Novem kept apace beside me, glancing at my face as she said, "On the other hand, that does mean that once you have proven yourself capable, you're free to help whomever you want. Let's strive to do our best so we can reach that goal as soon as possible. I promise I'll work hard to keep up with you."

Reassured by her heartwarming smile, I finally nodded.

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It was just as the traveler had told us.

Just beyond the highway, we discovered a forest with not a soul in sight. The grass-filled area was occupied by a number of slimes. I'd seen them in pictures before, but their pea-green coloring was even more eerie in person. Each one differed slightly in size. Beneath their translucent skin was a light red area, indicating their core. Destroying that was one way to kill them. The other was to pierce their skin, thereby causing their bodily fluids to spill out. Slimes weren't

aggressive, provided you didn't bother them, but even a properly equipped adventurer who approached a swarm without due caution would find themselves in danger.

Now that we'd found our quarry, Zelphy began instructing us. She picked up a small pebble from the ground nearby and tossed it in the air a couple of times before catching it.

"Listen up, 'kay? Doesn't matter what kinda adventurer you are, if you find yourself surrounded, you're going to be in real danger. That goes for any monster, slimes included. That's why you have to keep your eyes peeled at all times. It's pivotal you move cautiously to avoid getting surrounded. When your opponent is clumped together like this and moving in unison, you handle them like...this!"

She threw the pebble at one of the slimes. Its elastic skin jiggled from the impact, and although it had no eyes or nose, it sensed our presence and began moving toward us. It was more agile than its appearance suggested.

Zelphy unsheathed the sword at her side and stepped forward. Instead of meeting the slime head-on, she moved diagonally and positioned herself so that she could slay the creature in one blow. No sooner did it charge her than she thrust her sword right through its skin, pinning it to ground. Zelphy's weapon of choice was a one-handed sword with a slender, double-edged blade. As she yanked it out of the ground—and, by extension, the slime—she paused to survey the area before beckoning us over.

She shrugged off her bag and dug inside for a pair of thin leather gloves. Once she'd secured those over her hands, she touched the slime's skin. Goopy liquid was gushing out of the slain creature. The sight was enough to make me nauseous. As for the slime's skin, though it had gotten a bit dirty in the scuffle, it appeared to be completely transparent.

"The materials you can sell from a slime are its skin and core," Zelphy explained. "It's better if you can avoid destroying the core, and you want the skin in as pristine condition as possible. If you plan to primarily hunt slimes, then it'd be a good idea to buy a spear you can use specifically for stabbing them. Well, really, that kinda thing is totally up to you. They also sell poles with

a fine, needlelike tip at the end. If you're interested in giving it a try, it'd be worth purchasing one to test out. Aha! Here we go."

With practiced hands, Zelphy safely retrieved both the skin and the core. She'd pulled out what looked like a small cask, into which she deposited the skin. The core she tucked inside her leather bag.

On the ground where the slime's fluids had spilled out was a small red stone —what people referred to as a Demonic Stone. This she stowed away in a different bag.

"It's more convenient to keep the materials you're going to sell separated," she said, by way of explanation. "The merchants on the first floor will purchase anything you bring back, but they tend to prefer you be quick about it. If you piddle around too much, the merchants and your fellow adventurers will resent you for the wasted time. I should also mention that Demonic Stones are sold at a different location. The Guild oversees them, so you can't pawn them off to the merchants. All that is to say, make sure you separate your materials like I'm doing."

Once she finished, Zelphy carefully sealed the lid on her cask and tightened the cord on her leather bag. She peeled off her gloves and stowed them in one of her bag's outer pockets.

"The gloves you use for retrieving materials should never be used for anything else. Not sanitary. And while we're on the topic, just as you assign meal prep to someone, it's fine to assign material retrieval as well. Ideally, you want everyone in your team to be able to retrieve materials, which is why I'm going to teach both of you how to do it for now, but once you've got that down, you can decide between yourselves who's going to do it."

Zelphy paused to survey the area. There were still dozens of slimes present.

"I guess we'll have you do it next, Lyle. Give it a try."

I shrugged off the luggage I was carrying and set it aside. Zelphy kept her eyes on me but said nothing. Mirroring her earlier example, I grabbed a pebble and flung it at one of the slimes. The slime soon came bouncing toward us, and I unsheathed my saber.

Few shops in Darion sold sabers, and when I did finally manage to purchase one, its quality was less than impressive. Nevertheless, I was practiced enough with this weapon that its subpar make was irrelevant.

As the slime approached, I moved swiftly and thrust my blade into it. I retreated a step once I was positive my weapon found its mark. Gooey, yellow-green fluid gushed out of the slime's body. It made no further movements.

"This is surprisingly easy," I observed.

As Zelphy kept a watchful eye on me, I tried to move quickly and retrieve the creature's materials, but I couldn't get over how nauseating this sort of work was. It didn't help that the slime's skin was far more slippery than I'd imagined. Eventually, I managed to retrieve all the materials, though it took me about twice as long as it did Zelphy.

I turned to face our instructor, who immediately pointed out, "Lyle, I can at least say the way you took down the slime was good. Seems you're accustomed to wielding a blade, and judging by the way you handled yourself, you're in a good place for the rest of our lessons."

"Thank you!"

Alas, my joy was short-lived.

"However!" Zelphy said, raising her voice for emphasis. "You set your luggage to the side before attacking. Didn't it occur to you that someone might steal your things while you weren't looking? Luckily for you, Novem immediately moved over to your luggage and kept a lookout, but normally, that's something you have to communicate with your team. Your lack of dexterity isn't a big issue at the moment, but your lack of awareness and caution is a problem. As a result, I'm only awarding you twenty points."

Although she'd praised me for my sword work, I'd done a poor job with everything else.

"Well, can't say I disagree with her," offered the second head. "Lyle, you need to be sure to communicate with the people around you. You were lucky Novem stepped in for you this time, but you can't expect that someone is always going to read your mind and cover you. Moreover, your team is too vulnerable. You

haven't got the numbers you need. That's precisely why each one of you needs to keep a wary eye on your surroundings."

Noticing how deflated I was, Novem added, "Lord Lyle, don't forget that she praised your weapon skill. Everything else you can simply work on improving from here on out."

Zelphy glanced at Novem and nodded. "That's right. And now you understand, don't you? There's few people who can easily put into practice what they're told. That's precisely why I'm here to teach you. But really, it's up to each individual and their motivation to improve."

It seemed I still had a long way to go before I would be a full-fledged adventurer. With that thought in mind, I retrieved my bag and slung it over my shoulder.

Next up was Novem.

"Here," I said, holding my saber out to her. "I'm sure it'd be better to use this than a staff. The splashback is pretty nasty."

"Thank you," she replied graciously, accepting it. "Please keep an eye on my luggage for me."

I took up position beside her things while she searched for a pebble to throw.

"I've got a bad feeling..." the founder muttered from within the Jewel. "Lyle, something's coming this way. Have your weapon ready."

"Lyle, keep an eye on your surroundings," the second head advised, breaking his usual pattern of following up anything the founder said with a scathing retort. In fact, he seemed to trust his father's instincts on this. "Tell Zelphy too. All of you need to be ready for combat immediately!"

I yanked my short sword from its sheath, threw my bag to the ground, and surveyed the area. I opened my mouth to say something to Zelphy, but she'd already set her things aside and fastened her shield to her left arm, gripping her sword in the other.

"I have to hand it to you for noticing before I did, Lyle! Both of you, stay behind me!" Zelphy took up a defensive stance as she turned toward the forest,

which was where I could sense something lurking.

A number of creatures darted out from the underbrush. Their dark skin and green eyes immediately gave them away as goblins. They wore straw skirts and brandished either cudgels or stone axes. There were eleven of them in total, which was a conspicuously large group even for goblins, who typically traveled together in small numbers. No, this was far too many to be normal.

When the first one charged, Zelphy deflected the attack with her shield, knocking the creature off-balance as her blade came crashing down on the creature's exposed stomach. Blood sprayed everywhere, and Zelphy blocked the splatter with her shield as she retreated a step. Another goblin came swinging at her from the side, but she evaded.

"She's good," the sixth head remarked as he watched. "A fitting level of strength to be your instructor, I'd say."

The seventh head was less inclined to recognize her skills, if only because he had a deep-seated hatred of adventurers. "In my day," he said, "every one of House Walt's soldiers had at least this level of skill. No, in fact, if a man were content with only that, he'd be scolded harshly for slacking off."

While my historic house leaders gave their running commentary, Zelphy cut down her second goblin. There were still nine more to go.

"Really," Zelphy scoffed in annoyance. "Why, of all days, does something like this have to happen... Eat this!" She lashed out to the side with her shield arm. The nearest goblin was still a considerable distance away, so naturally her attack didn't make its mark, yet it didn't seem like she'd merely panicked and missed.

As Novem watched, she muttered, "Magic, I guess? And a unique type, at that."

One of the goblins must have assumed that she'd missed the timing of her attack, leaving an opening. It rushed toward her. In the same instant, flames encircled Zelphy's shield. When she swiped with her shield arm again, a number of fireballs shot forth. Two of the goblins took direct hits, and the flames engulfed them. While they flailed in agony, Zelphy cut them both down.

I'd never seen this magic before. Novem, on the other hand, nodded to herself as she watched, having mentally pieced the puzzle together.

In an amused voice, the fourth head commented, "She's an Art user, and a rearguard type at that. The kind that makes something really unique out of their magic. She's using the Fire Bullet spell but conjuring multiple compact ones instead of a single bullet. Her magic is intriguing, and it's easy to use in battle too."

Unfortunately, more and more goblins were spilling out of the forest. Zelphy also seemed wary of their growing number.

The founder shouted from the Jewel, "Hey, boy! Get your butt outta there! There's too many, and if they surround you, you'll all be toast. You hear me? I said move!"

Despite the tension in the air, the seventh head remained perfectly calm and collected as he quipped, "Don't be ridiculous. Lyle, go on and show them all how strong you truly are. A group this small is no match for you. I know it."

"Novem, my saber," I said, holding my hand out toward her.

"Yes, of course."

She quickly passed it over. Now I finally had my saber in my right hand and the short sword in my left.

Zelphy shouted back at us, "They'll surround us if we don't do something fast. You two go on and escape. I'll find a way to handle this myself."

No doubt she figured we'd only weigh her down if we stayed—she wouldn't have ordered us to run otherwise—but with the addition of five more goblins added to the mix, the enemy now numbered twelve, even with the ones Zelphy had defeated.

I raised my left hand in the air and said, "Miss Zelphy, I must kindly ask you not to move at all."

"What? What are you—?" She whipped around and started to yell at me, only to be cut short as I finished conjuring my spell.

"Lightning!" A bright pale light shone from my left hand. The crack of

electricity filled the air, deafening, as the spell spread throughout the entire area. I knew I couldn't risk hitting Zelphy, so I had to avoid the goblins on the other side of her.



Tendrils of lightning lashed out at eight of the goblins, leaving only charred remains behind. The ninth goblin was lucky enough to escape with its life—only because my spell missed for some reason—though its arm was scorched to a crisp.

I furrowed my brows. “Something feels...different than before.”

Maybe it was because I possessed the Jewel now, but my aim was less accurate than before. The power of my spell was also diminished. I flung my short sword at the goblin who’d narrowly escaped death. The blade pierced right through its head and knocked it flat on its back.

“Allow me to assist as well,” Novem offered, lifting her staff.

One of the goblins tried to lunge at Zelphy, but an invisible wind slammed into it. This was Wind Bullet, one of the many bullet-type spells that involved slinging pure magical energy at an opponent. It was a basic spell and easy to use, so it was usually the first spell most mages practiced when learning. Its potency, however, changed depending on its user. A normal mage’s Wind Bullet would only knock an opponent away, but at a skill level as high as Novem’s, an opponent would not only go flying, but shatter into pieces by the force of the impact.

“Hold on,” the second head gasped in disbelief. “You’re telling me the two of you could use this level of magic the whole time?!”

Even the founder was flabbergasted. “Little Novem being exceptional is one thing, but I had no idea Lyle was a real mage himself.”

The sixth head sniffed at the two, as if disgusted by their obliviousness. He explained, “I told you, didn’t I? Lyle is from a bloodline superior to even that of Banseim royalty. He is descended from true ancient royalty. Naturally, that means he’s an exceptional magic user. Not that what he exhibited just now was particularly special. I’ll have you know that even I could do that much.”

I felt almost nauseous watching the goblin Novem had hit flail back through the air, but this was no time to dawdle. I readjusted my grip on the hilt of my saber and dashed forward.

“Three left... I’ll deal with these,” I muttered to Zelphy as I slipped past her.

Almost immediately, one of the goblins jumped out in front of me. Before Zelphy could even react, I'd already sliced through the cudgel it swung at me, my blade driving right down through its skull. The resistance as my saber bit through skin and muscle was unsettling, but I immediately retreated a step to avoid the splashback of its blood. Unfortunately, I couldn't completely dodge it.

I scanned the area without missing a beat and noticed the second goblin was trying to loop around me from behind. I sliced it in two, right down the middle.

"I can't believe he's able to do all this with a saber," the fourth head blurted in surprise.

The last goblin immediately panicked and attempted to flee, but I ran it down. Showing its back was a fatal mistake. I turned my saber on its side and thrust, piercing the creature's heart directly. I'd attempted to aim so that my blade would avoid any bones, slipping right through the gap in its ribs to find its mark, and as if to indicate my success, the goblin choked up blood, which splattered on the ground as it collapsed forward.

Sensing no other living monsters in the area, I pulled out a towel I had tucked into my pocket and pressed it to my mouth. "Ugh, I feel even more nauseous than I thought I would."

Novem and Zelphy rushed over to me.

"That was incredible, Lord Lyle," Novem stated, even as she eyed me with concern.

Zelphy gaped at me in disbelief. "I'm shocked," she said. "I knew you could use magic, but I never dreamed you could use it at this kind of level."

I tilted my head at her, puzzled as to why she would sound so amazed. "It's nothing special."

"Dummy." She shook her head at me. "Among adventurers, anyone with even a little magic skill is considered a mage, myself included. That spell you saw before with the numerous bullets? That's about all I can use. I never even considered that you could use magic to this degree. And you have some serious talent for the sword as well."

Zelphy freely admitted that she'd underestimated my abilities. I couldn't help

but be a teensy, tiny bit happy about that. The only issue was that I was feeling terribly lightheaded.

Novem studied my complexion and frowned. “Lord Lyle, did you perhaps push yourself too much? But, um, I am fairly certain you were able to fight at this level before without any issues, so... Lord Lyle!”

My legs buckled, and I collapsed onto my bottom. It was so abrupt that I couldn’t climb back to my feet. I’d used too much of my mana. This would’ve been nothing for me in the past, but the Art I’d manifested was still incomplete. The Jewel was also constantly guzzling me dry as well. That unfortunately limited how much mana I had left to use in battle.

“Hey, you all right?” Zelphy asked. “Guessing you wore yourself out since you’re not used to this kinda stuff. Let’s take a little break. Novem, keep a lookout. I’ll go ahead and salvage materials and Demonic Stones from these goblins. Lyle, you just stay there and rest for now.”

Now that was a proposal I could get behind. The only issue was that I had no idea when my body would recover enough that I could move again.

Zelphy surveyed the area. “Still, this is odd. I’ve never seen this many goblins appear in this area before. On the odd occasion they did show up, there’d only ever be two or three. Did they flee here from somewhere else?” She fell into silent contemplation, scrutinizing our surroundings as she got to work harvesting materials from the goblins’ corpses.

Unfortunately, there weren’t many usable materials you could get from goblin carcasses, but Zelphy did saw off their slightly pointed ears. She also managed to recover Demonic Stones from their hearts. By the time she finished collecting everything she could, she had piled the bodies in one spot and started to burn them. Novem stepped in to assist her.

Alas, even with the respite they’d afforded me, I was unable to fully recover, and we had no choice but to return to the city.

## Chapter 12: Reluctance

Ciel was the name of the sweets shop tucked away in Darion's backstreets, with a storefront that warded off all but male customers, and it was here that I met with Rondo to get his advice. Ralph was seated beside him, savoring each bite of a cake he'd ordered as if it was pure paradise.

The peaceful atmosphere made it difficult for me to voice the concerns weighing on my mind. I didn't want to put a damper on things, not when I knew how much Ralph cherished his time here.

Rondo sipped on his drink as he listened to me speak, and when I finished, he said, "I get it. Basically, you want to do something to prevent your mana from running dry. Hate to break it to you, but this is out of my wheelhouse. My sword is a Demonic Tool, so it does use some mana, but never so much that it would drain me completely. Mostly because I don't ordinarily use it enough to run that risk."

The gist of my concern could be summed up in a single question: What can you do to ensure your mana doesn't run out? Much to my chagrin, Rondo had given me a less than satisfactory answer.

"Isn't there any other way to work on this besides training myself?" I asked.

Rondo took another drink, his eyes drifting upward as he contemplated his answer. "If you lack stamina, you can just build muscle and fix the problem. But, sadly, this doesn't work the same way. The only thing you can really do is wait for your body to mature. I've actually used up all my mana before, but fortunately, it wasn't during an actual battle. Not sure I could've survived if it was." He pulled a face, frowning.

Aria made her way over to our table and announced, "Your take-out pie is ready. When you decide to leave, be sure to let me know so I can get it for you." She paused, scrutinizing our faces. "You guys look awfully grim."

Since we frequented this place so regularly, Aria and I had started speaking

more casually with each other. She was naturally concerned, seeing how disheartened I looked.

“What a good girl,” remarked the founder, his voice full of emotion. “Alice must’ve been just as pure of heart as little Aria here. I’m sure of it.”

The second head, who was ever critical of his predecessor, sneered. “And how would you have any idea when you never spoke to her?” He clicked his tongue in annoyance.

Not that I could blame him; it had to be hard, watching your father fawn and gush over another woman despite being married.

“Oh, uh, well...” I started. “A few days ago I got some actual battle experience. Sadly, a lot of things kinda went wrong in the process.”

As she listened, her eyes shone with envy. “Oh, really...”

Part of me was curious about what her vague remark meant. I thought about asking, but before I could, Ralph polished off his cake and left his chair. Rondo followed his lead, chair legs scraping against the floor as he got up. It seemed the two of them had to be going already.

“Lyle, sorry about this, but we’re out of time,” Rondo said. “We’ll leave some money to cover our expenses. You can use the extra to help pay for your portion. Ralph, once we get your pie, let’s be off. We won’t hear the end of it from Rachel if we piddle around.”

“We’ll be goin’ then,” Ralph said, a satisfied grin spread wide across his face. “Try not to fret too much about things, Lyle. Better to spend that time trainin’ instead of mopin’. And, uh, Aria...you sure your prices haven’t been hiked up?”

“The shop is in a bit of a bind as well,” Aria explained. “The cost for ingredients has gone up lately. More bandits have been out and about too, so they’re charging us additional fees to cover the cost of hiring escorts. Every shop in the city is being affected.”

Satisfied with that answer, Ralph waved us farewell, then followed Rondo outside. Aria began cleaning up their dishes as soon as they were gone.

“Miss Aria, it seemed like you were a little envious of me just a second ago,” I

said.

“Noticed that, huh? You’re an observant one. I do enjoy my work here, but I’m really more suited for physical labor. I thought about becoming an adventurer at first, but it’s not really possible with all the family issues I have. Not to mention...this thing refuses to respond to me at all. I’m sure it’s probably because I have no talent.” She dropped her head and flicked the red Jewel hanging around her neck, looking rather distraught.

“What I really want is to go on adventures to earn a living,” she went on. “If I could make some money, then maybe...my father would be a little more... Oh, sorry. I guess this turned into something of a rant.”

“Nah. You’re the one who caught me crying before when I was in a bad spot.”

“Ha ha! That’s right. I guess we’re even, then.” She fixed her gaze on me. “I meant it when I said I enjoy the work I’m doing now. They taught me the ropes when I was still brand new at this waitressing thing. But I guess I can’t deny I’m envious of you and those other two.”

“Me? But all anyone ever says is that I’m a failure,” I argued.

She shrugged. “What’s wrong with that? There are only a select few out there talented enough to get it right the first time. Nothing wrong with sucking at first if you work hard and claw your way up. Well, I guess I’m not really one to talk, with all the trouble I cause the proprietor here. Speaking of, I’d best get back to work. Don’t let these small stumbles discourage you, Lyle!” Having gathered all the empty plates on the table, Aria left and disappeared into the back of the shop.

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After I returned that night and handed Novem the cake I’d bought her at the shop, I settled down and closed my eyes, letting my consciousness drift into the Jewel. My house’s historic leaders were already seated at the round table. A discussion was being held under the premise that we’d talk about what to do from here, but an absurd diatribe was unfolding instead. Predictably, the founder was the culprit, his voice booming throughout the room.

“I just remembered! It was right after my first love ended in heartbreak and I

returned to the village! I refused to take any other woman, insistent that Miss Alice was the only one for me. Everyone around me was being a real pain in my ass, so when I was knocking back pints, I offhandedly said some stuff about requirements for a future bride! Tsk. I never dreamed they took all that seriously..."

And thus, a new (totally irrelevant, in my opinion) truth about House Walt was revealed. The rules our house had perpetuated from generation to generation were borne of the founder's drunken rambling. Knowing how pathetic the origins of our traditions were, I'd probably have been better off staying ignorant.

"Knowing what I do about you now, that isn't the least bit surprising," said the sixth head. "More pertinent, I think, is that we determine what today's topic of discussion is. Lyle is with us now, so if possible, I'd like to have a *productive* conversation."

The fourth head, who was typically the one in charge of guiding our discussions, had removed his glasses and was polishing the lenses. He didn't look the least bit interested, which suggested that nothing of import was on the table today.

"Lyle is surprisingly stronger than we imagined," he began, "so we arranged for this meeting with that in mind. The issue is, no matter how powerful he is, it won't do him much good if he hits his limit that quickly. His mana pool is too small. He has skill with the sword, but he clearly lacks battle experience. In fact, there is much he lacks at this point in time, and since he hasn't decided on his own goals, planning anything right now would be meaningless."

Everyone's gazes shifted to me. The fourth head's words rang in my ears, but I couldn't think of any response. Fed up with waiting, the founder slammed his hand down on the table, drawing the others' attention to him.

"Who cares about the boy and his issues?! The real issue here is sweet little Aria. You heard what she said today. Seems to me she's anxious to quit that shop with the embarrassing getup they force her to wear. We oughta support her! Sounds like she's got some problems with her old man too."

The fourth head finally slipped his glasses back on. "That is out of the

question. Have you forgotten? Lyle here is still a greenhorn himself, yet you want him to lend someone else his support? Please. Don't make me laugh. In the first place, *you* are the one who still adamantly refuses to accept him. Or am I mistaken?"

Basil quickly went quiet.

Each of the leaders had their own wills and values, but they didn't have the bodies to see them realized. Anything the founder wanted done, I had to do it for him, and in spite of that, he still had yet to acknowledge me.

"Does Lyle really have any right to discuss that with her?" the fifth head asked, siding with his immediate predecessor against the founder. "Should things end poorly, Lyle would be saddled with the obligation of looking out for Aria. Do you intend to force him to take care of her for the rest of her life? How would Novem feel about that?"

Everyone seemed to be on the same page about avoiding needless interference. The founder was the one who refused to back down.

"Do you mean to say we should stand by while some other piece of filth gets his grimy hands on poor little Aria? And you call yourself a man, Lyle?!"

*You can say whatever you want, but the whole premise of your argument is jacked up. I mean, sure, I like her as a person. But it's not like I have romantic feelings for Aria.*

While my inner voice was more frank, I had to tailor my actual response to sound less antagonistic. "Um, I do like Miss Aria, it's true. But, see, I, uh...I don't like-like her. What I mean is, it's not love."

Apparently, that was still too blunt for the founder, because he began raking his fingers through his hair as he howled, "You spineless good-for-nothing!"

I frowned, but the fourth head was quick to compliment me on my decision.

"You did well," he said. "It's better to be honest. Besides, if you'd answered that you loved both girls, we probably would have sent you flying with a nice, solid punch. Monogamy really is the best way."

The fifth and sixth heads, however, narrowed their eyes at him.

"Hey," snapped the fifth head. "Was that supposed to be a dig at me?"

"A noble of my station, circumstances depending, has no choice but to take several women sometimes," explained the sixth head. "During your generation, we were still only a barony, so perhaps you're unable to comprehend the difference, hm?"

No sooner had the sixth head spoken than the fifth head shot him a look. It seemed the sixth head's father could say a lot about that. Sheepishly, the sixth head averted his gaze.

In the time it took them to have that little squabble, the founder had already regained his composure.

"That's it!" he cried. "We can have Lyle marry the both of them. Then Miss Alice's bloodline and mine will mix. This must be fate!"

The third head cackled. "Too bad that won't work! As it stands, Lyle's not financially stable enough to do that. I mean, no matter what generation, it's always the guys with power who're able to snag themselves a harem. Gotta have authority, finances, and renown. Lyle's got none of those. He couldn't even take care of one wife."

"You!" the founder roared at me. "Put in some more effort!"

*Ugh, give me a break already.*

"Yeah, uh, there's not really a whole lot I can do about that. I mean, I've got Novem right now. You can nudge me all you like, but nothing's gonna come of it," I said.

The second head, who'd been silent up until this point, suddenly leaned over in his chair and smacked his father hard from the side, silencing him. "Cool it. You're making a mockery of yourself. I do sympathize with Aria's circumstances, but it's also undeniable that, in his current state, Lyle doesn't have the spare resources to help her. I'll say this again: if you would only teach Lyle your Art, it would change the situation."

The founder slumped in his seat, downcast.

I cleared my throat and asked, "So, uh, what is it that you have against me

anyway?"

He glanced up at me. "You're spineless! And you always act so timid, going quiet and leaving poor little Novem to take care of everything for you!"

*I only wish you understood that a big part of why I'm like that is because of this Jewel.*

"You aren't gonna get my recognition. Out of the question! You hear me?!"

If he was already nursing a hatred this deep, was there really anything I could do to sway his opinion? It seemed I'd be stuck with this accursed relic for the rest of my life, all the while plagued with the concern of how it was constantly draining me.

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The following day, we met at the Guild again before heading outside the city limits. We filled out the paperwork and promptly handed it to Hawkins.

The Guild was bustling more than usual today. The place was packed with adventurers; teammates were in clusters discussing things among themselves. It was odd, given that they must have come here with their own plans in mind, yet they'd put those on hold to whisper to one another. It was getting more crowded on the second floor than I'd ever seen it.

I leaned over to Hawkins and asked, "Sir, um, did something happen?"

He'd just accepted the documents we'd handed over, and he paused at my question to glance around the room. "Well, you see, a second dungeon popped up. People have come in hopes of joining the official party going to conquer it. One actually already appeared within the region, and the liege lord dispatched soldiers to take care of it. They have only a few knights to spare to take up command positions, but they lack the necessary numbers, so they put in a request with the Guild to recruit more people. Not something you hear too often."

So not one but two whole dungeons had appeared, and Darion's leadership had their hands full trying to take care of the matter.

"A dungeon, huh?" I muttered to myself.

I'd never entered one before. Naturally, when I thought of becoming an adventurer, I figured I'd eventually head into a dungeon myself. I couldn't help but be curious.

"Lyle?" Hawkins said, interrupting my thoughts. "Don't tell me you plan to participate? I hate to break this to you, but I cannot give you approval. We still don't know what kind of dungeon this is, and your only teammate at this point is Novem. It's better for you to stick to drilling the basics until you have them down."

Touched by his concern, I smiled. "Nah, even I know that I'm not at that level. But it doesn't stop me from envying everyone else. I was just thinking I look forward to the day I can try my hand at it too."

He nodded, satisfied with my answer. "If you keep on giving it your best, a chance will surely come your way. I would suggest, in the meantime, that you find yourself some more party members. Haven't you found anyone promising yet?"

True. We did need to add to our numbers eventually.

"We're still looking, but we just haven't had any luck." After that, I bid him a brief farewell and rendezvoused with Novem and Zelphy.

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Aria and her father lived in a cheap apartment. It had only one bedroom, and the shared bathroom had no bathtub. A mage living nearby could prepare fresh, hot water, and he'd made a modest living for himself running a bathhouse. Aria used the showers there before she headed to work each day.

Unfortunately, even though they lived as meagerly as possible, money was tight. Aria eyed her father, who was knocking back cheap alcohol and grumbling under his breath, as she checked their household accounting ledger.

"Nowhere near enough, even with me working nights and getting respectable pay," she muttered.

Since their shop catered to primarily male customers, business boomed the most at night. Aria worked evenings, and before her shift, she spent her days at their apartment, looking after her father from morning until noon. She would

complete all the chores at home, then spend all evening working. When she finished, she'd retrieve her father and drag him back home. That had become her daily routine.

"At this point, I guess my only options are to become a prostitute or an adventurer..."

The words had barely left her mouth when her father shot to his feet. He tossed his alcohol bottle at her, spilling it all over their accounting ledger. Aria gaped at her father in disbelief. He'd largely wasted away since his fall from grace, and he had dark circles under his eyes. His eyes were also bloodshot, which was as good of an indication as any that he wasn't in his right mind anymore.

"Aria, what did you just say? How can you still call yourself a Lockwood, huh?! A baron's daughter, deciding between becoming a prostitute or an adventurer? Don't make me laugh!" He flew at her.

"L-Let go of me!"

"Gah!"

Aria instinctively shoved him away, and since she was far stronger than an average man, he went flailing backward.

"H-How dare you?!" he hissed.

"I'm sorry!" she said, immediately rushing over to him. She collapsed on her knees and tried to pull him up, but this time he was the one who knocked her away. Clutching her wallet tightly in his hands, he scrambled for the door and fled the apartment. Aria numbly watched him go, then lowered her gaze to the floor.

"It...didn't used to be like this."

Her father wasn't a natural-born Lockwood; he was of a lower status and had married into the family, taking their last name. It'd become a complex for him. His record was one failure after another, culminating in embezzlement. Aria had still been fairly young when their house fell into ruin. Now, they'd lost their noble status completely, but her father was reluctant to accept it—no, refused to accept it. A deep sadness washed over her just thinking about it.

“It’s too late to worry about things like status now.”

As the tears stung at the edges of her eyes, Aria realized that she needed to seriously consider her future. Her greatest hope was to become an adventurer, but she’d heard a person had to earn money to buy the necessary equipment first. That limited her options.

“I guess prostitution is all that’s left for me.”

She’d prepared herself for that possibility, but still...

“I’m not very ladylike, so who knows if I’ll even get any customers. Ha ha ha...” Aria forced herself to laugh, but it didn’t take long for the tears to fall.

She let herself cry for a little bit, then rubbed her eyes and pulled herself to her feet. A brothel had reached out to her once before about work, and she planned to pay them a visit. If she didn’t force herself to do that and earn more money, she wouldn’t be able to look after her father anymore. She wanted to at least fix her hair a little before she left, though.

As Aria searched for a mirror, she heard voices outside the front door.

“Hey, you’re sure this is where that guy lives, right?”

“Y-Yes.”

“Pull it together already! That old man strung you along too, didn’t he?”

“Y-Yeah, but I found his house, didn’t I?! Plus, I hear he’s got a daughter living with him. If we hand her over to the boss—”

“Idiot! I already explained this to you! What we need is money. Money, ya hear? We’re going to auction his daughter off for a hefty price. You’d better keep your grubby paws off. If you put your hands on the merchandise this time, I’ll slit your throat.”

Two men were talking. Aria sensed danger in the air and immediately tried to hide, but the cramped quarters of their apartment offered few options. She couldn’t find anywhere to conceal herself, and as if things couldn’t get any worse, her father had neglected to lock the door when he left.

“Hey, it ain’t locked,” one of the voices outside observed.

A short man pushed his way inside. Aria's gaze flitted around the room as she tried to search for something she could brandish as a weapon. A large man wearing adventuring equipment shoved the shorter man aside as he waltzed in.

Aria grabbed one of the dining chairs and tossed it at him. He easily knocked it away, shattering the wood into pieces. Aria gaped in disbelief.

"Keep your trap shut and take a little nap, 'kay?" He plunged his fist into her solar plexus, and Aria's vision immediately went black.

"Hey, I don't think we should be doing anything to draw attention..."

"Dummy. The lord here's got his hands full. We gotta strike while the iron's hot, get me? We're gonna blow this city and move on from banditry to form a legit mercenary band."

The two men promptly tied Aria up and carried her off.

## Chapter 13: Greenhorn

I returned to the Guild from our excursion, having safely completed the mission Zelphy had tasked me with. The Guild's first floor was basically a warehouse, and merchants would set up here to buy materials from adventurers. You could purchase things from the merchants as well, but I didn't really see any adventurers doing that. As for Demonic Stones, a guild official was present to purchase them.

Zelphy guided us along to sell off our materials first, striking up conversation with one of the many merchants.

"Hey, old man. I've got twenty slime mats here. How much are you willing to pay?"

The man in question glanced back at us. His face relaxed the moment he recognized Zelphy. "Oh, it's you, miss. Don't have anything else with ya? No killer rabbit meat or hides? And right now, what I'm really dyin' for is some horns."

Zelphy pointed her thumb back at us as she said, "I'm on babysitting duty right now. Can't help you for the foreseeable future." She grinned at him as she handed the slime materials over in exchange for coin. She then pulled out her cask and popped the lid open so he could confirm the contents.

"All of it's in pretty good condition," the merchant observed. "No surprise there. Havin' an instructor along helps. Wish these other amateurs would take a note outta your book. Anyhow, here's your money."

We received two silver coins and a number of large copper ones as well. Since we didn't have to share any of it with Zelphy, we could split it down the middle between Novem and me. All that was left now was to sell off our Demonic Stones.

"Saw some goblins here lately that were pretty close to the city," Zelphy said to the man. "Heard anything about that?"

He crossed his arms over his chest. “Yeah, been hearin’ that quite a bit lately. I’m guessin’ they fled here from somewhere else. No doubt some fools chased them out this way. Most of the goblins here stick to the old abandoned mines, right?”

Zelphy chuckled. “Fake mines, you mean. A prospector pulled the previous liege lord’s leg, and they tried frantically to hide the shameful aftermath.”

Next, we headed over to the Demonic Stone exchange department. Provided you didn’t undertake a specific request, this was where you sold off any Demonic Stones you came across. There was no need to go to the second floor.

We placed our Demonic Stones on a tray for the official to examine. None of the ones we’d obtained were of particularly good quality, so the official had to put them on a scale to determine our compensation.

“Ooh, making bank today,” Zelphy commented. “Actually, the Guild has been offering a lot more for Demonic Stones lately, no?”

“The demand for them has increased,” the official answered as they counted out our reward. “They’re often used as a source of fuel for Demonic Tools, after all. You know they’ve come out with lanterns and home heaters now, right? With the proliferation of those sorts of Demonic Tools, which require Demonic Stones to power them, the price has naturally soared.”

Darion wasn’t very far from Central, and when the supply lines were running behind, Darion had to offer their own Demonic Stones to supplement Central’s needs. That was why they were offering better compensation for them. Granted, with the taxes and other fees that applied per region, adventurers saw only a pittance of the actual reward money. Some regions, from what I’d heard, levied such heavy fees that the Guild would take sixty to seventy percent out of your pay. Adventurers didn’t stay around those places for long, so a liege lord had to take a balanced approach. Darion, fortunately, only took a modest tax. Fees weren’t the only issue, though; the Guild had to shave off a portion for their own profit as well.

In the end, Novem and I snagged five silver coins for our offering. Zelphy looked pleased with that payout.

“This is more than enough for a single outing,” she declared. “At the pace

we're going, we should be able to collect a total of seventy or eighty coins a month. Though, I'm sure you'll need to buy more equipment, and you'll have daily expenses to cover as well. How much you have left over will depend on how thrifty the two of you are."

Her words were a bitter reminder of how expensive our equipment was. It was pricey to purchase in the first place, but it also required regular maintenance. Sometimes that meant making custom orders with craftsmen. If we counted the additional cost of the medicine we handed off to passing travelers in exchange for information, plus the daily cost for our room and meals, plus other miscellaneous expenses, then...

*We're going to have to be frugal.*

Novem calculated it all in her head and announced, "Between Lord Lyle and myself, we probably need about ten or so silver coins for our monthly expenses. If we then include the cost of maintaining our equipment...it would probably be somewhere between twenty to thirty coins total."

Zelphy chuckled. "That's the best-case scenario. But if you can save somewhere around ten coins a month, that oughta be pretty good. Honestly, it's a better use of your time to think about how to earn more rather than how to save more. Anyhow, we'll only be clogging up the flow of traffic if we linger here. We're pretty filthy, so let's visit the bathhouse. I got some business on the second floor I need to get to, see."

With that, we took our leave, and in the meantime, my house's historic leaders came to a sudden realization.

"Now it makes sense," said the third head. "The adventurers putting their lives on the line aren't seeing the big profits. It's the people above them who are reaping the biggest benefits."

As I listened to him announce his epiphany, I spotted Hawkins climbing down the stairs to the first floor, which was a rare sight. The moment he spotted us, he rushed over.

"Miss Zelphy!"

"Something wrong, sir? Not often I see you looking so panicked," she said.

Yes, that part was rare too.

"I have something I need to speak to you about. A request has come in, and they're asking for you specifically. Seems things have really gone south."

She stared back at him, dumbfounded. "Uh, I can pitch in to help a little, but I've got obligations right now as their instructor, remember? Well, since you're the one asking, I'm not gonna turn you away without at least listening to what you have to say. But I'm still covered in filth, you know?"

Adventurers collected quite a bit of grime on their excursions—monster blood and viscera, mud, and sweat, among other things. That was why the first floor consisted only of merchants, while the reception area was located on the second floor. Most Guilds had a bathhouse right beside them for good reason.

"Please come to the second floor right away," Hawkins implored. "A Mister Lockwood has come here asking for—"

"Lockwood?! Little Aria!" the founder cried from within the Jewel. "Lyle, you need to go with them!"

Maybe it wasn't the best idea for me to tag along, but since I knew the founder wouldn't let me hear the end of it otherwise, I decided to heed his command.

"Um, would it be all right if I came along as well?" I asked.

"You too, Lyle? I'm afraid that's not exactly..." Hawkins trailed off, his lips pulled into a tight frown.

"Lyle," the sixth head interrupted, "this is the precise kind of moment where you need to push the other person into a position where they cannot refuse your request. You are the one who hired and paid Zelphy. Tell him that if Zelphy should decide to take on this request, it would be best if you were right there to give her your approval."

Grateful for his input, I immediately put his advice to the test. "Whether or not Zelphy decides to undertake this request, as her current employer, wouldn't it be best if we were close by to help hurry this matter along?"

Hawkins pressed his hand to his forehead but finally nodded. "Very well. You

have a point. As her employer, it would be best for you to be familiar with the situation as well. In that case, would all three of you kindly come with me?"

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When we arrived at the meeting room on the third floor, we found a man in tattered clothing waiting for us. He was terribly emaciated, and the stink of alcohol hung heavy in the air around him. A wrinkle formed in Zelphy's brow as she looked at him, and her hands tightened into fists. The man seemed to know Zelphy as well, and judging by his attitude, he used to be in a position above her.

"It really is you," he said. "Aria mentioned seeing you, but I doubted her at first. Can't believe you became an adventurer, of all things. Not that any of that matters now. See, Zelphy, the thing is..."

There were five of us in total gathered in the meeting room as the talks began. Inside the Jewel around my neck, the founder dejectedly murmured, "Can't believe this. So it wasn't little Aria after all."

The course of our conversation outside clued the third head in on what was going on.

"I get it. This man must be the father giving poor Aria so much grief. He sure does look awful."

Aria's father approached Zelphy, grabbing her by the shoulder. When he opened his mouth to speak, I noticed several of his teeth were missing.

"Aria's been kidnapped!" he exclaimed. "A group of bandits took her! I can't believe they'd dare put their hands on my daughter. You have to rescue her immediately! You remember how much she adored you. You just have to help her!"

When this man showed up at the guild claiming to be Aria's father and demanding to speak with Zelphy, Hawkins initially thought it was the irrational rambling of a drunkard. He apparently had the man wait here for our return, in the interest of confirming his story.

"Well, there you have it," said Hawkins. "We can't make a decision on this matter ourselves, and the request, being what it is, surely requires an expedient

resolution assuming what he claims is true. So, Miss Zelphy, do you know this man?"

Zelphy nodded, but the way she glowered at him suggested they weren't on the best terms. She seemed to loathe him. Everyone in the room could sense that she was seconds away from reaching out and throttling him.

"In that case, allow us to continue this discussion. Please take your seats." Hawkins acted as a mediator, encouraging the man to sit so that we could confirm the situation. "When exactly was your daughter kidnapped?"

"Uh, well," the man started, suddenly cagey. "She was there this morning. But when I went back later, the apartment had been ransacked, so..."

"In that case, on what basis did you decide it was a bandit group responsible and that Miss Aria had been kidnapped? Can you not think of any other possibilities?"

"Urgh, I...I said it was a bandit group and that's that, okay?! Have Zelphy go find her. Right now! I'm the employer here!"

This conversation wasn't productive at all. Worse yet, his claims had stirred up a fuss inside the Jewel as well.

"Did he just say someone kidnapped little Aria?!" the founder roared.

His blabbering was guzzling up my mana. Luckily, the seventh head sensed my dwindling reserves and stepped in to try to put a stop to it.

"Would you hold your tongue already? We won't be able to find out anything if you drain Lyle so dry that he collapses."

While the rebuke wasn't enough to quell the founder's rage and panic at this new revelation, he did at least shut his mouth.

Beside me, Novem reached over and pinched my sleeve, tugging at it to get my attention. "My lord, if this man also goes by Lockwood, could that perhaps mean that he's Miss Aria's father?"

Before I could answer, Zelphy interrupted, "What do you mean by that? Lyle, are you acquainted with Young Miss Aria?"

The way Zelphy referred to Aria more or less gave away the connection

between them. After all, Aria had hidden herself away in the back of the shop that day Zelphy showed up.

"She works at that sweets shop that you and the girls tracked me down at before," I said. "We're, um, acquaintances, I guess you could say, who talk a little."

Zelphy dropped her gaze to the floor. She suddenly left her seat and rounded the table until she was standing right beside Aria's father. Without any warning, she slammed her foot into his face, sending him flailing backward. Hawkins rushed over to stop her, but it seemed she had no intention of beating the man any further. Instead, she scowled at him.

"Let me guess..." she started, her voice gradually growing louder as she spoke. "You made the young miss work while you piddled away anything she earned on gambling. You reek of alcohol. Do you have any idea how early in the day it still is? I already know that you haven't done a damn thing to earn any money yourself *and* that you've been borrowing money from shady people! And while we're at it, let me tell you this too. Don't you ever order me around again! Have you any idea how much *my* father went through because of you?!"

Blood spilled out of the man's nose. He cupped his face protectively, eyeing her with a newfound fear.

"You ran House Lockwood straight into the ground, and thanks to that, we couldn't even stay in Central anymore. My father had to become an adventurer just to put food on the table for us. My mother had to start working too. Then, one day, my father was killed by a monster, and my mother worked herself until her body couldn't handle it anymore. By the time I was finally old enough to pitch in, my mother came down with something and she died too. But what about you? All you've been doing is gambling and drinking? You must feel really good about yourself, making your daughter do all the hard work so you can leech off of her!"

Zelphy was angrier than I'd ever seen her. I knew nothing about the situation, but the way she told it, her rage was perfectly legitimate. Meanwhile, all of the house leaders in my Jewel, save the founder, were calm and collected even as these revelations hit.

“Lyle, let’s try to smooth things over,” the second head, the most composed of everyone, suggested. “If this keeps up, we won’t be able to get to the bottom of this situation. What we require most now is information. She can save her personal grudge for later. Right now, she needs to show some restraint.”

The third head commented, “‘Young Miss Aria,’ she called her, hm? It does seem like maybe Zelphy is empathizing with her. I’d suggest mentioning little Aria’s name to get her back on track.”

Before I could put his advice into practice, Novem beat me to the punch.

“Please calm down, Miss Zelphy.”

“How do you expect me to stay calm, huh?! This bastard is the reason why—”

“And will verbally assaulting him bring Miss Aria back safely? I don’t think so, and I’m sure you don’t either. What we should be doing right now is gathering information. Should we not save her before it’s too late?” Novem fixed our instructor with a meaningful look, and Zelphy begrudgingly gritted her teeth. She finally relaxed her fists.

“Fine. You win.” Having conceded, Zelphy retreated to the edge of the room and stood beside the wall. She probably didn’t trust herself to stay within arms reach of the man, lest she give in to the temptation to reach out and beat him again.

The man continued trembling in fear, but he quickly blurted out what he knew. “There was a guy who said he was part of a bandit group. He came to me, asking me to do a simple job for him. Those thugs are illiterate, you see. That meant they couldn’t do basic math either, so I stepped in to help them sell off their stolen wares. It was good money. All I had to do was a little assistant work, and coin flowed my way. But...at some point, the group started to trust me, handing over large sums for me to look after. I was only supposed to keep it for a short time, but...I spent it gambling and lost big time.”

From the way he spoke, it sounded as though Darion had a pretty intricate crime network. He also admitted, in no uncertain terms, to colluding with them, even though his participation in their activities amounted to only fringe assistance with selling stolen goods. The punishment for that differed slightly by region, but no matter where you went, it was still a serious crime.

"What you mean to say is they have a good reason to bear a grudge?" Hawkins asked, trying to nudge the conversation along. Even he couldn't mask the anger filtering through his voice. "It's possible they may have already killed her, then. We have to make haste."

The man quickly shook his head. "N-No. What they need is money. That's why they intend to sell her underground, to a slave trader."

A slave trader? Slave trading was illegal in Banseim. That, of course, didn't stop criminals from engaging in human trafficking, if Aria's father was to be believed. And this bandit group seemed eager to make bank.

Hawkins's eyes flew wide open. "Where are they planning to make this trade? Do you mean to tell me that slave traders are here in Darion?"

"I don't know all the specifics," Aria's father admitted. "But from what they told me, it's hard to make such deals here in Darion, so they perform those sorts of transactions at their hideout. P-Please, I beg you, save Aria!" It was almost as if getting kicked in the face had sobered him. He was far more collected now.

Hawkins's face clouded over. "I'm afraid I must detain you. The Guild has an obligation to follow the region's rules, so I can't let you leave. Moreover, your crime will unfortunately affect your family as well."

Aria's father dropped his gaze and began crying. Part of me thought it was a little late for him to show any regret, but if only for Aria's sake, I did feel a little sad. I wanted to do something for them.

"Let's gather some people," Zelphy suggested. "If we consider where they're doing this transaction, they may still be in Darion right now. Moving people around tends to draw attention, which should make it difficult for them. Ugh, of all times for this to happen, it has to be when the soldiers are away from the city." She raked her fingers through her hair.

Novem's probing gaze periodically wandered to Zelphy.

"I'm not going to push you for answers, but in regards to this Aria girl..." Hawkins said to Zelphy, trailing off at the end.

"I know that already!" Zelphy snapped at him, though it sounded more like

she was trying to convince herself than anyone else. “I know. But I still want to help her.”

Given what Hawkins had said before, Aria would also receive some sort of punishment for her father’s crimes. Damnation was all that awaited her, whether we saved her or not, so which form of hell was preferable in this case?

As I considered this, a voice suddenly called out to me.

“We’re helping her, Lyle,” insisted the founder.

“Huh?” I blurted without thinking.

Novem glanced at me. “Lord Lyle? Is something the matter?”

I shook my head.

“What are you mumbling about?!” roared the founder, guzzling my mana as he launched into another one of his tirades. “We’re going to help little Aria! If you don’t step in to save her, I swear I’ll never recognize you for as long as you live, ya hear me?!”

Unsurprisingly, he was being as one-sided as ever. Even if I saved Aria, she would still be punished by law because of what her father had done.

“Go on, tell ’em you’re gonna save her! Don’t tell me you’re a coward, huh? And you still call yourself a man of the Walt family? You really disappoint me!”

The founder continued lambasting me in the background. His words were tiny daggers that pierced my heart. The pain was suffocating. After my family chased me out, not a single person had given me any recognition. Memories of that bitter experience combined with my dwindling mana pool, and my knees gave out from under me.

Novem shouted, “Lord Lyle!” She managed to leap at me, cradling my limp body in her arms.

“Lyle?” Hawkins gasped. “What’s wrong?!”

“Hey, why are you fainting on us?” Zelphy grumbled, as if exasperated that I’d choose now, of all times, to pass out.

Unable to keep a grip on consciousness, I found myself swallowed up by

darkness.

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They'd carried Lyle into the Guild's infirmary, where he remained unconscious on a bed. Novem stayed at his side, taking care of him, while Zelphy watched.

Zelphy knew they were both of noble birth, and when she first met them, she'd thought they were lovers. She knew better now—that they were more like a master and his faithful retainer. After keeping a close eye on them for over a month, she'd deemed neither to be a threat and reported as much to the regional lord.

However, while the two of them posed no danger themselves, that wasn't a guarantee that their presence wouldn't cause issues. Lyle had been expelled from House Walt before arriving in Darion. It wasn't public knowledge, but rather something the regional lord had quickly inferred from Lyle's presence. The lord had then tasked Zelphy with the duty of keeping tabs on the two.

Dawn had broken, and rays of sunlight spilled across the land, peeking through the gaps between the buildings lining the streets. The shopping district already looked bright and cheery, but shadows still clung elsewhere throughout the city. It had been a few hours since Lyle collapsed. Zelphy had spent the entire time waiting around in the infirmary.

"Novem, you can go back," she said.

The doctor had performed an examination and determined it was only fatigue. Novem had left briefly to bring Lyle's things from their inn room and bathe herself. She'd also brought water to wipe down his body, and ever since, she'd been glued to his side.

*Not like lovers at all. She really is like his servant... No, more like his mother,* Zelphy thought. She studied Novem's worried expression as she switched gears mentally, contemplating what they were going to do now. No matter how much she went over the situation in her mind, she didn't have the power to save Aria by herself. *Maybe I could call in a favor with the liege lord? Nah. He'd never go for it. He looks kind on the outside, but he's never been anything but strict in regards to this kinda stuff.*

Frankly, it was bad timing too. The bandit group that had infiltrated Darion's lands had suddenly ceased their usual looting activities to go underground. Laying low, they'd penetrated all corners of the city while enlisting Aria's father to help them sell their stolen goods. Aria's father, in a bad stroke of luck for the Guild and Darion, was at least clever enough to sell in small quantities to delay the city guard from discovering their operation. They'd even managed to enter the Adventurers' Guild so that they could masquerade as simple adventurers out in the open, strolling down the streets with smug grins on their faces. Other regions could hardly be blamed for seeing all of this and thinking that Darion was actively sheltering these undesirables. It wasn't a good situation for Darion.

Zelphy was still waiting around the Guild because she wanted to hear whatever information Hawkins had gathered.

"Will you be undertaking that request, Miss Zelphy?" Novem asked, not even bothering to glance back at her instructor as she posed the question.

Having no intention of lying to her pupil, Zelphy candidly replied, "Technically, no, I won't. But slave trading is a crime. Someone has to put a stop to that, and we can rescue any of their captives in the process. Sorry 'bout all of this. I won't be able to instruct you guys in the meantime, but I can promise that the days I take off, I'll add later to your—"

A knock on the door interrupted her. Hawkins announced himself, so Zelphy strode over and let him in.

"Well, sir, how's it looking?" she asked.

"In regards to the bandit group that infiltrated the city, it's going to take us some time to identify all of the members. It seems like they registered with the Guild in small numbers over time, without necessarily submitting the paperwork to adjust the size of their party each time. If we aren't cautious, our movements could be leaked to them. Even if we're able to apprehend this slave trader, we have no way of knowing how the bandits will move after that."

Both of them frowned, chagrined by the unfavorable position they founded themselves in. They'd identified a few people so far, thanks to the testimony Aria's father had provided, and they'd put feelers throughout the city, but it would take some time before they pinned down each of the criminals.

*What a pain, Zelphy thought. After causing all kinds of issues in the neighboring regions, they retreated here and went quiet. We might've discovered them sooner if not for that stupid idiot selling off their goods for them. Now the surrounding lords might mistakenly think that Daron was the one pulling their strings this whole time.*

"I suspect there's somewhere around twenty to thirty of them, from what I've heard," said Hawkins. "They were selling off what they could to buy up arms and provisions. Since goblins have been appearing closer to the city limits lately, it's probably a safe bet to say they've moved their headquarters to the old abandoned mines."

The two of them continued discussing what they were going to do. Novem didn't seem to be paying them any heed, too preoccupied with looking after Lyle.

Zelphy dropped her voice and said, "I'll report this to the regional lord. If I find out anything, I'll let you know."

Hawkins whispered back, "Thank you. I appreciate it."

Zelphy was in such a panic over the situation that she let her guard down; she didn't think Novem was eavesdropping on them since her gaze was pinned on Lyle. Plus, as long as she whispered, surely the girl wouldn't hear them, right?

Unfortunately for Zelphy, Novem heard every single word.

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When I opened my eyes, I found myself inside the Jewel, and the first thing I saw was the founder being heavily reprimanded by every other house leader in the room. They were all seated at the round table as usual, but their cold gazes bore into the founder. The second head was especially icy this time.

"You truly are scum. I will give you the benefit of the doubt and say I understand your desire to save your first love's descendant. Even I have to admit I pity her and her circumstances. What I cannot tolerate is your audacity to use Lyle as if he's some kind of tool. This has nothing to do with him. And your attitude before? Inconceivable. You're not even worth the air you breathe."

“Do you even know what the meaning of saving someone is?” asked the third head with an annoyed sigh. He was usually aloof and disinterested, but even he couldn’t hide how exasperated he was this time. “I’ll spell it out for you just to be clear, but let’s say Lyle does step in and they manage to stop the bandits from selling her off to those slave traders. She’ll still have a harsh life waiting for her. They may even chase her out of Darion and leave her to starve to death on the road. Or maybe they’ll send her off to work in a mine. Either way, they’ll only ever see her as a criminal’s daughter. This could be the greater of the two evils, actually; she might be better off being a slave.”

The fourth head adjusted his glasses, maintaining a perfect calm as he said, “Aria is a cute girl. Once she’s branded as a criminal, the regional lord may make her his slave anyway. Or perhaps she’ll be forced to shoulder her father’s debts and go into prostitution. Such punishments differ from region to region, but one thing is for certain: she’ll suffer even if we save her. But knowing you, I suspect you’ll order Lyle to save her from that too, won’t you?”

“Is there any merit for Lyle in this?” asked the fifth head. The legacy he’d left had framed him as a womanizer, but he showed absolutely no interest in Aria whatsoever. “I mean, is there any point in him going out of his way to save a criminal’s daughter? To be clear, Lyle’s under no obligation to carry out any order you give him.”

The sixth head heaved a sigh, exhausted by the atmosphere permeating the air. That didn’t stop him from laying into the founder, though. “It sounds valiant, proposing to save someone without any thought for the circumstances or consequences, but if it somehow harms Lyle or Novem, I won’t sit back quietly.”

“I am loath to recognize you as House Walt’s founder,” said the seventh head. “You were the one who demanded Lyle take good care of Novem, and now you’re changing your tune and demanding he save this Aria girl. No wonder you know the bitter taste of failure, making reckless decisions based on your feelings in the moment. Have you given any thought to how Novem will feel if Lyle goes out of his way to rescue Aria?”

The founder’s cheeks heated up. He leaped up from his chair and slammed both fists against the table. “You brats! Is that any kinda attitude to take with

the founder of your house?! If not for me, not a single one of you would've ever been born! Who d'you think you've got to thank for coming into this world, huh?!"

Each of the house leaders began to answer in order, and it was readily apparent that not a single one of them held an ounce of respect for the man.

"My old lady."

"My mother."

"Mom."

"Ma."

"My mom, without question."

"Indeed, I have my mother to thank."

As the founder listened to each answer, he began to tremble with rage. "You bastards..." He then suddenly noticed that I'd woken. His eyes turned to me, and he jabbed a finger in my direction. "You're a stain on House Walt! What was that attitude you took before, huh? When a damsel is in distress like that, you swear to save her come hell or high water! Instead, you're always collapsin' and makin' Novem look after you. You're so worthless... I hate your guts!"

His first words, about me being a stain on my house, cut deep. It was something my family had told me repeatedly, and hearing it again now, I couldn't hold back the tears that welled in my eyes.

Confused, the founder glanced around the room, as if he couldn't fathom why I'd be crying. "Wh-What's wrong with you? Why are crying at somethin' like this?! We're just havin' a discussion here; that's all. Why's that makin' you...?"



“Because the way you talk is too harsh,” the third head replied, irked that he had to explain it. “The current generation isn’t like yours. Lyle was heir to an earldom, remember? You might think the way you’re speaking is perfectly normal, but it sounds intimidating. And it looks menacing too. Having said that, Lyle, you need to pull yourself together, kid.”

The second head pressed a hand to his forehead, glancing at me as he said, “Try not to take my old man’s words to heart. The concept of being considerate is foreign to him.”

“Wh-What’s that supposed to mean?!” the founder snarled at his son.

“Lyle’s family drove him out of his house and abandoned him. The fact that you’re still able to call him a ‘stain’ after all he’s been through is proof you lack consideration. Rather than berating the boy, you should be asking politely that he save this girl if you really want him to go out of his way for you.”

The fifth head, meanwhile, left his chair to climb up on the table. He walked across the surface until he was right in front of me, at which point he squatted down and stared at me. “Lyle,” he said, “don’t think for a second that crying is going to fix anything. Tears just mean more valuable time wasted. Listen, what’s most important is what *you* want to do. At the end of the day, we’re memories of the original house leaders left in the Jewel to teach our Arts to future generations. But our own experiences are recorded here too. We can’t teach you every single Art right this second, but we can lend you what wisdom we have. So pull yourself together. What do you want to do?”

“I don’t know. I just don’t know!”

“Y-You little twerp!” the founder shouted at me.

The other leaders quickly silenced him before he could go on, and in the meantime, the fifth head said, “Don’t think too hard. Just tell me, right this second, what you want to do. If you’ve got no interest in saving this Aria girl, that’s fine. I won’t hold it against you. I’d even say it’s a reasonable choice.”

Although the others were holding the founder back, he was still howling something in the background. Fortunately, the second, third, and fourth heads had managed to pin him in place.

The sixth head made his way over and put a hand on my shoulder. “Lyle, speak your mind. Don’t let any needless thoughts cloud your judgment. You can weigh other considerations later. Right now, we want to know what you want to do.”

Memories of Aria filled my head. When I’d learned that Novem was making more money, I’d been so ashamed that I’d fled the Guild. That was when I’d met Aria, by pure coincidence. From there, we grew closer as I visited Ciel. She always met me with a smile and struck up conversation when I saw her, though that was probably just part of her job. I remembered how she told me that she wanted to become an adventurer and that she was working hard to support her low-life father. Knowing the situation she was in, how did I want to react? The answer came all too easily.

“I want to save her. I know the circumstances might be kinda complicated, but...I still want to save her! The problem is that I’m always counting on Novem to clean up after me. Plus, I’m still not a proper adult yet, so I feel like I don’t have any right to talk about saving her...”

The seventh head made his way over and put a hand on my other shoulder. “That’s fine. You did good. The most important thing is realizing what it is you want to do. As for us, we’ll lend you what aid we can. We may not be able to offer you our Arts at this point, but there are six of us here who can offer you our wisdom. No need to worry. Despite what impressions we may have given you, we were regional lords in our respective lifetimes. Helping grant your wish is most certainly within our capabilities.”

“My wish?” I echoed back at him. “But Miss Aria is...”

Our conversation was interrupted when the founder finally broke away from the other leaders who’d been holding him back. “Hold it right there! Why’d you only say six people? There are seven of us here!”

Exasperated, the seventh head shot him a look. “I was under the impression you weren’t willing to help. You refuse to teach Lyle the Art he needs, so what kind of advice could you possibly mean to give him? And just so you don’t misunderstand me, I don’t think any input you could give would benefit him anyway.”

The founder eyed me bitterly, looking none too pleased. He tilted his head back for a moment and closed his eyes. Then, in a booming voice, he declared, “I’ll do it for little Aria! I’ll teach you my damn Art if that’s what it takes! However! Only the first level!”

The second head smoothed out his clothes, which had become disheveled during his struggle with the founder. “Good to hear. Then that means I’ll be able to teach you my Art as well. We haven’t much time, so it’ll have to be the basic level only, but you should be able to use it immediately.”

“My Art isn’t necessarily the strongest, but it really depends on how you use it,” said the third head with a shrug. “I kinda think you’ll have a hard time with it in your current state, though, so I’ll pass on teaching you for now.”

The fourth head removed his glasses and wiped his lenses as he said, “I will teach you, of course. It may be biased of me to say as much, but I think my Art is quite convenient to have.”

The fifth head pulled himself back to his feet and hopped off the table. He took up position beside the sixth head and lightly clapped his son on the arm. “If you use my Art and his as a set, it’s pretty powerful. I recommend combining them.”

“True, it’s almost unfair how effective our Arts are together,” the sixth head declared with a chuckle. “But I suspect with the way you are now, the seventh head’s Art would be a little too challenging.”

The seventh head was the only one among them whose shoulders slumped in disappointment. Apparently, even with the founder’s Art under my belt, I wasn’t yet ready to learn his.

“It’s a convenient tool to have in your kit,” the seventh head assured me, “but the mana drain is too great. I’m sorry to say this, Lyle, but I won’t be able to teach it to you this time. I hope you can understand. It’s too dangerous.”

“I-I get it. But...but can I really learn so many of the others?” I asked skeptically.

“This Jewel was originally a simple Gem,” revealed the fourth head. “It’s an easy task to teach you the first level of an Art, but after that, it gets

complicated. The biggest obstacle is that it's impossible to use an Art unless you know its name and purpose already."

Basically, there were two types of these items. Gems had no restrictions on them, but they could only teach the basic level of an Art.

No, the word "teach" didn't exactly cover it; a Gem more or less forced your brain to comprehend all the ins and outs of the Art. Since a Gem couldn't contain memories, such as those of my annoying historical house leaders who refused to impart their knowledge, it also couldn't reject its holder. I found it appealing for that reason alone. If I had a Gem rather than a Jewel, then I wouldn't have to listen to a peanut gallery gabbing incessantly, thereby draining all my mana in the process.

The founder waltzed toward me and planted his hand on my head. He seemed anything but pleased with the situation, but he did finally mumble, "Be sure to save little Aria. That's all I ask."

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When I opened my eyes again, I was myself in an unfamiliar room.

"Lord Lyle, can you hear me? Can you see me?"

Medical equipment lay all around, and Novem was beside me, looking after me. Her eyes shimmered with tears. I'd probably made her worry again.

"So...I guess I must have passed out," I muttered, pulling myself into an upright position on the bed. There was nothing wrong with my body at least.

When I glanced outside, I noticed the sun had begun to rise, indicating that I'd been out the entire night. I cast my gaze across the room and spied my blue Jewel resting on the bedside table, glimmering the same way it always did. When I took it into my hand, a strange sensation washed over me.

"I think maybe...they've started to see my potential?" I thought out loud.

"Lord Lyle?" Novem prompted.

I flashed a smile at her and assured her I was fine. She pressed her hands over her chest, sighing with relief. I felt bad for making her so anxious, but I had more important matters to attend to. Namely, confirming what had happened

last night after I lost consciousness.

“Novem, how’s the case of Aria’s kidnapping unfolding?”

“After our meeting with her father, Mister Hawkins began looking through the Guild’s internal records for people they suspect are members of this bandit group. Based on what Aria’s father told us and what other information Mister Hawkins could find, we suspect they have about twenty or so people among their ranks. Miss Zelphy seems to intend to set out on her own. She’s putting her instructor duties on pause for the moment, and our remaining two months with her will continue once Miss Aria has been rescued.”

In other words, Zelphy intended to save Aria after all.

“Lord Lyle,” Novem continued, “it seems that Miss Zelphy has some sort of link to the liege lord of Darion. I noticed before that she seemed to be observing us and trying to suss out our intentions. For this incident in particular, the liege lord and the Guild will be cooperating directly.”

Inside the Jewel, the third head remarked, “Aha, I suspected something along those lines. Lyle’s arrival here probably put the liege lord on guard, so he dispatched the most fitting person at his disposal to keep tabs on you. Guess it worked out, though, since Zelphy’s such a talented instructor.”

*If you realized this a long time ago, you should’ve told me,* I thought grudgingly, but right now, I hadn’t the spare time to bother being annoyed at him for it.

“Oh? So Zelphy is connected to the liege lord?” said the sixth head, sounding amused. “This suits us perfectly. It’ll be that much easier to rescue this Aria girl.”

The founder skeptically retorted, “Didn’t you boys say there’d be no point in saving her in the first place? And while we’re at it, wanna explain why you’re so eager to help now? You stubbornly refused when I raised the matter before.”

“You went about things the wrong way,” said the fifth head. “None of us ever said we *wouldn’t* help her, did we? What’s important now is laying the proper groundwork. Besides...the liege lord will only punish her if it’s for the good of the region. That means that if it somehow behooves him to save her, then

there's a good possibility he'd let her off."

The second head shared his father's confusion. "Wouldn't it all be over if we destroyed the bandit group? Besides, do you even think the liege lord here would be willing to negotiate something like that with Lyle? If it were me, I'd turn him away at the door."

"And that's where we employ the Walt name," said the fourth head, sounding a bit too much like he was enjoying himself. "Lyle may have been expelled from his house, but that doesn't change the fact that he *is* a Walt. And this bandit group seems to be a substantial thorn in Darion's side. I'm sure even the liege lord is troubled over them. After all, if the neighboring liege lords are involved in the matter as well, it'll be an enormous headache for him."

"If we truly want to save Aria, not just from her captors but from the repercussions of her father's crimes, then we'll need to come up with a solution complex enough to achieve that goal," said the seventh head. His voice oozed with a level of confidence I couldn't even begin to comprehend. "Let's begin by collecting information. This is where we get to show you what we're made of."

None of my house leaders were surprised to learn that Zelphy was the liege lord's minion. Glad as I was that they'd all rallied together, the task of convincing Novem of this plan fell to me. It was a difficult topic to broach, but I'd made my decision; I was going to save Aria.

"I didn't realize," I said vaguely, trailing off before changing the subject. "Say, Novem."

"Yes, what is it?"

"If I told you that I want to save Miss Aria, would you oppose that decision?" I asked sheepishly.

She shook her head and smiled, which was not at all the reaction I was expecting. "If that's what you desire, then I shall assist you. Nonetheless, Miss Aria's circumstances are extremely unfavorable right now. Even assuming we do manage to rescue her from the bandits, that won't necessarily amount to saving her, considering what will come after. You do understand that, don't you?"

I nodded. I knew about the potential consequences. My house leaders and I had already discussed it, and we had a plan in the works to solve that particular issue.

"I'm aware," I said. "I know it won't end at rescuing her. I'll probably be a burden on you in the process too. I feel terrible about that, especially with all you've done for me, but that's also why I want to tell you this: if you're against what I'm doing, it's perfectly fine for you to bow out."

Again, Novem shook her head, beaming at me as gently as she always did. "If your wish is to save her, then I will be with you every step of the way. Let's save Miss Aria together."

I reached out and grasped her hand in mine. "Thank you, Novem."

## Chapter 14: Foolish Noble Scion

I caught Zelphy when she came to the Guild early that morning, and the two of us settled into some seats at a café to discuss things. She had refused me at first, on account of being too busy, but I insisted that it couldn't wait. While enjoying some cake, which was her treat, I broached the topic I was anxious to speak with her about.

"Miss Zelphy, I have a request to make of you, unrelated to your job as my instructor. Would you inform the liege lord that I wish to meet with him?"

Zelphy spewed her drink at my sudden request. After hastily grabbing a napkin to dab her mouth, she stared at me wide-eyed. "What nonsense are you on about? I'm busy, so I'll be going." She shot out of her seat and started toward the door, anxious to escape.

"I know of a way to save Miss Aria," I said, "and I have a solution for how to break this messy deadlock that the liege lord finds himself in. Please tell him as much for me."

Zelphy froze in place and craned her neck back to get a look at me. Fury was written plain on her face. I could feel cold beads of sweat trickle down my back, but thankfully, the third head piped in to give me encouragement.

"Lyle, you can't back down. She can't attack you out here in the open anyway. The only reason she's trying to intimidate you like this is because she's realized she can't ignore you. We've only just begun. Let's enjoy ourselves a little!"

Beside me, Novem began to reach for her staff, but I held up a hand to stay her. Though Zelphy's demeanor frightened me, I stuck to my cool facade.

"You'll draw attention if you glower at me like that. There are other customers here, you know. Don't you think you'll be disturbing them by doing that?"

Zelphy's lips formed a tight line as she returned to her seat.

I took a single sip from my drink. I was afraid my hands might tremble and

betray me, but much to my own surprise, the coolheaded mask was holding firm. Perhaps that was because my house leaders were still fussing inside the Jewel and providing a suitable distraction for me.

After a short silence, Zelphy said, “You do comprehend the situation, right?”

I smiled at her. “Of course I do. I know it won’t all end by saving Miss Aria. Indeed, I plan to tell the liege lord that if I manage to resolve the current situation, I would like him to exempt Miss Aria from punishment for her father’s crimes.”

“You don’t get it at all,” Zelphy said, eyes still pinned to my face. “This isn’t just a problem involving Darion anymore. The neighboring regions are involved too. If we don’t resolve this cleanly, there could be war. We *have* to see an end to this. No one would turn a blind eye if we were to let the family of someone who colluded with these bandits go.”

“It’s safe to assume you’re not speaking from your place as my instructor anymore, correct?” I asked. Zelphy had her own position to consider. I understood that, which was precisely why I’d decided to cut the niceties even if it meant sounding condescending. “In that case...stop wasting my time. I told you to let me speak to the lord. Tell him that Lyle Walt, former heir of House Walt, wishes to see him. I will take care of this messy situation he finds himself in with his neighbors, as well as this unruly bandit group that’s sunk their teeth into his city.”

Zelphy’s face strained, a bitter smile spreading across her lips. “Don’t put on airs with me, greenhorn.”

Those words nearly coaxed Novem into jumping out of her seat, but I put up my hand again to stop her. Meanwhile, my historic house leaders were huddled together trying to form the best response. I focused my attention on them, mimicking what they said.

“Don’t you dare look down on me. I may be an amateur adventurer, but I am still a son of House Walt.” I stared straight into her eyes as I spoke, announcing my intentions with every ounce of confidence I could string together. I tried to make myself sound bold, as if speaking this way came naturally. “This puny bandit group is merely a tool for me to gain more renown. This is merely a job

to me, no different than an adventurer taking a mission to hunt down monsters. Do you understand me?"

I'd said it. I'd actually said it. But was this really the right choice? The anxiety was almost suffocating.

Novem stared at me from the side, her cheeks coloring.

In truth, I had nothing to do with the plan they'd concocted to take down the bandits. Was it really going to work, lying through my teeth like this?

Zelphy looked utterly shocked. Seeing this, the sixth head declared, "Perfect! With this, we'll be able to meet Darion's liege lord. Lyle, my boy, while we're at it, we're going to need to do a little fundraising to take those thugs down!" He sounded over the moon.

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Zelphy acquiesced and showed us the way to the liege lord's residence. Once inside, we sat ourselves at a sofa in front of Lord Bentler Lobernia's office desk. He was small in stature, and his blond hair was combed over to one side. Although he had a warm, inviting air about him, my house leaders assured me he was a shrewd man. They'd come to that conclusion based on what they'd seen of his servants and the city he ruled over. I suspected they were correct about that. There seemed to be more to this middle-aged man than kindness. Yes, his eyes were soft and unassuming, his belly protruding past his waistline, but his eyes were sharp as they fixed on me.

"Zelphy has informed me of your conversation together. It is true that I assigned her to keep tabs on you. I will readily apologize if my actions have offended you, but you must understand, I am the lord of this land. I had no choice but to do so, in order to protect my people. It's not every day the heir of House Walt makes a sudden appearance here. You must agree it would have been strange if I hadn't been wary of your presence."

He made no mention of my being driven from my family home. It was a good thing I walked into this prepared for the possibility that he'd already thoroughly investigated everything about me. Here I was, just trying to live normally, but those around me were constantly maneuvering.

I nodded at the lord and said, “Yes, I do agree. If I were in your position, I’ve no doubt I would make the same decision. But let us dispense with the small talk and discuss the matter at hand.”

A servant was hovering in the corner behind Bentler, acting as his bodyguard. He was also middle-aged, but he was muscular and had a sword hanging at his hip that looked as if it had seen quite a bit of use. No doubt he was a practiced swordsman. He had his guard up too.

Bentler straightened his back and said, “Very well. Though I will warn you that if you offer me the silly ramblings of a child, I will have you leave Darion, Lord Lyle. No one wishes to keep a keg of gunpowder that may light up at any moment.” His position was clear; if I didn’t propose something noteworthy, he was going to chase me out of his city entirely.

I smiled at him in response.

Although Novem, who was seated beside me, remained perfectly still throughout this brief exchange, Bentler’s guard kept his wary gaze on her.

“Such a harsh stance,” I said. “I would be at a loss if you were to chase me out. After all, I’m eager to prove myself as an adventurer.”

His brows twitched. “Interesting. Well? As an adventurer, what advantages do you propose to offer me? These bandits have made a nuisance of themselves in our neighboring regions, but they decided to lay low once they retreated into my borders. Their actions could invite a misunderstanding with the other liege lords that I am their puppet master. Unfortunately, I’m unable to dispatch my soldiers to take care of them, despite my eagerness to squash them quickly and prevent anyone from getting the wrong idea. These bandits really are proving to be a thorn in my side.”

Two dungeons had appeared in the surrounding area, and the lord had sent his soldiers off to deal with them. He was wise to dispatch them so quickly, but the bandits had capitalized on the city’s resulting vulnerability to spread their roots in Darion. At a glance, it seemed the bandit group was calculating and organized enough to see through the lord’s actions and perfectly adapt to the situation. My historic house leaders suspected, however, that this wasn’t the case.

The fifth head had lived in a generation rife with banditry, and with his years of experience, had declared, “They’re not organizing. They’re only grandstanding. Even allowing for the fact that they made a clever decision to use Aria’s father, there’s nothing deliberate about what they’ve done. If anything, they’ve been lucky. They simply changed their target area after a bit, came to Darion to sell off what they had to raise money, and have kept a low profile. The lord is giving them too much credit. If they were half as clever as he thinks, then soldiers from the neighboring regions would already be marching on Darion.”

I relayed everything that the fifth head said to Bentler, warning him that he was overestimating the bandits, then added, “Actually, my lord, I have no intention of living here permanently. I plan to eventually make my way to the city of traders and adventurers—the Free City of Baym. I’m only staying here for now to learn the basics of adventuring. As you can surely guess, I never received any such education while I was at home.”

Bentler cupped his chubby chin as he studied me. His skin was so plump it jiggled under his touch, but though I was tempted to touch it myself, I showed restraint.

“Hm. Yes, your words do hold some merit. We’re short on people at the moment, so perhaps we’ve been too cautious. But even if that is the case, it changes nothing. We still haven’t done anything to combat the bandits.”

I stared him straight in the eyes as I said, “Would you consider hiring me for my services? Not as Lyle Walt, the boy who was driven from his home, but as Lyle Walt the adventurer. As compensation, I would like two hundred gold coins paid upfront.”

His eyes shot open for a split second before he glared at me. “I cannot trust you. How do I know you won’t take my money and run?”

He had a point there. I’d been cast out by my family, after all. I couldn’t blame him if he was suspicious of me.

“Then, please appoint someone to keep an eye on me. If I attempt to betray you, have them cut me down. I see no issue with that arrangement. They wouldn’t be killing Lyle the former heir to an earldom; they’d be killing Lyle the

adventurer.”

Bentler threaded his fingers and rested them on his lap. “Lord Lyle, allow me to ask you frankly. Do you have any real combat experience? I don’t mean vanquishing monsters. I am asking if you have ever killed a person before.”

I shook my head. “Never. But killing isn’t my objective here either.”

The guard gave me a look of exasperation, as if he couldn’t believe what I was saying. Even Bentler looked disappointed in my response. He sighed and said, “Very well. If you wish to live your life as an adventurer, I will permit you to stay in Darion. I will even give you fifty gold coins to do what you will with. I only ask that, henceforth, you refrain from associating with me or my family.”

In other words, he meant, “I’ll give you money, so don’t get involved with this.”

I chuckled. “Oh? I admit, I’ve no real combat experience, but are you sure about your decision? You do realize that merely killing these bandits won’t be the end of your troubles, don’t you? Or do you honestly think that if you claim the matter is dealt with, the neighboring lords will meekly nod their heads, sit on their hands, and do nothing?”

His face remained an unreadable mask. Maybe there was no point in saying anything more; I’d spoken my piece, and he knew where I stood. But that was precisely why I was going to give him one more nudge to seal the deal.

“I understand that you have your position to think of, as the liege lord here,” I said. “That’s why you can’t ask for aid without due consideration for the consequences, especially given ongoing power struggles between your neighbors. But what if the person you asked for aid was simply a rich and foolish ex-noble scion?”

He was unable to mask his surprise this time, his eyes flying open wider than I’d ever seen before. Once he recomposed himself, the lord said, “I’m listening.”

“It’s simple. As I said, I’m nothing but a foolish ex-noble scion who was driven from his family. I’m still ignorant of the world, so if I somehow die in the process, then it’s a fate of my own doing.”

Once I laid out my plan, Bentler let out a hearty laugh and promised to pay

the two hundred gold coins upfront, as I had asked.

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Lyle had climbed on top of a wooden box in front of the Adventurers' Guild and was presently shouting at the top of his lungs.

"My name is Lyle Walt! Though I was driven from my noble home, I still have the spirit of an aristocrat within me! I swear here and now to pass judgment upon the treasonous bandit gang that committed the gross atrocity of kidnapping a fair young maiden! If you're of a mind to join me, step forward!"



From the way he conducted himself to the way he spoke, he looked as impressive as a knight. The only problem was the content of the speech itself—it sounded far too naive to convince anyone. Those gathered quickly offered their scathing commentary.

“You are going to take down a bandit gang? Dream on.”

“Ignore the kid. It’s just some stupid noble boy who knows nothing of the world.”

“He’s still only a newbie, but he forked over twenty gold coins so he could hire his own personal instructor. I bet his pockets are overflowing with cash. This adventuring business is probably just a hobby for him.”

Zelphy and Novem were watching from afar, but the crowd’s reception was cold. Everyone already knew what a nuisance it would be to track down and punish bandits, and since Lyle had revealed the truth of him being cast out by his family, they merely watched him and laughed.

As Zelphy looked on, she said to Novem, “You sure this is okay? Everyone’s laughing at your lover.”

Novem’s face pinched in displeasure, but since Lyle had made his decision, she was intent on following him. No, from Zelphy’s perspective, Novem looked less like a faithful servant and more like an anxious mother watching from the sidelines.

“Lord Lyle made it clear that this is what he wants to do. Besides...since coming here, this is the first time he’s ever said anything about what he wants. All that’s left for me is to obey his will.”

Zelphy put her hand to her head. “Hawkins was shocked, you know. Your lover said he would offer three silver coins to any adventurer willing to go along, even if they couldn’t fight. To call this irregular would be an understatement. And he plans to recruit two hundred people? Seeing him squander all the money the liege lord gave him as if passing out candy honestly makes me a little uncomfortable as a citizen of this city.”

Novem smiled and explained, “I can see your point, as that money was originally taxes paid by the people. Nevertheless, if two hundred gold coins is

enough to solve the dilemma with the bandits, then it's not all bad. Assuming my lord succeeds, the end result will far outshadow the cost."

While they were discussing these things, a shady-looking group of adventurers arrived on the scene. Zelphy scrutinized them and immediately recognized that they were the very people Hawkins had identified as bandits.

"Looks like they've realized what's going on," said Zelphy. "Guess this is where my job starts. All I ask is that you guys don't screw this up badly."

Novem smiled and waved at Zelphy as she turned to leave.

"With me, Lyle Walt, on the battlefield, you have nothing to fear from these bandits! A simple wave of my sword will terrify them. And before you know it, the legends will feature me— Urk... *Cough...hack...*"

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At the foot of the mountain stood the entrance to the abandoned mines. The liege lord at the time had overseen its original construction only to abandon the endeavor without anything to show for it. Once the lord discovered that the prospector had deceived him, he had the man dragged to the mines and tortured to death. Since then, the place had become infested with goblins, so none of the nearby townspeople dared to get close anymore.

The bandit group that had taken up residence inside Darion made their headquarters in these mines. The group of thirty-five had committed various acts of barbarism not limited to looting the nearby regions. In order to shake off pursuers from said lands, they'd crossed the border into Darion. It was at that point they found themselves in a bind, for they had no way to sell off their stolen goods.

When they entered Darion, the man at the top of their band, Boraz, had an idea. Rather than continue thieving as they had been, why not use the money they obtained from liquidating what they'd already stolen to form a mercenary group instead?

Boraz was blessed with good fortune, for it was only by a stroke of luck that he'd continued his banditry up until now without being caught. His green hair was a disheveled mess at the top of his head, and his blue eyes were clouded.

He stood over two meters tall, which made any room he entered feel small.

Propped up right beside Boraz was an axe he'd stolen from the liege lord's manor. It had a long handle and a wide blade spanning out like the wing of a bird. Some talented artisanry must have gone into crafting it, and Boraz had used this axe—or more aptly, battle axe, on account of its massive size—to claim the lives of countless knights. At this point, it was less of a weapon and more of a partner to him.

At present, Boraz had discovered a new partner—a cord that he wore wrapped around his left arm. Dangling from the end of it was a red Gem.

"This is a nice one," he said. "I figured a Demonic Tool would be the best option, and this one suits me perfectly!"

While he chuckled in delight, his subordinates, who'd just returned from the city proper, continued their report.

"Boss, this is no time to be talkin' about that kinda stuff. Back in Darion, this adventurer fellow named Lyle is trying to gather troops to come take us down."

Even as Boraz listened to the details, his mirth didn't fade. Why would he and his people fear some foolish noble scion? He had killed countless knights before. The idea of this runt challenging him was hysterical.

"Well? Is this boy strong or what? I wanna fight some people who'll give me a challenge."

His subordinates exchanged troubled looks before one responded, "But, Boss, we're talking two hundred people here..."

Boraz suddenly shot out of his seat. "Two hundred? Perfect! Think about this, boys. If we can beat all two hundred of them, word of us'll spread far and wide!"

He laughed heartily, but as much as he joked, Boraz was still the head of a bandit group. It wasn't merely because he was powerful that his men followed him. More often than not, the people standing at the top possessed a certain level of intelligence lest they lose their position. Boraz was also human, like anyone else. If someone betrayed him and attacked him in his sleep, it would all be over. He knew that perfectly well, which was why he'd survived this long.

“But still, we need some intel on this guy,” said Boraz. “And it’ll be a bit until we can sell off that girl we got our hands on.”

One of his men, who’d infiltrated Darion’s Adventurers’ Guild, replied, “With all the fuss in the city, the slave trader has postponed plans to come here for the moment. What’ll we do with the girl, Boss?”

Boraz paused to contemplate what to do with Aria, the girl they’d seized. *She claims she’s a virgin, so she should net a high price. Not to mention, being as pretty as she is, that should drive her value even higher. The problem is that what we need right now is money. We still haven’t finished selling all the goods we stole before.*

“We’ll make her our hostage,” he declared. “That should be effective against this foolish noble scion. Might not even need her, to be honest. Speaking of, are there even any formidable adventurers left in Darion right now?”

Boraz’s subordinate put his hand to his head as he mulled over the question. “No,” he said at last. “There aren’t any. It wasn’t too long ago that a second dungeon was discovered, and most of the capable adventurers ventured off to deal with it.”

“See? Seems they think they can overwhelm us with numbers, but we’ve already got our roots spread firmly in that city. We’ll dispose of this stupid boy and leave Darion behind. We can sell off the girl for a high price, establish ourselves as mercenaries, and throw a lavish party to celebrate. We’ll have enough funds to buy prostitutes for all of us and really have ourselves some fun!”

Boraz had managed to ward off any of his crew from touching the girl by warning them that if they did, there’d be no more alcohol or women. Even so, many among his people had no self-control.

*Well, we’ll cross that bridge when it comes. We’re gonna be a mercenary band either way. I can tighten up ship by executing the rule-breaker in front of them, to serve as an example.*

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It was early morning when adventurers gathered at the gate leading in and

out of Darion, none of them properly equipped. They were the types who stuck to missions involving miscellaneous errands around the city—people who scraped by so they could buy arms and armor, or people who'd only become adventurers to make a living for themselves. They were here only for show, to give the illusion of a massive force.

I did need some who were capable of doing the work required, however, so we'd also hired some additional adventurers who already had their own equipment. Namely, Rondo and his party. I promised them a fitting reward for the labor and had already paid some upfront.

As I climbed into our horse-drawn carriage to look over our assembled equipment and make sure we had everything together, Rondo nervously called over to me.

“Hey, Lyle, even I have to say this is a little crazy. You’ve got sticks for swords and beat-up boards for shields. Sure, maybe it’ll give the illusion that everyone’s armed to the teeth from afar, but if you ask these guys to fight, we’ll have some real trouble on our hands. And what’s with this bundle of dead field grass?”

Having surveyed what I’d assembled in the carriage, Rondo was anxious. While I understood his concerns, we were already on the same page; I didn’t want anyone coming out of this injured either. But there was no need for all two hundred of them to fight anyway.

“They just need to stand there,” I assured him. “They don’t need to fight.”

As I spoke, I secretly scanned the area. A traveler was sitting on a wooden box next to the carriage. They weren’t looking our way, but it was evident they were eavesdropping. I pretended not to notice, even though I could sense something suspicious about them and their presence.

“I assume by that you mean to give them the illusion we’ve got a huge army, and you hope that’ll intimidate them?” Rondo guessed.

“You’ve got it. The people here have nothing to worry about, so long as our numbers discourage them from fighting.”

As I looked over our equipment, a voice trickled out of the Jewel around my neck.

"We need to hurry. Biding our time any more than this will be dangerous," said the seventh head. "But with two hundred adventurers among our ranks, that will leave Darion's Guild completely empty."

These people had gathered here hungry for the silver I offered. Most of them weren't even fighters. I could have probably gotten away with paying them only a single silver coin to get them to come, but the financially savvy fourth head had convinced me to pay three silver coins instead.

"Not a drop of ambition in any one of these people. Once you give them their coin, they'll run off to splurge it on alcohol, women, and gambling. I'm sure they'll be able to live the high life for a couple of days on that pay. Word of you will spread like wildfire, Lyle," said the fourth head, sounding most amused.

It seemed he was eager for them to fan the rumor mill, but I had no idea what purpose that would serve. All I knew was that we only had a budget of two hundred gold coins to work with. We had to take down the enemy with those funds, and we'd already used nearly half of it hiring all these people. Plus, we had to get this carriage together and all the equipment in it. It was a huge undertaking.

I was still in the carriage checking things when Novem, Rachel, and Ralph made their way over. They'd done me the favor of inspecting the other loaded carriages.

"Lord Lyle, our preparations are complete," Novem announced. "We are ready to depart whenever you see fit."

Rachel peered at the rows of carriages. Exasperated, she muttered, "Hey, are these all really necessary? If we're just going there and coming back, it shouldn't even take us a day to be done with this. I get we've got a lot of people with us, which will make traveling a pain, but aren't we taking too much luggage along? You've got all kinds of random things loaded on these carts, including provisions and other stuff."

Even Ralph was skeptical of this plan. "D'you mean for this to take a while or somethin'? But even if it takes a bit, we've got way too much crap with us. It's almost like we're a whole mercenary band."

It was only natural for him to find this dubious. This many resources wouldn't

normally be needed for a mission of this nature. In truth, this was merely bait to ensure the bandits didn't flee. Based on the information Aria's father had provided, these bandits intended to form a mercenary band. That was the whole reason they'd infiltrated the Adventurers' Guild.

"Mercenary band, eh?" the fifth head mumbled. "I have to admit, they're better than your average brigand. They're clever enough to liquidate their spoils and stockpile whatever equipment and other things they need. They won't be able to ignore a convoy of carriages like this loaded down with materials. They'll be dying to get their hands on all of it."

Indeed, what the enemy desired were carriages to carry their supplies and resources. The things we were bringing with us were precisely what an aspiring mercenary band would want. The carriages held the supplies we would need for the two hundred people marching with us, including tents to camp out in. I'd assembled all of this on purpose, knowing it would tempt the enemy. The need for haste meant I'd had to impose on Lord Bentler and ask him to arrange everything I needed, but with the groundwork laid, the bandits were not likely to run from us.

Amused by how everything was unfolding, the third head commented, "We have props for equipment and soldiers with no morale, but look at how lavish our provisions are. We're practically begging the enemy to come attack us. They'll definitely bite. Why not snatch up delicious prey when it's walking straight into your mouth? There's no way they'll let such a golden opportunity pass them by!"

"Well, then, why don't we get going? It'll be all right. I promise we'll win this," I said.

At some point during our conversation, the traveler who'd been eavesdropping had disappeared.

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Back at the abandoned mine, Boraz was guzzling down some alcohol that his subordinates who lived in the city had brought him. Mountains of unfenced spoils sat around the room. Several of the women they'd captured during their raids in neighboring regions were busy servicing some of the members

gathered. Aria was in here with them, but she remained bound on account of her fierce resistance and the fact that she was to be sold off later.

As Boraz enjoyed his drink, one of his subordinates who'd disguised themself as a traveler offered their report. Boraz couldn't stop cackling.

"They've stuffed their carriages full of food provisions and other supplies, eh? Incredible. This kid really is a dumb aristocrat!"

In particular, Boraz was relieved to receive intel on the dispatch force full of adventurers that Lyle was leading. Most of them were merely coming along for show, unable to actually fight. To Boraz's eyes, they were all nothing more than helpless prey.

He tossed his alcohol-filled cup and snatched up the battle axe beside him. The red Gem, dangling from the cord wrapped around his left arm, began to glow. Gleaming red lines began to appear across his body, causing his muscles to bulge. This was a result of the frontline Arts recorded inside the red Gem.

"I've got my weapon, Arts, and men who are fully armed. There's no way we'll lose!" he declared.

Seeing how confident he was, his subordinates likewise grew excited, as if their victory was already certain. It wasn't as though Boraz calculated his words or actions. He simply knew from experience that by making such declarations, his men would follow him.

Boraz closed his left fist around the red Gem and glanced at the captive Aria. "This family heirloom of yours seems to have recognized my potential. And it's not the only heirloom I've stolen—my axe was too. Sadly for you, it's mine now."

When he flashed the red Gem at her, Aria turned her gaze away. She was seething; the Gem had never reacted for her, but it was willing to do so for this bandit leader.

"Kill me. I said kill me already!" she screamed.

For a moment, all of the bandits present went silent, until one of them burst into laughter. Boraz snorted at Aria as well.

“Don’t get so pissy. You’re valuable merchandise for us. Not a bad looker, and you’re thin and fit too. It’s a bonus that you’ve never known a man before. With all those qualities, you’ll fetch a high price from the slave trader. Don’t know or care what’ll happen to you after that. It’d be a better use of your time to start praying now that you get a nice master to buy you.” He chortled as he commanded one of his subordinates to gag her, preventing her from biting her own tongue and ending it herself.

Boraz kept a great big grin on his face as he rested his axe on his shoulder and shouted, “Men! Our next target is a big one. You’d all better get pumped and ready!”

A chorus of voices rang out, echoing through the abandoned mines. Every single man present was certain that victory awaited them.

## Chapter 15: Founder

As our train of carriages headed toward the hideout where the bandits had made their home, I curled up in one of the carriages and fell asleep. Well, I wasn't actually sleeping. I was poking my head inside the Jewel because the founder had summoned me.

When I arrived in the room with the round table, I saw only the founder awkwardly waiting for me. None of the other leaders were present. They had all retired to their individual rooms.

"Uh, um," I said, unsure what else to say.

The founder stood, turning his back to me, and strode toward his room. He paused to glance back and said, "Hurry up and come, boy. I'm going to teach you the second level of my Art."

The founder's Art was an enhancement type. By second level, he meant a more powerful version of the one he'd already imparted on me. But I had to wonder, was it really necessary for me to enter his room?

"You're really going to teach me? But, um, why am I going into your room exactly?" I ventured anxiously.

The door behind the founder's chair was constructed of wood and didn't fit properly in the doorframe. Among all of the other doors in the room, this looked the most flimsy and cheap.

"It'll be more convenient that way. Plus, there's some other stuff I wanna show ya."

Having received his answer, I obediently followed him inside. What spread out before me was a sight I'd never have expected to see inside the Jewel. It looked like a whole cityscape. Countless people were milling about the streets. Gobsmacked, I tried glancing behind me, but the door had already disappeared.

"This way," said the founder.

As he bid, I followed along close behind him, only to run straight into a man who'd been walking along.

"S-Sorry about— Huh?" I apologized on instinct, thinking the two of us had collided, but I soon realized his body had gone straight through me. When I tried to reach out to the other people around us, my hand went right through them.

As I gawked, the founder snapped, "We've no time to waste, boy! Move it!"

Panicked, I raced after him, following him out of the large main road into an alleyway. We continued on, traversing what seemed like a maze of streets. We wound our way through narrow passages among thick clusters of buildings and arrived, at last, at a row of houses. The atmosphere here was decidedly different than everywhere else. Finally, the founder came to a stop in front of one of the houses.

"This is it. This is my house," he said.

I studied the building, which was tiny and dilapidated.

As we stood there, the founder explained, "When I was younger, we were dirt poor. At the time, I'm pretty sure it'd only been fifty years since Banseim's founding. Anyhow, there were still other wars all over the continent. Banseim engaged in some of them. Small skirmishes were a daily thing back then. That's why...I became a knight myself, figurin' I could go out and fight with the rest of 'em."

Although the founder had eventually become independent and established himself as a regional lord, such aspirations hadn't even popped into his head when he was younger.

As we stood there, a young man suddenly stepped out of the house. He had sharp, intimidating eyes, and he was tall and buff.

"Who's that?" I asked.

"Me."

"What?!"

I had to do a double take. True to his word, there was something similar

between the two of them, but I never dreamed this was what he looked like in his youth. It was proof that time could really change a person.

The young man, Basil, glanced around the area, then strode forward.

"We were court knights, see. I was in the line of succession, I guess, but I was only the third son. The oldest lived at home since he was going to take my father's place, and the second son was just a backup in case anything happened to him. I had to get out on my own, so I went to the battlefield a number of times. Earned myself some accomplishments and made a name for myself in the capital that way. Assumin' I didn't do anything else, I'd spend my life as a knight, but the title wouldn't be passed on to my children. It'd end with me. And..."

The young Basil kept walking until he came upon a certain area, where he promptly hid. A little farther on was a woman with long red hair. She was dressed like a wealthy, young noble lady, standing in front of a mansion as she prepared to board a carriage. The young Basil watched her, pumped his fists with a great big grin on his face, and scrambled off to head elsewhere.

*That woman looks like Aria, I thought.*

"I was content to look at her from afar," said the founder. "Each time I saw Miss Alice, I got pumped up, ready to take on the rest of the day. Lookin' back, I seem like some kinda suspicious stalker."

The scenery around us suddenly shifted.

Basil was standing on a battlefield as a soldier. He'd managed to take down a beast, and a rather large one at that, all on his own. Cheers rang out from all around him.

"I walked a dangerous line sometimes. I always thought I'd make a name for myself and finally be able to welcome Miss Alice as my wife. But, as you know..."

All of the color around us began to fade, replaced by a dull gray as time came to a grinding halt. The scenery changed ever so slowly. By the time the colors were restored again, we were somewhere else entirely. In front of us, Basil was confronting one of his superiors.

"The bastard had some nerve, takin' credit for my accomplishments! Even though I was the one who took the beast down!" seethed the founder.

His younger self had slammed his fist into his superior's face. As blood gushed from his nostrils, the man clamped a hand over his nose and ordered his other men to hold Basil back.

"Makin' a name for myself was nothin' but a fever dream," the founder said. "You make connections, spread your wealth, and break your back doin' your best, and if you're lucky, maybe you can get a noble title—but not one you'll ever be able to pass on in your family. That's why I was desperate to do somethin'."

He continued, "I thought it'd be easier, goin' with the pioneering team rather than climbing the ranks as a court noble. Figured I could kill any beasts we faced, and we'd be good. But life wouldn't be such a struggle if things were always that simple."

Before he went, he'd searched through his family's storage and discovered a blue Gem. His family had left it in a pile of junk, indicating that they didn't see much value in the item.

As he watched that moment in his past replay before our eyes, the founder said, "A single Gem like that ain't worth much, see. It's as good as garbage if it's not got an Art recorded inside. I heard it belonged to my gramps, but my old man didn't have an Art, nor did my two brothers. Since it was just sitting there wasting away in their storage, they said I could have it. But in exchange, they didn't offer me any more to help me get on my feet when I left."

Tears almost welled up in my eyes, hearing how awful they'd treated what later came to be the Walt family Jewel. Not that I could really blame them; who could have known that generations later it would come to house seven Arts inside of it?

Something else was niggling at the back of my mind, so I ventured, "Why is a Jewel able to do these kinds of things anyway? And why did you want to show me all of this? I don't really understand how it went from being an ordinary Gem to being a Jewel in the first place."

The founder cocked his head. "Who knows? I've got no clue how it happened.

Besides, what I wanted was a red Gem to begin with. But they were so popular it was impossible to buy one, so I settled for taking this blue one with me."

It seemed he was being genuine about not knowing, and he didn't seem interested in discovering the answer. There was no point in asking him any further. Instead, I studied the memories he was showing me.

The scenery around us shifted. Basil realized leading this pioneering group was far tougher than he'd bargained for. But the township came together, and he snagged himself an official knighthood—one that could be passed down to his heirs—as well as the position of regional lord. With the birth of House Walt, Basil took all of the coin he'd been saving and made his way back to the capital. He probably wanted to ask for Alice's hand at long last.

Unfortunately, I already knew how that tale ended.

"Miss Alice..." The Basil in this memory collapsed on his knees as he watched a crowd celebrate. Miss Alice was clad in a white wedding dress. He looked so utterly heartbroken that I couldn't help but feel for him. At the same time...

"Um, I feel bad saying this, but the two of you had no interaction with each other, and you hadn't even broached the topic with her family. So wasn't marriage kind of out of the cards for you to begin with?" I asked.

He turned his head away, likely already aware that I was right. "Sh-Shut it, boy! I realized afterward that I'd screwed up. But...at the time, I was so desperate to make somethin' of myself for her, and I had no one to turn to for advice. I was actually gonna try to save more money before I went to see her, until pops convinced me to go for it..."

By "pops," he was referring to the leader of House Fuchs at the time who'd looked after him.

Again, the scene around us changed. Basil was guzzling alcohol, looking more like the barbarian I recognized. Apparently, a tribe lived near the Walt's region that was not under Banseim's rule. Basil had waged war and subjugated them, turning into the impressive savage I saw before me now.

Basil was wearing beast fur wrapped around his neck, and he carried an unwieldy sword on his back. He was at a banquet surrounded by the region's

citizenry and tribesmen, who urged him to find a wife quickly. Basil responded to them with cold disinterest.

"A wife? You really think I need some broad with me?! If ya really want me to marry that bad, then...hm, let's see. What was it again? Ah, house traditions! That's right. Walt has its own house traditions about taking a bride! She's gotta be a beauty, first of all." His cheeks were bright red, signifying just how inebriated he was as he began rattling off a list of qualities required for his future wife. "Next, she's gotta be healthy! And, uh...a good constitution. Gotta be intelligent too. And, err...needs to have clear skin! Yeah, if a woman can't pass those five requirements, then I can't marry her!" He continued nursing his drink as he spoke.

My gaze drifted to the founder.

Beside the Basil from memory, who was continuing to make merry, was the old head of the Fuchs household, whom he refers to as "pops." Troubled by the conversation that had just unfolded, he was pinching the bridge of his nose as if he was at a loss for what to do. The others around him were already beginning to discuss whether any women were available who might fit the criteria Basil had listed.

"You were awful," I said bluntly.

"Moron! It was an excuse I spit out while we were all drinkin'. How was I supposed to know people'd take it seriously and pass it down? No man's got that kinda foresight. And why the hell hasn't anyone put a stop to those traditions yet anyhow?!"

Again, the color from the scene before us began to fade. As everything else dissipated around us, an enormous bear appeared with brown fur and red eyes. Drool dribbled from its open mouth, and it looked ready to jump us at any second. Undaunted, the founder approached it. The bear lifted itself onto its hind legs, trying to intimidate him. In a flash, the founder drew his enormous sword, brandishing it with one hand.

"You've got more important things to worry about," the founder said, "like learning the second level of my Art, Limit Buster."

Thin blue lines spread across the founder's skin, covering his entire body. No,

that wasn't quite right. It didn't appear *on* his skin; it was as if his very veins were glowing. His muscles began to bulge. He lifted his sword, which looked more like a crude chunk of metal. When he brought it down, he cleaved the bear clean in two. It was unnatural the way he could wield such a heavy weapon in one hand, but what surprised me even more was his sheer power. His strength was beyond all normal limits, and yet he looked none the worse for wear.

"Back in my day, our lands were infested with these brown bears. It was tough, battling with them. They're faster than they look and pack a punch too. I found myself thinkin', if only I had more power, this'd be so much easier. That's when the second level of my Art manifested, which is called Limit Buster. The way pops explained it is that it basically lets you wield power above your normal limit while simultaneously healin' you. Somethin' like that. I dunno much about it, but if you push your body too hard, it starts to fall apart on ya. He called it a demerit. But like I said, I ain't too keen on the details."

My head was spinning. I could hardly believe how casually he'd left out the most important aspects of his Art, claiming he had no idea how it worked.

"Isn't that part kind of important to know, though? And you're being kind of vague, but does that mean this Art has a demerit if you use it too much?"

He shrugged as he looked at me. "What, you don't even know that much? You really are an idiot, boy. If you push yourself past your limits, of course your body's gonna fail ya."

He was the last person in the world I wanted commenting on my intelligence.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but aren't you the one who just said you know basically nothing about your own Art? And who are you calling an idiot, anyway? If I'm stupid, then so are you!"

The moment the words left my tongue, I slapped my hand over my mouth. *Crap*, I thought.

The founder dropped his gaze, and his shoulders began to tremble. He looked pissed. At least, I thought he did, until he burst out, "Ha ha... Ha ha ha! That's it. Yeah, that's good. Here I was thinkin' you were always bein' way too polite. It's good for ya to fire back when someone say somethin'. There's no fun in talkin' if

you're always a wet blanket. Take a good look at my son, the second head. He doesn't hold back with me." He paused. "Well, nor do those other bastards. But, well...guess I did go too far with ya, boy. Sorry 'bout that."

He scratched the back of his head, looking at a loss as he peered at me. Almost as quickly, he averted his eyes, seemingly embarrassed. Where he directed his gaze, another brown bear appeared, looking like an exact copy of the one we'd seen moments ago.

"There, see. We've got another one. Go give it a beatin'. Burn through the mana that's built up inside you. That's how you get your power."

His explanation wasn't the easiest to follow, but the bear was already charging this way. The carcass of the previous one has disappeared at some point during the course of our conversation.

I glanced around, trying to find a weapon I could use.

"Use your head a little, boy. You're inside the Jewel. Nothing here is real. You control it with your mind. All you gotta do is want a weapon and it'll appear."

True, this place wasn't real. Rather, we were inside the founder's memories. That meant the people I'd seen before milling about that street were nothing but illusions. Even so, his advice to conjure the weapon with my mind was difficult to execute in light of the encroaching bear. I panicked the closer it got.

"I-I can't—"

I was convinced there was no way I could do as he bid on the fly. The bear was already on its haunches, lunging at me with its front paws. I immediately leaped back, but without missing a beat, the bear flung itself at me in a tackle.

"Take this!" I bellowed without thinking, my flight-or-fight response kicking in. The saber that Ceres had once destroyed not so long ago manifested in the palm of my hand.

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I awoke to Novem shaking me by the shoulders. The carriage wasn't moving anymore, I noticed, which meant we'd arrived at our destination.

As if to confirm my suspicions, Novem announced, "Lord Lyle, we're here."

Preparations are already complete. We're ready to carry out this operation whenever you are."

I sat up and stretched my arms. Thin rays of orange light were trickling in through the gaps in the cloth canopy secured over the top of the carriage. As I cracked my neck, I asked, "Did you get some sleep? Things are about to get pretty busy here."

"Yes, I was able to get plenty of rest," she answered, smiling at me. "But, my lord, I noticed...something seems a bit different about you?"

I cocked my head at her, confused, but maybe she was right. Maybe something had changed. Or perhaps it was more that other changes around me had influenced a change in me. Speaking to the founder had relieved some of the weight from my shoulders.

"Yeah, I guess that was the problem," I said vaguely. "Maybe I was just being too uptight before."

Now it was Novem's turn to tilt her head in confusion. Her reaction brought a small smile to my lips as I climbed to my feet and hopped out of the carriage.

"All right, it's about time for the main attraction."

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Dusk turned to nightfall, and soon the members of Lyle's dispatch force were fast asleep. After confirming that the two squads on watch had nodded off on the job, a group of three adventurers huddled together, nodded among themselves, and made their escape from the camp. They ducked into some nearby shrubbery and crept to the entrance of the abandoned mines. They moved cautiously, keeping alert of their surroundings, and slipped inside. After hailing their comrades who were keeping a vigilant watch for intruders, they made their way farther into where Boraz was located.

"Boss, those guys are camping on our front door without a care in the world. They were even knocking back pints of alcohol, saying it'd be okay to drink tonight since they wouldn't be attacking 'til first thing tomorrow morning."

As he sat on top of a wooden box, Boraz stroked his chin. "Interesting. Seems like you two had an awfully easy time slipping out unnoticed, though?"

The three bandits, who'd joined the dispatch force as adventurers, chuckled.

"I bet they've no idea the enemy is in their ranks, stealing intel. Most of the people they've got with them are amateurs. They're just here for the ride, so we didn't bother to count them. Although, a few guys in the group know how to use a weapon. They're camped out in tents, and we already looked in on them. Should we head back to rejoin them?"

Boraz held up his hand to stop them. "Dummy, we've got no obligation to wait until morning for them to attack. We're gonna do a night ambush. If we get rid of their leader, the rest of them'll go scrambling for the hills. I'm sure some of 'em will even be willing to switch sides and join us. Then we'll have the superior numbers."

Boraz's men were grinning from ear to ear, certain that they'd already won the battle. Lyle and his group barely had any decent equipment among them, while the bandits were fully decked out. Boraz was even clad in a suit of iron armor they'd scraped together. The pieces were stolen, of course, and the bandits had made clumsy repairs to the suit, so it looked rather unsightly. However, when the massive Boraz donned it, the unshapely iron armor suddenly became intimidating.

In the midst of their confident posturing, one of the bandits soon noticed something amiss.

"H-Hey! What the heck is this? There's smoke!"

Boraz took to his feet. "What? Is something burning? You guys can't keep it together. We'll be in a tough spot if the fire spreads to our treasures. Hurry and put it out."

But even as he gave his directions, more and more smoke began filling the room.

"Wh-What is this? This smoke...isn't normal!" Boraz choked out. He'd set enough fires before to recognize that the smell of this one was off. He couldn't keep his eyes open, and it was difficult to breathe. Something wasn't right. "Hey, all of ya, get outside—"

Before he could finish giving orders, one of the bandits who'd been acting as a

lookout came stumbling inside and collapsed at the entrance. A number of arrows were protruding from his back.

“Th-The enemy,” the man managed to rasp out. “Those bastards are attacking.”

The other bandits inside the mines were struck speechless by this news.

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The Walt family’s historical house leaders had passed on their abilities through the generations. This method of inheritance came with a certain merit; each Art was unique, and once they manifested for one person, they could never manifest for someone else. That meant no one could receive their Arts so long as I had them in my arsenal.

That night, I was joined by Novem, Rondo, Ralph, and Rachel at the entrance to the abandoned mines. We were burning a pile of rotten leaves we’d carried with us. As the fire grew, smoke came billowing out. Novem and Rachel each raised their staffs and used magic to manipulate the wind current.

We actually weren’t the only ones here. About twenty adventurers cloaked in black robes were hanging nearby, waiting for any bandits who came running this way to escape.

Rondo strode up to me, wearing a cloth mask like everyone else to avoid inhaling the fumes. “Lyle, don’t tell me those leaves are...” His anxious voice trailed off, as if he was concerned I was using something poisonous. I wouldn’t go that far, of course. I wasn’t as ruthless as the fifth head.

“It’s not fun to inhale, but the only side effects are some tears and snot,” I assured him. “Nothing lethal or dangerous.”

Inside the Jewel around my neck, the fifth head breathed a sigh. “I suppose it makes sense we can’t use poison since they’re holding someone we want to save. A more effective method would be to use a paralyzing agent, wait for everything inside the mines to go quiet, and then storm it en masse.”

The fifth head had offered dozens of methods to snuff out the entire bandit group. I’d listened to a few of them, but most were so gruesome that I pitied any enemy who fell victim to them.

The third head let out a hearty laugh. “As if we’d overlook the fact that they had spies in our ranks. It’s cute they thought they had a leg up on us, but they made a fatal mistake by making enemies out of us. They’re going to come along obediently whether they like it or not.”

I kept Full Over—the Art the founder had taught me that boosted all of my abilities—activated while also using the other Arts that my house’s historical leaders had imparted on me. I couldn’t use any of them for long stretches of time, but when I did elect to utilize one or more, I made sure to combine them with Full Over. When I wasn’t immediately using them, I deactivated them so I could conserve as much mana as possible, all the while keeping a careful eye on the enemy’s movements.

The reason I was able to read the enemy so easily was thanks to the Arts the fifth and sixth heads had shared with me. The fifth head’s Art was called Map, and it allowed me to visualize the surrounding area’s layout in my head. It basically gave me an internal eagle-eyed view, perfectly mapping out each feature of the area. The sixth head’s ability was Search, which was the ability to detect traps, enemies, and other things around me. It separated things into easy-to-understand colors too. Anything with hostile intent would be red, neutral parties would be yellow, and allies would be blue. Basically, by using these two abilities together, I could visualize a map in my mind and detect the movements of both enemies and allies.

I could already sense the enemy scrambling for the exit, racing down the tunnels of the abandoned mines. I reached for my weapon, turned to those present, and announced, “We’ve got four coming!”

I deactivated my Arts and focused my attention on what was happening right in front of me.

“Lyle!” barked the sixth head. “You need to dole out more orders! Make sure Novem and the other mages are on standby, ready to attack as soon as they come out!”

The bandits were pumping their legs as hard as they could, as if their lives depended on escaping the mines. My house leaders knew better than to underestimate them. Even if they weren’t the most powerful adversaries, they

were still desperate; they had to kill us if they had any hope of a future. As the sixth head bid, I ordered those present to stay vigilant, lest they let our favorable position right now go to their heads.

Bandits clad in armor came dashing out of the smoke-filled cave. Some of them even had swords or axes in hand as they charged toward us.

“Novem, use your magic!” I shouted.

“Yes, my lord! Wind Bullet!” She aimed her staff at the enemy and unleashed her spell, decreasing its potency enough that it wasn’t lethal. It slammed into one of the bandits wearing a shield and sent him flailing through the air. His back slammed into the ground, and he let out a strangled cry before going motionless.

The black-robed adventurers immediately leaped forward to deal with the other bandits. Rondo and Ralph joined them on the front lines, the two of them taking on one man together. Barely any time had passed before we had three of them bound with rope.

“L-Let us go!”

“Dammit, you bastards... W-Wait! Who are you? I’ve never seen you guys around Darion before!” One bandit gaped at the man swathed in black who’d apprehend him. Like many of his comrades, he’d infiltrated the Adventurers’ Guild and was familiar with most people who frequented it, so naturally, he was shocked to see someone he didn’t recognize. But of course he wouldn’t recognize them.

The adventurers in black used the hilts of their weapons to knock out any conscious bandits, then dragged them through the dirt until they were all gathered in one spot.

Ralph watched them work, wiping the sweat on his forehead with his bare hand. “You got some seriously impressive people to come with you. How’d you get them on board?” Seeing the practiced way they dealt with the enemy, he could hardly believe his eyes.

To be perfectly honest, they weren’t adventurers from Darion’s Adventurers’ Guild. The city had already sent out its finest to deal with the dungeons that

had appeared, so these were people they'd borrowed from elsewhere. More specifically, they came from the territories the bandits had been raiding.

Ralph gave me a questioning look. I could tell he wanted an explanation, so with a smile, I informed him, "We're not the only ones who have a bone to pick with these guys. In fact, there are other people with a much greater grudge than we have." As I spoke, I squeezed my fingers around the Jewel dangling from my neck. Once again, I activated Full Over along with the other Arts I'd acquired. A mountain of information came crashing into my brain, leaving a faint ache in my head.

"It can't be easy since you're still not accustomed to using these Arts," said the sixth head. "Narrow down your search parameters more. All you need to know is what's friend, what's foe, and what's neutral. That should be enough."

I followed his instructions, but thanks to my inexperience, the results were poor. More importantly, I noticed that the bandits inside had finally realized that all other escape routes were sealed, so they were heading this way. Zelphy and her squad had used their magic to close off those exits, taking down any lookouts posted there in the process. Some small holes had been left only to make sure the wind would help the smoke travel around inside, but they were too small for a person to squeeze through. The bandits had only one option: to traverse the narrow path leading out this way. Still, I'd posted adventurers at the other exits as well to be on the safe side. Our plan was airtight.

I visualized a map of the mines in my mind. A few yellow dots mixed in with the dozens of red, indicating presences that were neither friend nor foe. I also spotted one blue one, which I assumed was Aria. The red dots were racing around like chickens with their heads cut off, suffering from smoke inhalation. I could only guess how bad the situation was inside.

"The next wave is coming," I announced. "We've got seven...no, they've got four more coming in right behind them! Novem, get your magic ready."

At my orders, the other adventurers also prepared themselves for what was to come. One of the men in black, who seemed to be the leader of their group, paused to glance at me.

"Those are some awfully precise details. Is this your Art?"

I peered at him and flashed a small, ambiguous smile.

The man shook his head. It was considered poor manners to ask what someone's Art was. It was equivalent to asking to see someone's hand in a card game; no one would risk exposing themselves like that.

"Sorry. Forget I asked. Right now we're just glad to have you on our side," he said as he raised his weapon, ready to meet his foe.

The bandits again came spilling through the curtain of smoke. Magic and arrows went flying. The enemy could barely put up any resistance before they were overwhelmed and captured. The adventurers made sure to drag any bandits who got injured in the skirmish away from the area, even offering them treatment for their wounds. Those on healing duty wore bitter looks as they healed our enemies.

"Dammit. I can't believe I gotta help these losers."

"Suck it up. For now, anyway."

Though I could hear them grumbling in the background, I tuned them out and kept a vigilant eye on our surroundings as I gave out orders. For the most part, Rondo and the other adventurers were taking care of the bandits. While Rondo fought with his sword, Ralph brandished his spear. Rachel stood back behind them with her magic at the ready. Having a mage to lob spells while two frontline fighters kept the enemy at bay made them a highly offensive party. Rondo was a skilled fighter, and Ralph had a solid build with lots of power, which made him a reliable member. For her part, Rachel knew exactly when to launch her spells and had impressive accuracy.

When we'd nabbed about half of all the bandits, the second head coolly announced, "Lyle, another one's coming."

I readjusted my grip on the hilt of my saber and positioned myself, ready for what was to come. An enormous man clad in iron armor came barreling through the smoke, his fierce battle cry piercing the air. Two adventurers tried to meet him head-on, only to be knocked out of the way. He was swinging an enormous axe—a battle axe, by the looks of it. A cord was wrapped around his left arm, and from it dangled a red Gem.

The founder gasped. "That bastard! He stole little Aria's red Gem! Lyle, dontcha dare show that monster any mercy! I can tell ya right now that's their leader."

"You're making this claim without anything to base it on, I assume?" said the seventh head, unconvinced.

"My intuition's tellin' me he's the leader!" the founder barked back at my grandfather. "That's your proof right there! Show a little faith in me, will ya? My intuition's almost never wrong!"

"I'll take on that behemoth of a man," I announced to everyone present, though I was mainly directing it at Novem, Rondo, and the leader of the black-robed adventurers. "I'll leave the rest to you guys. Oh, and we've got captives inside the mines. Please be sure not to attack them."

As I raced forward to meet the bandit leader, Rondo reached out a hand toward me and cried, "Lyle! It's dangerous for you to face him alone!" He was clearly worried about me.

I paused to glance back. Novem gave me a pointed look, and I nodded silently. I assumed the message she was trying to send was that she trusted me...right? If so, that would make me happy.

"Hey, big lug, over here. I'll take you on," I shouted.

The man who'd been brandishing his battle axe froze in place as he turned to me. His helmet had a thin slit in it, and through it I caught a glimpse of his bloodshot eyes. He was obviously agitated, and if that wasn't indication enough, his booming voice soon echoed around us.

"Bring him out! I want the man responsible for this... I want that idiotic noble kid!"

He must have heard about me from his minions, which was why he was so eager now to locate me. The battle had turned chaotic all around us as the other adventurers clashed with the other bandits. I slowly edged away from them as I answered the leader, saying, "Oh? You're calling for me specifically, are you? My name is Lyle. Am I correct in assuming you're the head of this bandit group?"

Immediately after I posed that question, the red Gem dangling from his left arm began to gleam. The bandit leader wasn't even within reaching distance of me, and yet he lifted his axe as if he was about to attack.

"Lyle, run! No, don't turn your back to him. Leap to the side!" cried the founder.

I immediately did as he asked, narrowly evading the shock wave the bandit leader had unleashed from his axe. He was breathing so hard afterward that I could hear him gasping through the gaps of his iron helmet.

Cold beads of sweat trickled down my back. I took a quick glance around me. The area surrounding the abandoned mines was thick with trees and undergrowth, perfect for obstructing the enormous weapon my enemy was wielding, so I had a mind to lure him deeper in to give myself an advantage.

"That sure was something. I assume that was an Art inscribed into that red Gem you have," I said as I leveled the tip of my saber at him.

The bandit leader seemed to think he'd already won the battle. He lifted his battle axe and rested it on his shoulder. A split second later, he came charging at me, swinging it down through the air. I leaped to the side again, dodging the incoming blow, and in the process, I put more distance between us and the others that were fighting.

"I'll be the man who kills you, brat. You can call me *Master Boraz*," said the bandit leader. "Better not forget my name, 'cause it's your fault my plans were ruined. But all I gotta do is kill you. You're the brains of this operation, so if I cut you down, I still have a chance. I'll make the rest of this useless flock you've got with you my subordinates. With a few more people on my side, we can manage."

His words suggested that he still hadn't given up on his dream of rebranding his bandit party as a mercenary band. I could at least praise him for his tenacity.

"I'm impressed you still haven't given up," I said. "But if you were really that set on it, why didn't you use proper means to establish a mercenary band? I'll be frank, Boraz. It's over for you. All that awaits you now is the harsh bitterness of reality."

“You damn braaaaat!”

An atmosphere of pure rage billowed from Boraz, encompassing him like a glowing red light as he darted toward me. Even though we’d entered a dense thicket of trees, it didn’t slow down his battle axe at all. I thought this area would put him at a great disadvantage, but my calculations were obviously wrong.

As the second head watched from inside the Jewel, he calmly stated, “The Art he is using is a physical enhancement type. Seems it may also be increasing the strength of his weapon. His shock wave attack is a notable threat as well. I don’t know if it’s all House Lockwood’s Gem giving him those abilities, but he’s got quite a number of Arts at his disposal.”

“Heh heh,” snickered the founder, sounding strangely gleeful. “I’ll bet those are Miss Alice’s Arts!”

Annoyed, I said, “Hey, couldn’t you guys show a little bit more concern for my situation here?”

As the behemoth of a man in front of me began drawing his battle axe back, intending to swing from the side, I immediately shut down the fifth and sixth heads’ Arts. In exchange, I activated the fourth head’s Art and then the second head’s Art.

The fourth head’s Art was simply called Speed, and as the name implied, it substantially boosted the user’s agility. What made it so impressive was that instead of giving an instant, uncontrollable acceleration, it offered a more steady, stable increase. The only downside was that it constantly consumed mana.

The second head’s Art was more ambiguously titled All. It was a support-type Art that gave the user the ability to allow someone else to access their Arts. The only issue with that was it required the other party to have a certain skill level and to be within a certain proximity of the user. Basically, a lot of variables had to be met for everything to work smoothly. However, it had one other secret usage as well.

The moment the shock wave came rippling toward me, I leaped into the air to avoid it, grabbing a tree branch in the process and using it to propel me in

another direction before I landed safely.

“How’d that brat dodge my attack?! He wasn’t even looking!” the bandit leader grumbled to himself.

A by-product of All’s usage was that the user could sense things around them whether they could see them or not, including the distance between themselves and anyone close by. That is to say, it was omnidirectional. I could close my eyes and still tell what was happening in a circular range around me.

The only downside to all of this was that it left me out of breath. Using so many Arts simultaneously was proving to be quite the challenge. That was especially true since these Arts weren’t originally my own, and I’d only just begun using them recently.

Boraz hauled his battle axe into the air, eyeing me warily. “I don’t have time to waste on a small fry like you,” he spat. “I need to get back to where my men are so I can kill all your little friends.” He seemed panicked now, though it wasn’t because he was worried about his subordinates. Rather, he was concerned that once they were taken down, my allies would come this way and surround him.

“Haah, haah.” I took gasping breaths, still worn out from that last maneuver. “Don’t act so scared. Seems to me you’ve had your fun running amok. Oh, I get it. It’ll be rough for you once you’re captured, but I think you’ve done more than enough already.”

He stared at me and burst into laughter. “You’re an idiot, aren’t you, kid? Once I crossed the border into Darion, my criminal slate was pretty much wiped clean. You’re only dead meat if you let them judge you for your crimes in the same region you committed them. But that’s why I’ve been careful not to do anything too notable here in Darion.”

“Well, he does have a point there,” the fourth head remarked. “The officials cannot investigate him for whatever crimes he committed before he came to Darion. It would be too big of an undertaking for them. Now I see. They moved their area of operations with that in mind. It’s not a bad plan, to be honest. But I must say it’s a rather naive one.”

As I stood in front of Boraz, I deactivated all of my remaining Arts. I then took

a deep breath and said, “That’s awfully simpleminded of you. That excuse might fly if you were guilty of lesser crimes, but after all the destruction you’ve left in your wake, do you honestly think any region would leave you untouched?”

I must have hit a nerve, because Boraz glowered at me and lifted his battle axe above his head. He was done talking, apparently.

“Time for you to die,” he growled.

The red Gem dangling from his arm emitted an eerie glow as he leaped forward, flying at me with impressive speed and even accelerating along the way. He was intent on cleaving me in two with one blow. It seemed he still had another Art up his sleeve that I didn’t know about.

I kept my eyes glued to the approaching axe. From within the Jewel, the founder hollered at me, “Lyle, hit him with it!”

## Chapter 16: The Jewel's Power

The founder's words lingered in my ears. As Boraz's axe came racing toward me, I caught a glimpse of his eyes through the gap in his helmet. They shone with confidence, as if he thought victory was assured.

"Limit...Buster!" I muttered.

I pictured the mana coursing through me as fuel, and as I did so, a pattern of thin blue lines appeared all over my body, glowing against my skin. It was the same sort of light that Boraz was emitting, but while his was red, mine was blue.

Boraz's axe slammed into the ground with such incredible force that it left a crater in its wake. The resulting shock wave made all the trees in the area shudder, leaves rustling noisily around us.

Boraz's eyes landed on me, standing just beside him—unscathed—and he dropped his jaw as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing. "Wh-Why? There's no way you could've..."

While he struggled to process what he'd just witnessed, I lifted my saber.

Having watched everything that had unfolded, my historical house leaders gasped in unison as if they'd suddenly remembered something, but it was the sixth head who spoke first. "That's right," he murmured. "The ability he's using is called Slash. It's an Art that allows the user to temporarily close the distance between them and their opponent and land a devastating blow. It's dangerous if you get hit by it, but he's obviously not an experienced user. The attack is linear enough that it's easy to avoid it."

Much as they claimed it was easy to evade, my life would've been in serious danger if he'd landed a hit at point-blank range. Caution seemed the prudent choice, but I couldn't use Limit Buster for an extended period of time. A quick, decisive strike would be the most desirable. The only problem was that my weapon wasn't the best suited for stopping him. Boraz was, after all, clad in a

full iron suit. A saber would have a hard time piercing through that, and Boraz knew it.

"You dare look down on me?!" Boraz snarled.

This time, his axe came in diagonally. I could see everything around me so clearly that it was almost like it was playing out in slow motion. I dodged his blow at the last possible second. I reached for the short sword still hanging from my waist, brandishing both weapons at him.



“A short sword? You must not be taking me seriously, you damn twerp!”

I didn’t know what part of this had provoked Boraz’s anger, but I managed to deflect his next swing with both weapons. Sparks flew as metal clashed against metal. The force behind his swing was so impressive that if I didn’t match it perfectly, I risked breaking my weapons trying to parry.

“Lyle,” uttered the second head, sounding shocked at what he was seeing. “You...can dual wield?”

I had no idea why he sounded so surprised. There was nothing special about it. I had two weapons at my disposal, so of course I could wield them in either hand and fight. Was he trying to mock me or something?

“They’re just weapons. All you have to do is hold them...and swing!” I said.

As my concentration improved, my opponent’s movements appeared slower to me. When I deflected his attack, it gave me an opening. I slammed my foot as hard as I could into his vulnerable stomach. We were both using Arts to enhance our bodies, so the damage was minimal. His armor, on the other hand, wasn’t quite as durable as the rest of him; my blow left a visible dent in the iron.

Boraz paused to take in the damage. “I took a real liking to this armor, y’know. Now, no matter what it takes, I’m gonna kill you! I’ll be covered in your lifeblood before this is through!”

His attacks grew more and more chaotic. I deflected each one, dodging any shock waves he sent my way, all the while trying to minimize my movements to conserve energy. Boraz was far more erratic. He tried to use Slash on me again, but I danced around him, forcing him to miss his mark. Perhaps he was unable to alter his trajectory once he’d committed to the attack, because although he tried, he ended up slamming into a tree instead of me.

Though his strike had resulted in a self-inflicted injury, that wasn’t enough to knock him off his feet. His helmet was so severely caved in that he discarded it, and the rest of his armor had dents all over it as well, so he peeled that off too. By the time he was done, he was panting hard, sweat dripping from his exposed facial hair.

Boraz held his battle axe in his right hand while his left held tight to the red Gem he'd been using.

"Give me more power!" he howled. "The hell if I'm gonna let this little brat get the best of me!"

The red Gem emitted a glow. The patterned lines that had spread across Boraz's body earlier appeared even thicker now, pulsating like veins. His muscles bulged even more than before, tearing through his clothing as well as bursting the last piece of armor he'd neglected to shed earlier.

"Yes! Yes, ha ha ha!"

"You're telling me he's still got some fight left in him?" I grumbled.

He was lighter on his feet now that he'd disposed of his armor, and the Art he'd employed boosted his power even further. He came at me again with his axe, but this time he was much faster. Saying his attacks were also sharper would be an understatement. He was like the embodiment of sheer, brute strength now.

"Guh..."

I focused all my attention on him and leaped back to put distance between us and observe his movements, but he immediately launched into a series of Slash attacks. No matter how much I ran, he would chase after me. If I put any distance between us, he'd send dozens of shock waves my way. The trees around us fell in rapid succession, caught in the crossfire, leaving the whole area almost desolate. If I waited until the last second to dodge his blows, the shock wave would disrupt my balance. The blades of my saber and short sword were barely holding up, sporting dents and scratches everywhere.

"Why is this guy so tough?" I wondered out loud, more to myself than anyone else. Had I underestimated him? I was beginning to grow anxious about whether I'd made the right call.

"Don't let weakness consume you now, boy!" shouted the founder. "You succumb to that, and your whole body'll freeze up. And while we're at it, Lyle...you can see this guy's movements, can't ya?"

I nodded silently.

"Then you've got this. Toss those weapons to the side."

The opinions inside my Jewel were split on this.

"What madness are you suggesting, telling him to dispose of his weapons?!" the fourth head demanded, clearly in opposition.

The founder chuckled. "Ya see, I've been through somethin' like this before. Found myself up against a tough barbarian. The two of us were locked in a death match, but I couldn't finish the bastard off. He had his own Art, and it was the same type as mine—enhancement. Pissed me off so much I dropped my weapons and started brawlin' with my fists."

So he wanted me to forsake my saber and short sword and face this hulking giant with my bare hands?

"Listen up, boy," said the founder, "I'm sayin' you need to match the enemy's movements. If he comes flying at ya, use his momentum against him. Slip past his defenses..."

The founder had barely finished speaking before Boraz came swinging at me again. Plumes of dirt flew as he kicked off the ground, indicating that he was putting more power behind this attack than he had any of the previous ones. I decided to follow the founder's advice and threw my swords aside.

"Fool, I'm not gonna let you surrender now! It's too late!" Boraz shouted. He was grinning from ear to ear, certain that victory was inches away. How many times had he given me this same look before?

I watched carefully as he came closer, then jumped forward to meet him. I crouched low as I closed in. Caught off guard, he flinched.

"Now I've got you!" I shouted, matching his movements as I dodged the blade of his axe and slipped in past his defenses. I grabbed the belt looped around his waist and focused all my strength on throwing him off his feet. I was going to take him to the ground.

"That's it! Now just slam his head into the dirt!" the founder ordered.

"Graaaah!" Following his advice, I slammed Boraz's skull into the earth with such impressive momentum that it created a crater where he collided. Clouds

of dirt shot up all around me. I leaped back, pushed away by the resulting shock wave from my attack. Intense surges of pain rippled through my body. I immediately shut off my Art.

“Guess I pushed myself a little too much there.” I steadied my breathing, watching as Boraz’s stiff body slowly went limp. I straightened my back and approached him. Along the way, I grabbed the battle axe he’d dropped when I was grappling with him and, cautiously, examined my fallen foe. He was motionless, but his bulging muscles remained, and the pattern of thick red lines over his skin had yet to fade.

The fifth head instructed, “Take a good look at him. This is exactly why we didn’t teach you our Arts until you were ready. If your body doesn’t grow accustomed to using them or you surpass your limits by using them too much, this is what happens to you. A Gem can basically teach anyone the Arts contained within, but if things go sour, then...”

Before he could even finish speaking, the skin stretched taught over Boraz’s inflated muscles suddenly split open. Blood came gushing out, coating his body as the pattern of red lines slowly disappeared. Mine were already gone since I’d deactivated my Art.

“So this is why you didn’t teach me before...”

My entire body ached, but even with the pain I felt, I was in much better condition than Boraz.

I snatched the red Gem dangling from Boraz’s left arm. “Now I just need to return this to its original owner...” I was so unsteady on my feet that I had to use the battle axe almost like a crutch to keep me upright.

Fortunately, my adventurer comrades came racing to the scene at that exact moment.

“Sorry for being late...” The leader of the adventurers paused as he studied Boraz’s collapsed form on the ground. “That looks pretty gruesome, but it seems like he’s still alive.” He turned back to his men. “Put some salve on his wounds and bandage him. We’ll be in trouble if he dies on us.”

Several of his subordinates hauled their supplies over and circled around

Boraz, showing little compassion as they tended to his wounds. If the bandit leader had been conscious, the sting of the medicine against his wounds would've probably been unbearably painful. Perhaps he was lucky that he was still out cold.

"Now that that's over with, let's start discussing what happens now. We'd like you to hand Boraz and his men over to us."

As he spoke, he removed the hood he'd been wearing up until now, revealing the handsome face of a knight who served in one of the neighboring regions. He'd come here under his lord's orders to help subdue the bandits while keeping his identity hidden. Along the way, he'd gathered some adventurers from their region's Guild as well as official troops. There was a limit to how many he could recruit on such short notice, but in light of how many enemies we'd faced, the force he'd brought with him was more than sufficient.

"I will be more than happy to give you custody of all the bandits," I said. "After all, the only thing I did here was drive them from Darion. Please punish them however you see fit."

The knight offered me a dark smile as he glanced sidelong at Boraz. "Much appreciated. The people would lose faith in our leadership if they knew this group had successfully outrun us after all the havoc they caused. I'm sure the punishment they will face will make for an entertaining spectacle. Also, one more thing...about that battle axe you have in your hand there, Lord Lyle..."

At the mention of it, I looked down at the axe I was using in place of a crutch. "Oh, this thing?"

"That weapon was stolen from a house related to my own. Their failure to protect the land the liege lord gifted to them resulted in their house's downfall, but survivors from their line still live. Come," he ordered one of the hooded people with him.

Even clothed in all black, I could tell that the person who stepped forward was a woman. She stopped in front of me and pulled off her hood. Long locks of silky black hair spilled across her shoulders. An inner strength shone in her black eyes.

"I suppose I haven't introduced myself yet," she said. "I am a daughter of

House Rauli. My name is Sophia Rauli. While I realize it's impolite of me to make such a request, might I ask that you return my father's heirloom—that battle axe you have in your hands—to me?"

Since she'd claimed it as her family's heirloom and I had no good reason to refuse her request, I did as she asked.

"Here you are," I replied. "It's heavy, so be careful... Oh, I guess you'd already know that, though."

The knight fixed his gaze on me as he explained, "Sophia has lost her father, older brother, and the rest of her family as well. I'm afraid she lacks the means to repay you herself, so I'll be the one to—"

Sophia shook her head and interrupted him. "No, uncle, it's all right. You have looked after me for months now. I couldn't possibly let you pay on my behalf too, especially after how hostile my family was to you before. I will shoulder this burden on my own." A strong resolve gleamed in her eyes as she spoke.

The knight looked troubled by her declaration. "Sophia, your father did so much for me. That's why I went out of my way to help you. Besides, it would cost at least a dozen or so gold coins to compensate him. You can't possibly afford that."

"No, I will pay it," Sophia insisted with unwavering determination. "I'm a woman of House Rauli, and I would be ashamed to have our family's treasure returned without offering anything in return. Uncle, I plan to make a living for myself as an adventurer." She paused and turned toward me. "Lord Lyle, I apologize for asking this, but would it be possible for me to return the money I owe you in payments while I work?"

Inside the Jewel, the fourth head commented, "She doesn't strike me as the type who can make a living by doing the dangerous work that adventurers often do. Plus, there's no reason to force a repayment plan on a girl like this. It'd be better to put an end to this by saying the axe is your gift to her. It would be too heartbreak to see her become an adventurer. She does look like she's been training some, but at a glance, it doesn't seem to me like she's really battled with anyone."

"You don't have to repay me," I said, heeding the fourth head's advice. "I'm

happy to give the axe back to you without any compensation.”

I was the one who’d defeated the bandits, so that gave me the right to dictate what to do with any of their possessions. That was why these two were so concerned with repaying me for the return of this family heirloom.

“I planned to have any of their stolen items returned as well, so please, feel free to take it and go on your way.”

Sophia gaped at me in disbelief. “What?! Then for what purpose did you fight? You went to all this trouble, and you plan to tell me you don’t need anything in return? Am I right in assuming that this really is just a hobby to you?”

The third head burst into laughter. “Ha ha, that’s a sassy way of putting it, but her heart’s in the right place. I can understand why she’d wanna do something to pay Lyle back for returning her family’s heirloom. Worst-case scenario, you could compromise and let her pay a meager fee.”

“The girl may sound a bit cheeky, but it seems she’s determined to have you accept financial compensation for the service you’ve done,” said the seventh head, suggesting he supported her position on this. “She seems like a very earnest girl. It’s adorable to see, really. I hope as she grows older, she doesn’t lose that sincerity.”

Even though I’d already made it clear I didn’t need her money, she was stubborn about repaying it. I was too exhausted to argue the point; not to mention, I still had more work to do after this. In my haste, I was eager to end the conversation and be done with it.

“A hobby?” I shrugged. “Sure, call it that if you like. I’m just Lyle Walt, the foolish former aristocrat who was driven from his family home. You can chalk this decision up to my stupidity if that makes it easier for you. In any case, I got what I wanted out of this already.”

I said my piece and, realizing that Novem had made her way over, gave the knight and Sophia a wave as I left the scene.

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The knight and Sophia watched as Lyle left.

“Couldn’t you have chosen your words a little more carefully?” the knight said to his niece. “That was pretty rude. Considering he wasn’t too worried about monetary compensation, you didn’t have to say anything. That’s a bad habit of yours.”

Sophia held her family’s battle axe in both hands as she stared after Lyle. Confused by his parting words, she muttered, “Uncle, what could he possibly have gotten out of this? From where I’m standing, he’s walking out of this empty-handed.”

The man stared at his niece and chuckled. His eyes wandered back over to Boraz, who was now bandaged and firmly bound so that he couldn’t escape. “You may have been taught the art of war, but you’re still a girl. I suppose no one ever taught you about things on the battlefield, hm?”

Sophia glowered at him, which indicated she’d interpreted his statement as mockery. Well, actually, she probably hadn’t intended to glare at him at all, but her gaze was naturally piercing. Her uncle feared it wouldn’t serve her well. She was a beautiful girl, to be sure, but her narrow eyes made her look menacing.

“Don’t get angry,” he implored. “All I’m saying is that maybe it doesn’t make sense to a girl. He played the fool here, but he did an impressive job of solving a delicate issue between neighboring regions. I think he’s got genuine talent. Plus, he was legitimately strong enough to take down Boraz even though he was using Arts to enhance himself in battle. It’s unfortunate, really. If he hadn’t been born out of House Walt, I would’ve happily endorsed him for employment with our liege lord.”

As she listened, Sophia once more glanced in the direction Lyle had gone, then turned her gaze back to Boraz. Her eyes harbored murderous intent and a thirst for revenge, but her uncle held a hand up to stop her before she could act on it.

“Sophia, I’m sure you know this already, but this man has earned the ire of many other people. There is no point in killing him here. He needs to receive his punishment at the feet of our lord for any of this to have meaning. I’m sure I told you this already. I only brought you along because you assured me you understood.”

Sophia dropped her gaze and bit her bottom lip. Tears pricked at the edges of her eyes. “I know,” she said. “I know perfectly well. But that also means I wasn’t able to take vengeance myself. I can’t stand myself for being as weak as I am. I want to get stronger. I mean it, uncle. I want to get stronger,” she reiterated for emphasis.

The tears started to fall, for Sophia had not only lost her parents and her older brother—her entire family, really—but she’d also lost the noble status her house had once enjoyed.

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I had to lean on Novem’s shoulder as I made my way to the group of women we’d rescued. Aria was among them. Her clothes were covered in filth, but she seemed in pretty good health despite her captivity.

“Lyle, you look awful,” she said.

Her features were slightly more gaunt than before, but she still smiled at me the same way I remembered. That was enough reward for all the effort I’d expended. Still using Novem for support, I held out my right hand to Aria, cradling her red Gem in my palm.

“This is your family’s precious heirloom, isn’t it?”

“Huh, this is... Y-Yes, it is.” She accepted it with both hands, tears trickling down her cheeks. She used her sleeve to wipe them away as she explained, “It’s very precious. Even though I wasn’t ever able to use it, that stupid bandit was. It broke my heart...”

“That’s not true!” shouted the founder from within the Jewel, unable to stand by quietly as Aria cried. I was already low on mana, so his booming voice only put extra strain on my body. I clutched at the blue Jewel around my neck, praying he’d shut up, but alas, my hopes were quickly dashed. “I’m sure it’s just that Miss Alice didn’t want her to use those Arts, for her own well-being. That’s gotta be it. Right, guys?” He directed his question to the other house leaders, hoping for their support, but none of them were the least bit interested.

For the purpose of placating him, the fifth head spoke for the rest of his colleagues by saying, “That’s right. I’m sure that’s exactly it.”

The founder was delighted to hear that response. I decided to incorporate his explanation into my own speech as I attempted to console Aria.

"The bandit leader who used those Arts sustained some pretty gruesome injuries because he used them recklessly. I'm sure your Gem deemed it too dangerous to teach you at this point, which is why it hasn't allowed you to use it. You're too precious to meet such an end, so it's just waiting until you're fully prepared to learn what it has to teach you. That's what I think."

Part of the reason I said all that was because I hoped it was true myself.

As Aria listened, she wiped her tears and nodded. "Thank you, Lyle. But...I'm sure once I go back, I'll be punished alongside my father. There won't be any point to me holding onto this heirloom." She seemed resigned to her fate. Maybe the bandits had already told her everything her father had done.

Rondo, who was standing nearby, regarded Aria with a pitying look.

"You have nothing to worry about, Miss Aria," Novem assured her. "Lord Lyle has already arranged things in a way that leaves your bondage fee paid in full. In other words, his reward for subjugating these bandits is you, Miss Aria."

"What?"

"Huh?"

Aria wasn't the only one shocked by this revelation. I didn't see this coming either. Sure, I'd requested a down payment of two hundred gold coins with the agreement that my remaining fee would be Aria's freedom. I'd argued to Bentler that there would be no point in saving her if the lord planned to punish her once she was free. However, I'd never heard anything about a bondage fee or any of that.

The atmosphere inside my Jewel had turned tense as well. Each house leader went in order, making their own remarks about the situation.

"Hey, what's this all about?" demanded the founder. "Did Lyle ever say anything 'bout this?"

"He didn't. We see everything he does, so I can say with certainty that he did not."

“Bondage fee? If I remember right...that’s the money a guy pays to free a prostitute from a brothel so she can be his, right?”

“There was never any talk about any of this. The only thing Lyle ever said was that he wished to save this girl.”

“Hey. Isn’t the bigger problem the way Novem is reacting? Doesn’t seem normal.”

“Agreed. She’s not acting like a woman who watched her man pay to break another woman out of bondage. Although, she could just be wearing a mask.”

“So the story is that she was sold off as a prostitute, and part of Lyle’s reward is for her bondage fee to be paid. That’s the premise they decided upon? A rather proper one, if you ask me.”

Aha. So that was how they were spinning things. Come to think of it, Novem did discuss a number of things with Zelphy before. Perhaps, in the course of their talk, she heard something from Zelphy about how they were going to frame Aria’s situation.

“I get it now,” I said. “So that’s the explanation they devised for giving Miss Aria her freedom...”

I was certain it was all a ruse they were upholding for the sake of optics. They couldn’t be serious, surely. But the smile Novem offered me soon shattered that expectation.

Novem turned back to Aria and stated, “She meets all the criteria set forth by House Walt for a suitable bride. I think she would fit you perfectly, my lord. Don’t you agree?” She directed the conversation back at me, still beaming.

Everyone else in the area was more apprehensive about this development.

For her part, Aria went as red as a tomato. “What? Hold on. You can’t mean this. No, I mean, it’s not like I’m against it. It’s just so sudden that it’s hard to know how to respond. N-No, I mean, I’m not saying I can’t. But shouldn’t there be some steps before we get to the whole marriage thing? And, well...I’ve not mentally prepared myself for this. Like, are you even sure I’m the girl you want?” She seemed almost flattered by Novem’s suggestion.

What in the world was going on? This whole conversation was going in a direction I'd never expected.

I glanced around me. Both Rondo and Ralph were giving me cold looks.

"Lyle, I have to say...this isn't very becoming of you," Rondo grumbled.

Ralph shook his head. "You already have a lover and now you're looking for your number two? Is this some kinda dig against me since I still don't got a girlfriend?"

Rachel quickly put some distance between herself and me, cackling almost maniacally. "Ha ha! I knew it! Men are all beasts. Novem is a dear friend, so I'll continue hanging around her, but not you, Lyle."

Their reactions were only natural. Novem had done so much to look out for me. I could never betray her like this.

Hoping for some clarification on how she really felt about all of this, I seized Novem by the shoulders. I still wasn't quite stable on my feet, but I had no time to worry about how dizzy I felt.

"Novem!" I said.

"Yes, what is it, Lord Lyle?" She tilted her head, still smiling at me, looking every bit as beautiful as she always did. Her side ponytail rippled with her movements, and her hair had such a luster to it that it almost glimmered—not that it was any time to be noticing such details.

"Just to be clear, when did I ever say anything about a bondage fee—?"

"What's the matter, my lord?" she interrupted before I could finish. "Isn't this what you desired? Besides, Miss Aria is perfectly suited to marry into your house. It's no wonder why you fell for her."

I couldn't comprehend what I was hearing. Inside my Jewel, the house leaders were kicking up a fuss, but I was just plain puzzled. I couldn't understand what she meant by "what I desired."

"What is the meaning of this!?" the fourth head demanded. "Lyle, just what sort of desires were you harboring?"

I stared Novem directly in the eye and shook my head. "Hold on. Hold on just

a sec. I never said anything like that. Never."

This time, it was the third head who spoke up. "You did. You did say that, Lyle! Remember? At the beginning of this adventure, before you met with us face-to-face. You and Novem left your home region, remember? It was during that trip!"

Slowly, my mind traveled back to the conversation I had with Novem shortly after I'd left home.

*"I plan to live a free life as an adventurer and pick up all kinds of ladies."*

My own words echoed in my memory. *Crap, so I did say that*, I thought. But at the time, I'd only said as much to convince Novem to return to her own house. I thought making such an audacious declaration would make her so disgusted with me that she'd want to leave. I'd never actually meant it.

"So that's the time she's talking about, huh?!" howled the founder.

"Yes, but remember!" the second head protested, trying to cover for me. "That was only a lie Lyle told in hopes of persuading Novem to go back home."

"Look, Novem," I began, "that was only..." My voice trailed off.

"Lord Lyle, you look awfully pale. You have also been unsteady on your feet for a little while— Lord Lyle!"

I tried to force the rest of the words out, to admit it was all a lie, but my body betrayed me. I'd hit my limits. My house's historic leaders making a fuss inside the Jewel had sapped me of the last drops of mana I had left. It was hard to even stay upright. What terrible timing for all of this to go down.

"Lord Lyle!" Novem shouted at the top of her lungs, genuinely worried for me. If she'd honestly been contemplating abandoning me, she wouldn't have had tears in her eyes like this.

*Someone, tell me that's true. Tell me she's not planning on leaving*, I thought to myself. Unfortunately, my house leaders were all too preoccupied with other concerns to grant me my wish.

"But would Novem really not have seen through Lyle's lie back then?" ventured the third head, carefully contemplating the situation.

The fourth head was too panicked over my current condition to humor such supposition. “Lyle,” he shouted at me, “stay conscious! You need to rectify this misunderstanding immediately, before it gets wildly out of hand. Do you understand me? I swear to you, it will become a giant mess if you don’t clear the air now!”

“Huh, I wonder,” said the fifth head, sounding much too composed for the situation. “She is a baron’s daughter, right? Maybe in her family it’s normal to have mistresses.”

“That certainly is possible, but as far as I know, the Fuchsses aren’t really the type to keep mistresses like that.”

“Nothing to worry about with Lyle here. I’m certain he can take care of two women if need be.”

*You jerks. Quit your useless banter and give me some serious advice, would you? Ugh, crap. I can feel my consciousness fading...*

“Lord Lyyyle!!!”

## Epilogue

After Lyle fell unconscious, he didn't make an appearance in the round table room as he had in times past. That was probably due to the intense battle he'd experienced, coupled with the absolute exhaustion that came from activating multiple Arts simultaneously. The seven leaders present didn't mind that he wasn't in attendance. While they did view Novem's misunderstanding as a problem, they had more pressing matters to discuss. That was why they'd gathered together like this.

The fourth head was acting as the facilitator, adjusting his glasses as he launched into the main topic. "Well, with this, Lyle has one important accomplishment under his belt. Granted, he did have to use someone else's money to gather the necessary men to carry out our plan, and it also involved secretly bringing in people from outside the region to assist."

In retrospect, all Lyle had contributed was acting as an intermediary to put all the pieces in place, but that was still a pivotal role.

Oblivious to the implications of all of this, the founder glanced around at his colleagues and asked, "So, what? In the end, everybody's still gonna see him as a dumb ex-noble kid? He's comin' outta this at a loss, if so. Ain't got a whole lotta gold left in his pocket either."

Lyle had received two hundred gold coins as a down payment, but he'd used almost all of it. Or, at least, that was how it seemed to the founder.

The fourth head promptly responded, "He has precisely twenty-eight coins left in his pocket. If he had a mind to, he could take some remuneration for returning those stolen items to their previous owners and make money that way. But Lyle has fully exhausted himself, so I suspect this will be the extent of what he accomplishes this time. He managed to fulfill his original goal, however, so I see no problems with things the way they are."

"But he didn't kill a single bandit in the process," muttered the fifth head, as if he was trying to poke holes in the fourth head's assessment of the situation.

"That was one of the conditions put forth by this neighboring region for sending in men to aid our cause," the sixth head reminded his father dutifully. "The neighboring liege lords needed the bandits captured alive, particularly the leader, so that they could pass judgment on them, lest they lose face otherwise. If the story ended with the bandits giving them the slip, it wouldn't be in their favor. Darion must also be relieved to have cleared the air with the surrounding areas."

The seventh head nodded, but he wasn't entirely pleased with how everything had gone. "He did manage to take down the bandits, though it wasn't the most glorious first battle. I had hoped his first battle would be with a legion of Walt retainers at his side, and that he'd have a much larger-scale engagement...but I digress. This was still a notable achievement for Lyle."

Indeed, Lyle had successfully defeated the bandits. Rumors of him and his victory would eventually spread.

"Will House Walt really let this fly?" the second head wondered out loud, concerned. "If Lyle is too ostentatious, it's possible they may send assassins after him. That happened frequently back in my day."

The fifth head breathed a sigh. "Assassination isn't that simple. Besides, they're the ones who threw him to the wayside. What do they care what he does? If they were going to try something like that, they'd have already killed Lyle a long time ago."

"Lyle does seem to be a lucky fellow," commented the third head thoughtfully. "Luck tends to come into play far more than power when it really counts. I'm jealous of the people blessed with that kinda fortune. I kicked the bucket in battle, after all. Pretty sure I'm the only one of us who died while fighting, yeah?"

The founder pulled a face, still not understanding. "So what does this accomplishment business mean for the boy, anyhow? Doesn't seem like it changes much of anythin' to me. Besides, we've still got this Ceres girl who's been blessed with the power of the Cursed God. Wouldn't surprise me if she came lookin' for him, wantin' to kill the boy for sport... What?" He stopped when he noticed everyone giving him exasperated looks.

The fourth head summarized everyone's opinions as he said, "No matter what path Lyle decides to take from here on out, this accomplishment of his will prove to be a great boon for him. If he desires to become the best among adventurers, then he needs that renown. It will also benefit him if he instead aims to become an aristocrat again. It might not be a bad idea for him to leave this country for another, find a pioneering group to lead, and become independent."

"What's most valuable is actual fighting experience, which he got," added the fifth head, who saw other merits from this incident than the ones already listed. "The more he builds on that experience, the quicker he'll become a full-fledged adult. It'll help move his growth along too. Considering how little mana the kid's got, don't you think he's the specialized sort? I mean, he dual wielded that short sword and saber with such ease and dexterity."

Maturation was key, because once Lyle underwent that, he'd be able to overcome the obstacles ahead of him more easily. He could also surpass his current limits and reach a higher level of skill and ability.

The fifth head continued, "The more he grows, the more his own Art should fully manifest. But no matter how you slice it, the kid's headed in the direction of technical specialization, if you ask me. Not a bad thing, of course, but he'll be screwed if his mana pool stays that small."

"The 'specialized sort,' you say, hm?" The second head nodded, seeming to be of the same opinion. "At the very least, he is more skilled than the average boy his age. Many experience balanced growth without developing anything unique to distinguish them, which makes it hard to establish their own exclusive style. Lyle would do well to continue honing what he's already got, but as you said...his lack of mana is troubling."

Lyle's most pressing issue was that both the Jewel and his not yet fully manifested Art were draining his mana constantly, leaving little left in reserve for him to freely use. If he could only manage to resolve that issue, he would instantly become much stronger than he was already.

The fourth head removed his glasses. "I suppose the only way is for him to train himself little by little, pushing himself to the brink by draining all of his

mana each day and increasing the strain on his body so that he can slowly improve. If he can't at least do that, he won't be able to properly utilize the Arts in his arsenal."

"Huh?" blurted the founder in surprise. "You mean, you guys were thinkin' about this the whole time? I thought you were just actin' like numbskulls for no reason."

Several of the men present averted their gazes. It seemed the founder wasn't the only one who'd been a burden on Lyle without proper forethought of the toll it would have on his body.

The third head burst into laughter as he said, "Well, all's well that ends well, yeah? The founder's finally given Lyle some recognition, and from here on out, our Arts can help support Lyle as well. But come to think of it, how come we're passing our Arts down like this anyhow?"

He wasn't the only one who found this system uncanny. It was a simple matter for them to teach the first level of their Arts to the possessor of the Jewel. The second level didn't require them to show their memories to impart the necessary knowledge either. Yet, for some reason, each one of them had manifested inside the Jewel at the prime of their lives. No one knew why that was. They were only echoes of their past lives; their memories stopped the moment their real selves had touched the Jewel for the last time. They possessed nothing beyond that. None of them even knew why they had individual rooms with the records of their pasts stored within. True, this layout proved convenient for them, and it was a safe place for them to teach Lyle their Art, but realistically, they could've taught him completely verbally without all of them.

The room fell silent as each man anxiously mulled over the meaning of their presence here.

It didn't take long for the founder to grow tired of all this thinking, at which point he promptly lifted himself out of his chair. "Enough already. If we've not got the answers now, it'll only be a waste of time to sit here thinkin' about it. We've reincarnated and—"

"You say reincarnate, but we're still only leftover memories," the third head

corrected.

The founder cleared his throat. “Ahem! Anyhow, we’re here now, and we’re able to teach Lyle all kinds of stuff. Ain’t that enough? You got some kinda problem with the way things are? I’m enjoyin’ myself, personally. I got to meet little Novem Fuchs and Miss Alice’s descendant. This time period isn’t so bad. Plus, we gotta get that boy into shape. He needs to be more spontaneous and genuine. He’s way too much of a spineless doormat for a descendant of mine—for a Walt!”

The second head clicked his tongue in annoyance. “For the last time, you’re not half as spontaneous and genuine as you think you are. You’re just an idiot.”

“What’d you say?! Is that any kind of attitude to have with your father?! C’mon, we’re gonna take this outside!”

“You fool, I’ve already told you there’s no ‘outside’ for us to go to!”

As the two of them (who were supposed to be fully grown adults) launched into a childlike spat, the others watched in exasperation. Unlike the outside world, any wounds sustained here would heal almost instantly. No, maybe it was more accurate to say that they lacked physical bodies, so there wasn’t any way for them to get injured in the first place.

“For what purpose exactly have the seven of us been gathered here?” wondered the third head out loud. “Judging by Lyle’s reaction, our blue Gem has suddenly become a Jewel. Could this perhaps be...?” He trailed off as he tried to read deeper between the lines, but as he watched the fight between the founder and second head unfold before him, he burst into laughter. “Nah, I’m just overthinking things. Our family line’s not that crazy, surely!”

\*\*\*

Several days later, I stood inside the liege lord’s mansion looking straight at the man Aria called “father.” My body still wasn’t in the best of shape. After the battle, I hadn’t been able to move for an entire day. It was the following day when the liege lord summoned me to his mansion.

Bentler was surrounded by knights as he engaged Aria’s father in conversation.

"We're fortunate this incident ended without becoming more serious. Nevertheless, your sins are still heavy. You knew these men were bandits, yet you helped them integrate into Darion and even assisted in the selling of their stolen goods. Since you are presently a citizen here, you had a duty to notify me of their presence."

"Yes, I know." Aria's emaciated father kept his gaze on the ground. He had a far more gentle appearance now, having cut his unruly hair and shaved his facial hair.

"Ordinarily, your family would be called to account for your crimes as well, but Lord Lyle's compassion in this case has allowed me to spare your daughter. Nevertheless, I have my own reputation to uphold. If I do not punish you for the wrongs you have committed, then the neighboring liege lords will think me unfit to rule. The same goes for my citizenry."

Aria's father let out a strangled laugh. "I know that. No, I knew this would happen, but...it seems I'm not half the man I thought I was. I'm just a fool. And in the process, I've caused much trouble for you and yours."

Tears trickled down Aria's cheeks as she watched her father.

He smiled at her. "You'll still cry for me, Aria? For a man who was hardly even a decent father to you? Even after all the heartache I caused you and all the trouble I put Zelphy and her family through?"

"Of course! You're still my father. I always knew that one day you'd come out of it. But...not like this."

Her father awkwardly scratched his cheek as he watched her cry for him. He seemed somehow at peace. "Thanks, but it's fine like this. I was a weak man. This is what I deserve. And Zelphy?"

We were gathered in the inner courtyard of the liege lord's manor, circled around Aria's father, awaiting his judgment. Naturally, Zelphy was with us, given her connection to Bentler. She had her arms crossed over her chest and had kept silent the whole time, her eyes closed as she listened.

"Aria says she wants to be an adventurer. I was opposed to it, but I've got no right to tell her what to do. I know I don't have any right to ask anything of you

either, but I still have to ask: please look after Aria. And..." His face pinched, conveying a complicated range of emotions as he looked at me. He shook his head several times as he searched for the right words, but finally, with a solemn expression, he said, "Please make my daughter happy. I beg of you!" Then he took a deep breath. "All right, I'll be on my way now. It'll only make it harder to leave if I linger."

As tears rolled down his face, he suddenly looked much younger than he had before. A group of soldiers circled around him and took him away.

Aria collapsed on the ground, sobbing. I didn't have the option of asking for her father to be spared, and if the reactions of those present were any indication, no one wanted to see him get such mercy.

"What will happen to him?" I asked after a long pause.

Bentler's face betrayed no emotion as he solemnly answered, "He has been sentenced to hard labor for his crimes. Granted, there are no coal mines here in Darion, so his work will mostly amount to keeping the highways maintained. In the event of any land cultivation projects, he will be dispatched to assist or perhaps otherwise stationed there permanently to help out."

All I could do was watch as her father's back receded into the mansion. Zelphy stepped over to Aria and put a hand on her shoulder, trying to comfort her.

"This is actually rather merciful," chimed in the seventh head. "Lyle, if I were in this lord's place, I would have ordered that man's execution."

The third head sounded almost melancholy as he said, "That's because the region we preside over is so vast. Darion isn't all that large. Back when I ruled, execution always felt like such a harsh judgment to pass. Everyone knew everyone back then. But since you had to think of the good of your lands and its people, sometimes you had to hand down harsh punishments."

Each one of my house leaders viewed Aria's father's punishment through a unique lens, based on their individual life experiences.

"Now then, Lord Lyle," continued Bentler, turning his attention back to me. "I would like to thank you for all you have done. I never dreamed you would solve the issue and wrap everything up so nicely in the process. You did say I could

pretend it had nothing to do with me if you lost your life during all of this, but in truth, I was on the edge of my seat the entire time.”

That was a complete lie. Bentler struck me as the type of man who had no compunction over cutting ties with someone when necessary.

Bentler smiled at me. “And in light of all you have done, I would be remiss not to honor any favor you ask of me. Thus, it will be said that Lady Aria was temporarily sent to a brothel as punishment for her father’s crimes, and that you shouldered her bondage fee shortly thereafter to set her free. A perfect ending. And this way, you get exactly what you desired. Though, I admit, I never realized you harbored such desires. You struck me as a most earnest and sincere young man when I first met you. I suppose one cannot judge a book by its cover.”

He beamed at me, but his words were like daggers straight to the heart. I had a sneaking suspicion that he was enjoying all of this. Of all ways for me to find out that Novem had spread her misunderstanding by disseminating it through Zelphy...well, this had to be the worst. I had a feeling it would only complicate matters if I refused to go along with this cover story, but nonetheless I planned to do just that—

“Give it up, boy. Did you forget what her old man asked of ya? If you refuse now, it’ll make a number of people look bad. In fact, after all of this, you’d better not say no,” said the founder, insisting that I go along with it. He’d been one of the primary ones panicking about the misunderstanding before, but apparently after all we’d been through, even he’d resigned himself.

But wouldn’t it be offensive to Novem to let something like this slide? I glanced at her, but she was smiling as she made her way over to Aria and attempted to comfort her, alongside Zelphy.

“Don’t worry, Miss Aria. Lord Lyle will make you happy. I am certain of it.”

Aria continued to sob as she choked out, “I-I get that, but my father...”

“It’s all right. There’s still hope.”

Strange. I’d had no intention of trying to establish a harem for myself, but due to Novem’s misunderstanding, I had no choice but to accept Aria. To tell the

truth, I wasn't really mentally ready for all of this.

Since Novem was now there to console Aria, Zelphy took the opportunity to make her way over to me. Bentler, meanwhile, bid me farewell and ventured back inside his mansion.

"There's a lot I'd like to say to you," said Zelphy. "Some of this I'm not too happy about, but I can't deny you did save the young miss's life. For that, at least, I'll offer my gratitude. Thanks, Lyle. But there's also one more thing I'd like to say, if you don't mind." She smiled menacingly at me, clapping her hands down on my shoulders as she leaned in close.

*This is terrifying. She might be smiling, but she's scaring the crap out of me!*

"You're the enemy of women everywhere, you sleaze."

As my house leaders took in her declaration, they all had differing reactions to it. It wasn't as though I was trying to be sleazy. Nor did I ever dream that Aria's father would beg me like that to make his daughter happy. It was probably far too late to make excuses for myself, but even so, it was hard to stomach this kind of undeserved criticism.

Inside the Jewel, the founder mumbled, "I just want little Aria to be happy." The others soon followed with comments of their own, speaking in descending order.

"Novem better be your first priority. I won't budge on that."

"Did you hear that? She called him a sleaze! I guess he kinda is. But hey, at least you won't be lonely ever again, right?"

"Personally, I think two women is a little more than you can handle. It's going to be tough from here on out, Lyle."

"Other men would look at you and be envious that you've got your own harem. But when you're the guy living in one, it doesn't look quite so rosy."

"So, Lyle, you've chosen to walk the same thorny path..."

"Your situation was of your own making. That's different. Lyle, my boy, don't forget you hail from an earldom that you were originally supposed to inherit. Whether you've got one mistress or two, it's your responsibility to take care of

them and look out for them."

Well, crap. Everyone inside the Jewel seemed to have given up on trying to contest this outcome. Not a single person in all of this, not my historical house leaders or otherwise, was on my side. I was starting to become ridiculously anxious about the future. At the same time, I found myself thinking that maybe this Jewel dangling from my neck was actually a cursed possession after all. None of this would have started if not for it. Yeah, it had to be cursed...

# Afterword

## Yomu Mishima

A resident of Kagoshima Prefecture. Has also authored two other light novels under the pseudonym Wai. One is *Dragoon Ryuukishi e no Michi*, while the other is *Wakiyaku Yuusha wa Hikarikagayake*.

## Tomozo

An illustrator and mangaka. The main light novels they have illustrated include *Isekai de Ikiteiku Houhou* and *Kantei Nouryoku de Chougoushi ni Narimasu*. Their most notable manga work is *Hinamizawa Bus Stop When the Cicadas Cry*, among others.

“I look  
forward  
to it,  
Lord  
Lyell.”

I waved  
to him and  
turned to leave.  
The old man  
watched me  
warmly the  
whole time,  
until I was  
completely  
out of sight.

Author  
**Yomu Mishima**  
Illustrator  
**Tomozo**

THE  
LADY  
IN  
THE  
MIRROR

ZTH





In that  
split second,  
Ceres's eyes  
wandered  
to the grip  
of her rapier.  
Her lips  
spread into  
a smile.

“Garbage.  
Useless  
worm.”

“Please  
let me  
come  
along  
too!”

“Novem...”







“My name is  
Aria  
*Lockwood...*”

“If you  
agree to tag  
along with me,  
I’m willing to  
call this water  
under the  
bridge.”



“When  
she lowered  
her hood,  
long locks  
of silky black  
hair spilled  
across her  
shoulders.”

“I’m from  
House Rauli.  
My name is  
Sophia  
Rauli.”















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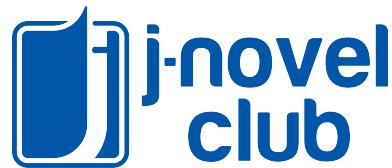
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Seventh: Volume 1

by Yomu Mishima

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Translated by Alyssa Niioka Edited by Suzanne Seals

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SEVENTH 1

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