



# SEVENTH

10

Author **Yomu Mishima**  
Illustrator **Tomozo**



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# INTRODUCTION

Lyle's party has obtained **Thelma**, holy maiden and key to the conquest of Zayin.

But even though they've been given their chance, they lack the troops to wage war. Scouring dungeons can support a party, but not an army. What they need,

they realize, is a backer. Soon after, the party catches wind of a job request

from the **Tres family**—one of the leading merchant houses of Baym—and Lyle decides to guard one of their merchant vessels in an attempt to secure their

support. The captain of the ship is **Vera**, the beloved eldest daughter of the Tres family head. Lyle's ancestors pressure him to seduce her, but he's not entirely on board with the idea. Consequently, he fails miserably time and time again.

Upon learning of his mission, the rest of his party members grill him for details.

Afterward, most of the girls decide to give Lyle the cold shoulder, but Miranda

flies into a rage. "If you're going to do it, then seduce her seriously! Now having unexpectedly found himself

supported by all his comrades,

a confused Lyle takes their advice

and approaches Vera once more.



# SEVENTH

## First Head



### Basil Walt

#### First Stage

#### Full Over

Raises physical abilities from between 10% to 20%.

#### Second Stage

#### Limit Burst

Allows user to exhibit strength beyond their physical limits while temporarily ignoring the burden on their body.

#### Third Stage

#### Full Burst

A blue flame envelops the user's body, significantly increasing physical abilities.

## Second Head



### Crassel Walt

#### First Stage

#### All

The user can grant their Arts to others. The user perceives all applicable targets in a nearby radius, effectively eliminating blind spots.

#### Second Stage

#### Field

The user can grant their Arts to a large group. It boasts a wider effective range than All.

#### Third Stage

#### Select

Allows the user to automatically distinguish between friend and foe and lock on to either. Has an even wider effective range than Field.

## Third Head



### Sley Walt

#### First Stage

#### Mind

Messes with the opponent's psyche, forcing them to hallucinate, among other things.

#### Second Stage

#### Control

Bends foes to one's will.

#### Third Stage

???

## Fourth Head



### Marcus Walt

#### First Stage

#### Speed

Gives a stable boost to movement speed.

#### Second Stage

#### Differential

Raises the user's and their allies' movement speed while lowering the speed of enemies.

#### Third Stage

???



# Arts of the Ages

## Fifth Head



**Fredriks Walt**

First Stage

**Map**

Grants the ability to view one's surroundings as a map.

Second Stage

**Dimension**

Grants the ability to view one's surroundings as a 3D topological map.

Third Stage

???

## Sixth Head



**Fiennes Walt**

First Stage

**Search**

Distinguishes friend from foe, and identifies the location of traps among other things.

Second Stage

**Spec**

Provides detailed information on friends, foes, and traps.

Third Stage

???

## Seventh Head



**Brod Walt**

First Stage

**Box**

A space-manipulating ability that can store anything that is not alive.

Second Stage

**Warp**

Teleports the user and items across short distances.

Third Stage

???



**Lyle Walt**

First Stage

**Experience**

Allows the user to gain more experience. Affects their surroundings as well.

Second Stage

**Connection**


Forms a link through mucous membrane contact allowing shared Arts and senses.

Third Stage

???



Arts of the Ages		Author Yomu Mishima
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# Prologue

Summer had arrived, and yet the concept of seasons seemed nonexistent within the dimness of the dungeon. I'd heard of dungeons that changed to reflect the outside world, but the dungeon of the Free City of Baym remained constant throughout the year.

Dim with a slight chill. An endless descent lined with dilapidated houses. It was a spiraling path that ran along the wall of a massive cylindrical pit, where the alleys between forgotten ruins formed a labyrinth of sorts.

Advancing through the dungeon, I—Lyle Walt—swung the saber in my right hand to slice through a monster in one swift motion.

I managed to take it down in one strike, but the feedback I was getting from the saber was off. Sensing it would soon be useless, I leaped backward just as another monster swung its weapon down at me.

The axe struck where I'd been moments before. The fiendish lizardman swiftly followed me with its eyes. It was a creature resembling a lizard that had been twisted to take on human proportions. Just as it readied its axe for a horizontal swing—its head was run through by a spear.

The monster collapsed, its life snuffed out by a clean blow.

The one who took it down was my comrade, Aria Lockwood.

Her violet eyes were already scanning for her next target; with each swift movement of her head, her red hair whipped behind her.

Not long ago, she'd been a normal girl; now, she'd grown into a formidable warrior. She was a reliable presence, already possessing the air of a seasoned fighter.

After pulling her spear out of the fallen monster, she slung the bloodied weapon over her shoulder.

"Looks like that was the last of them."



Confirming there were no other enemies around, Aria spat out a slight, relieved sigh.

A slim, well-toned body was concealed beneath her combat gear. She was a bit rough around the edges, her hair receiving as little care as she could get away with. And yet, its natural luster made it seem radiant, even in the dim dungeon depths.

However, when drenched in the blood of monsters, her fierceness far outshone her beauty.

I offered her my thanks as I glanced down at the blade of my saber. The edge was terribly chipped, but the blade wasn't bent out of shape. It wasn't past the point of usefulness.

"You saved me."

"Another saber down the drain? How many does that make?"

I'd managed to acquire a number of high-quality sabers since coming to Baym, but they didn't seem to last long when compared to other weapons. There wasn't much I could do about it—sabers were delicate weapons. If I really wanted better quality than that, it was going to cost a fair sum of money.

I considered my party to be quite wealthy by adventurer standards. We could easily afford better equipment. But now wasn't the time to throw around money.

"This is my second one of the trip. I have one left."

Since I had a spare, there was no need to worry about finishing this dungeon campaign.

Still, the thought of having to replace or repair them again left me feeling uneasy. Dungeon crawling was an adventurer's livelihood. The wear and tear of my weapons naturally affected our profits.

Our income hinged on it.

Aria began wiping the monster blood from her spear with a cloth as she carried on the conversation.

"Sabers are pretty pricey, right? And I would never trust a cheap one. Why



don't you try switching to a different weapon? Spears are my recommendation."

Aria was quick to recommend a spear—the weapon she used herself. And as if she'd been waiting for her cue, in came Sophia Laurie whose silky black hair flowed slickly behind her.

Sophia hid a voluptuous figure beneath her baggy robe, carrying a bloodstained battle-axe in hand. A massive weapon designed for destruction, and yet she wielded that fearsome weapon with a smile.

"I'd suggest an axe over a spear. They're sturdy, and they can't be matched in destructive might. You can take down any monster in a single strike."

She boasted of her axe with a sweet smile, while Aria puffed out her cheeks in protest. She was clearly upset that someone was putting the axe over the spear.

"I can't let that slide. Spears are the best. I mean, axes are so bothersome to swing around. And spears are far more common, aren't they? Isn't that proof enough of their superiority?"

When I imagined the weapon a soldier might wield, it was certainly true that it was a spear more often than not. I could imagine some wielding swords, but spears were far more prevalent among their ranks.

They were easier to handle on a battlefield to boot, and allowed soldiers to maintain a greater distance from the enemy—well, that gave them a psychological advantage.

Sophia, however, quickly shot back, "If it's Lyle, he can easily swing an axe as well as a sword. Then wouldn't power be the deciding factor? Arguing popularity is just distracting from the main issue. I would not recommend it."

"What do you mean distracting?! I'm just proving how perfect a spear is. Axes just have to chop wood—that's it."

"What did you say?!"

As their debate heated up, I heard a voice from the blue Jewel hanging from my neck.

One of the memories recorded within—the third head of House Walt—spoke



up. By his tone, he clearly found their argument to be utterly pointless.

“A weapon’s just a tool. You’re better off just using whatever suits the situation. By the way, my recommendation is a double-edged sword. A sturdy one, at that. Sabers are way too flimsy.”

While advocating for choosing weapons on a case by case basis, he didn’t miss the chance to plug his own weapon of choice. And just when I thought the conversation had ended with the third head’s sensible suggestion, the sixth head cut in.

He seemed far more agreeable when it came to Aria’s and Sophia’s opinions.

“Indeed. A spear is easy to use. And an axe’s destructive might is appealing—in short! The halberd, which combines the strength of both, is the best!”

His favored weapon, as you might imagine, was a halberd. In simple terms, it was a spear with an axe blade attached to the side.

You could thrust with it like a spear, or cleave with it like an axe.

It was indeed an excellent weapon, but a difficult one to master.

Yet still, the man eagerly pushed it onto me.

“Halberds are great, you know. The star of the battlefield, I say. Out there, in the big leagues, swords are nothing more than side arms.”

The third head objected, “They’re fine weapons, but I don’t think halberds are a good fit for Lyle. He should go with something similar to what he’s used to wielding—a sword, perhaps.”

“Lyle will be seeing more battlefields ahead. That’s what makes the halberd the optimal choice.”

In the future, rather than facing monsters in the dungeon, our battles would be more against other humans. Anticipating this, the sixth head seemed eager to have me trade in for the halberd.

“The best weapon is the one you’re most familiar with,” said the third.

The sixth huffed, “And I’m telling you—”

“Spears, I say. Lyle would do well with a spear!”

“No, an axe. Have you never seen Lyle using an axe before? It was quite the sight to behold.”

In the Jewel, the third and the sixth bickered, while Aria and Sophia glared daggers at one another right in front of me. Both were equally as loud and as tiresome.

As I was considering how to put an end to the argument, an adventurer approached us.

They were clad in full plate armor with a helmet tucked under their left arm. The slender armor accentuated a female figure, and indeed, the one wearing it was a woman.

She had blonde hair cut into a forward-slanting bob, her emerald eyes giving off a strong-willed impression. Her appearance was the epitome of a female knight—the sword and shield she wielded reinforcing that perception.

A knightlike adventurer—no, a former knight turned adventurer? Anyways, she was in a bit of a troublesome position.

The woman’s name was Alette Baillet.

A former noble of Lorphys, she led an adventurer party called Lorphys’s Raid Knights. It wasn’t just a flashy name either; they were equipped and organized in a way that could fool anyone into thinking they were a genuine knight order.

Alette, captain of Lorphys’s Raid Knights, had come to talk to me.

“Taking down a lizardman in one blow—that’s quite impressive! And your two friends are strong too. I heard rumors that you were leading a party of elites, and it looks like they were true. It is good to have you on the team.”

She had a cheerful and hearty way of speaking. There wasn’t a shred of cynicism as she heaped praise onto us. She was not the sort of person who looked down on adventurers.

A good person through and through. Both her character and her capabilities as an adventurer were commendable. And as a matter of fact, she was considered to be one of the more prominent adventurers of Baym.

With Alette’s arrival, Aria and Sophia awkwardly let up on their bickering.



“It goes both ways,” I said, turning to Alette. “I never thought we’d be able to make it past the thirtieth floor this fast. It’s all thanks to your team.”

The party led by Alette performed magnificently. While I didn’t think the members of my party were weaker, Alette had also gathered some high-caliber members. And far more of them.

There was strength in numbers.

By merely accompanying Alette’s party, we made it to the thirtieth floor in no time at all.

“There is no need to humble yourself. I’m sure your party would have come this far in only a few months. Putting that aside, have you considered my proposal?”

The proposal—it was something Alette suggested once she recognized our skill level.

“You mean the offer to work as mercenaries for Lorphys?”

“That’s right. We need as many capable comrades as we can get. You’d be more than welcome.”

“I can’t make a decision right away.”

“Of course. Sorry if I rushed you.”

With a brief apology, Alette turned and left. And after watching her off, Novem Fuchs came up to me.

Novem was a woman whose tawny brown hair was done up in a side ponytail, and whose silver staff was hanging from her belt. But even as she approached me, her eyes remained fixed on Alette’s back.

“She seems to be growing anxious,” said Novem.

I let out a slight sigh and put a hand to my head.

“I can’t blame her. Of course she’d be anxious, knowing her homeland is about to be invaded.”

Though I said that, to me, it felt like someone else’s problem. I couldn’t really feel the weight of the situation. However, all the past heads of House Walt in

the Jewel unanimously expressed their empathy.

I didn't have any good memories of my own homeland. Would I grow anxious if I heard that those lands were in danger? My savior Zel was no more, and aside from a few acquaintances—no, now wasn't the time to think about that. I shook my head to drive the thought from my mind.

"We have our own mission to fulfill. Taking up Ms. Alette's proposal isn't an option."

I was only putting my response on hold because I felt bad giving her an immediate rejection. In truth, becoming a mercenary for Lorphys was never an option.

Novem seemed relieved by my decision. After confirming there were only allies around, she went on: "We should aim to intervene before the war starts in earnest."

"Agreed."

Alette was reliable; I had quite a high opinion of her. Despite this, there was a reason we couldn't assist her: We intended to use the conflict between Lorphys and their aggressor—the Theocracy of Zayin—as a stepping stone for our own rise.

There was little to gain by taking either side when our ultimate goal was Zayin itself.

I glanced at Porter, which had been trailing behind us. Standing atop its ceiling was Eva whose puffy pink hair bobbed as she waved at us. She was an elf, as indicated by her long, pointed ears.

She waved both her hands enthusiastically.

"Good work, you two!" Eva greeted us without a care, but neither Novem nor I was focusing on her—instead, our attention was on the two figures hiding within Porter.

As I raised a hand in response, Eva hopped off and made her way over, with Porter coming to a halt nearby. Eva glanced at Porter as she reported the situation to us. By her troubled look, things weren't looking too favorable.



“It’s hopeless. We managed to get Gaston on board, but Thelma is still against it. It will be hard to use her at this rate. We’re taking turns persuading her, but she doesn’t have the will. Even Miranda can’t get through to her.”

Gaston...and Thelma.

They hailed from Zayin, Lorphys’s enemy, and had formerly ruled from its top as the high priest and holy maiden. The “formerly” part was tacked on after they lost their power in a coup d’état. However, that didn’t change the fact that they had once presided over the nation.

I instructed Eva to keep up the persuasion efforts.

“Keep at it. There’s no need to rush. Just talk to her normally and try to lift her spirits. That will be enough for now.”

Eva shrugged. Her eyes had turned to Lorphys’s Raid Knights in the distance and she seemed aghast at the absurdity of the situation. The look on her face was telling me, “Wow, you’re really playing the field.”

After all, from the Raid Team’s point of view, both Gaston and Thelma were detestable enemies. Eva couldn’t believe that I had brought them both on our expedition, hidden right under their noses.

“If you say so. I’ll do it, but...man.”

No matter how we tried to coax her, Thelma remained unmotivated.

“Please do. We need Thelma’s assistance if we’re going to recapture Zayin.”

The moment I brought up the words “recapture Zayin,” a somewhat bemused look crossed Eva’s face. The girl happened to love any topics she could turn into material for her stories. And so—she was completely on board with lifting Thelma up as a rallying banner to retake Zayin.

“You’re something else, you know that? Most people wouldn’t even think of using the former holy maiden to usurp the country. Not that I’m against that sort of thing.”

If we succeeded, bards everywhere would want to sing of our deeds. If we succeeded, that is; and if we wanted to do that, Thelma’s help was absolutely essential.

But there was one other major problem, and the one who pointed it out was Novem.

“So long as we can get Ms. Thelma on board, the only issue left would be funding.”

I pressed my left hand against my face.

“That’s the biggest problem. We’re talking about enough money to wage war on a nation. It’ll take forever if we want to scrounge it up as adventurers.”

Ideally, I wanted to start moving as soon as possible, but the lack of funds was tying our hands.

My party alone wasn’t enough to fight a full-scale war. Even if we wanted to gather mercenaries in Baym, we needed a significant amount of capital to pull it off.

Eva placed a hand on her hip. “Funding, huh?” she said. “That’s not exactly a glamorous part of the story, so it’s getting cut. Too realistic. It kills the vibe.”

I wholeheartedly agreed with her on that one. But we couldn’t avert our eyes from it.

“A story can be as fantastical as you want it to be, but we need to face reality.”

Novem seemed moved by my words. “As expected of you, milord. That’s right. Humans—must live in reality. We cannot dream forever.”

“You’re a harsh mistress, Novem. But seriously, what are we going to do about this?”

No matter what we wanted to do, we needed money. That was how the world worked. This dungeon expedition, too, was arranged as a way to raise funds.

But even if we made a decent profit this time around, it would be like drops in a bucket.

*Seriously. What are we going to do? At this rate, we won’t be ready by the time the war breaks out.*



“Looks like we’ll need to find a patron after all.”

Doing things the straight and honest way would take far too long. Finding a merchant willing to back us financially seemed to be the quickest path to our goals.

## Chapter 108: The Great Merchant of Baym

It was the bottom of a dark sea.

*Ah, I'm dreaming the same dream again.*

It didn't take long for Vera Tres to realize she was inside a dream. The dreams she saw were almost always the same.

She would be there, silent and still, at the bottom of a deep, quiet sea. Vera had long grown accustomed to the solitude to the point where it felt like she had become nothing more than a mindless rock or some other manner of refuse.

*I'm always alone in these dreams.*

When she awoke, she would be returned to a reality with a family who loved her. Though her mother had passed, her father still smothered her with affection—so much so that it was irksome.

And then, there was her sister who had gotten with the man Vera herself had loved.

She didn't resent her for it and even gave her blessings to their union.

However, in the dreams, she was always alone.

She was haunted by an image of herself floating, hugging her knees in the depths of the sea. She could never move, no matter how hard she tried.





And Vera knew what would happen next. It was always the same.

*It should be any moment now.*

Slowly rising from the dark sea floor, Vera struggled toward the surface, but her body refused to obey her. But still, she fought desperately, determined to escape the water. Gradually, the light grew stronger and stronger, and just before she could finally break free, then came a voice.

“Well done, Tres. Your duty is complete.”

It was always the same voice, always the same line. A voice she had never heard in reality.

What awaited her as she broke the water’s surface was a figure that floated in the air with the sun to their back. She would reach out to the figure, and Vera would feel the urge to turn away.

After all, the hand that reached out wasn’t her own. It was rough, like craggy ocean cliffs, encrusted with all manner of aquatic creatures. And when she took the outstretched, seemingly feminine hand of the figure before her—her hand would crumble away.

It wasn’t just her hand. Her shoulder, then her chest—cracks would spread from each new collapse until finally her entire body had cracked and crumbled away.

*No. No! I don’t want this!*

Her fragmented body tumbled back into the depths. *I don’t want to go back*, she thought to herself. But no matter how much she wished otherwise, she was always dragged back into the same darkness.

Her body, now in pieces, would sink, unable to even struggle...

“...?!”

And that was always when she’d open her eyes.

Drenched in sweat, Vera steadied her breath as she lay in her canopied bed. Her heart was racing, pounding so hard she could hear it in her ears.

She felt relief as she realized she was in her own room. She closed her eyes

and took a deep breath.

Wiping the sweat from her brow with the back of her hand, she slowly sat up. She drew her knees close to her body, wrapping her arms around them.

“It’s been happening a lot lately. I hope it’s not a bad omen.”

After her heart had calmed, Vera rose from the bed.

It was summer. The heat had her sleep lightly dressed, and so she was in her undergarments.

Peering into the room’s mirror, Vera sighed at the sight of her weary self. Her sharp eyes—which gave her a willful appearance—looked especially irritated today.

“I should take a shower.”

Her long black hair, ruffled up from her sleep, still held its gloss despite the mess. Her skin was white and clear despite her frequent sea voyages—and her eyes were a striking purple. She had a slender figure, her chest on the smaller side, but enough to fit neatly in her own hands.

Just as Vera was about to head to the bathroom, there was a knock at the door.

“Yes?” she replied offhandedly, knowing full well who it was.

She was dealing with none other than the great merchant, Fidel Tres. The head of her household, and Vera’s father.

“Vera, hurry up and get ready. Let’s have breakfast together—just the family. Yes, today’s the day we promised to have a wonderful breakfast together.”

She could immediately tell how high-spirited he was—she could sense just how much he’d been waiting for this day. Vera had been staying at the estate for an unusually long time, given her frequent trips at sea, and her father could hardly contain his excitement.

“You didn’t need to go out of your way to wake me up.”

“Papa’s been looking forward to this day, you know! Don’t be late, Vera! Papa has an important business meeting later, so he needs to leave the house.”



She winced as she sensed her father clinging to the door in tears. “Fine, fine, got it,” she said as she set off to take her shower.

Gathered at the breakfast nook were Vera, Fidel, and Vera’s younger sister, Gina Tres.

Unlike Vera, Gina had a very calm and settled air to her. She didn’t help with the family business, living the sheltered life of a noble lady within the estate.

Usually, Vera would have done the same, but she had been entrusted with work once her talents were discerned. The morning consisted of a peaceful breakfast, filled with the smiles shared between the three loving members of the family—or not.

Fidel’s face had been twisted into a bitter expression by the guest whom the settled noble lady Gina had invited to the table.

“What’s a whelp like you doing here?” Veins bulged on Fidel’s forehead as he struggled to hold back his desire to scream.

The guest—Roland—was an affable young man with short hair. He also happened to be Gina’s lover.

Roland had once been an earnest young man who worked for House Tres. After he caught Gina’s eye, he was promoted to be her personal attendant.

Fidel hadn’t approved of the arrangement, but Gina forced it through.

He looked uneasy as he shifted his gaze from Fidel to Gina. All eyes had gathered on the girl.

“Roland’s going to be my husband. He’s practically family.”

At those words, Fidel’s hair practically stood on end in his fury.

“This whelp’s gonna marry my adorable Gina?! Papa’s never gonna allow it!”

“Why not?! Do you hate me, papa?”

Gina grew teary-eyed at Fidel’s rejection. The sight of her had Fidel lose all his momentum, turning him into a confused, quivering mess.

“No, umm, Papa loves Gina very much. You and Vera are my only two treasures in the world. But... But you know? I think marrying Roland might be

going a little too far...”

Fidel shot a pleading glance at Vera, silently begging for her help.

As she picked up on it, Vera let out a quiet sigh before pitching in.

“Why don’t you just let them be?”

“Thank you, sis!”

“Veeeeraaaa! What do you think you’re saying?!”

Gina rejoiced while Fidel—now completely isolated—looked like he was about to burst into tears.

Not wanting to see her father cry, Vera returned her attention to her meal as she went on.

“Papa, didn’t you say you weren’t going to use us as tools for political marriages? If that’s the case, then what’s wrong with marrying Roland?”

Gina’s eyes lit up as she nodded again and again, and seeing this caused Vera to go through a mix of emotions. After all, Roland was the man that she had come to love too.

Roland, a kind and earnest young man, shyly cast his eyes down. He seemed embarrassed by Gina’s affection. Watching this, Vera knew there was no room for her to step in.

But Fidel wasn’t about to back down just because Vera told him to.

“Absolutely not. Papa isn’t opposing it because he hates you. I’m saying it because that boy can’t make Gina happy.”

Fidel’s stern eyes stabbed straight into Roland. With such a fierce stare from the great merchant, the young Roland could do nothing but shrink back.

Gina wasn’t convinced. “I’m happy!”

“Please understand, Gina. You and Roland—”

As Fidel was about to continue admonishing her, his secretary entered the room.

“Master Fidel, it’s time. The carriage is ready to take you.”

“Huh? No, wait. I’m having an important conversation with Gina right now.”

“There’s no time for that. You’re already cutting it close.”

“Urk! I-if it’s work, I suppose I can’t help it. But we’re definitely talking after this! Gina, stay tight at the manor.”

Fidel put on his work face, his eyes sharpening as he left the room. He spoke with his secretary about the day’s negotiations as he disappeared down the hall.

It was only at times like these that she would see her ideal father in him—before his daughters, he couldn’t help but soften up far too much. Vera didn’t hate that about him. But at this rate, it seemed like neither she nor Gina would ever be able to get married.

Once Fidel was gone, Gina turned to Vera and said, “Sis, I have a favor to ask. I want father to approve of Roland and me. Could you help us?”

Vera stifled her conflicted emotions and put on a smile.

“Fine by me. But I don’t have much time, since I have to leave for work soon.”

“Are you going out to trade again? You could just leave that to someone else.”

Gina’s innocent suggestion caused Vera’s gaze to briefly flicker toward Roland. But she quickly shook her head.

“It’s my ship. I don’t want to leave it in anyone else’s hands.”

Gina seemed a bit put off by Vera’s dedication to her work, but she wouldn’t criticize her for it. Instead, she offered her support.

“As long as you’re fine with it, I’m not going to stop you. But how can we get father to approve of Roland?”

As Gina held her head and worried aloud, Roland, sitting beside her, spoke up.

“Milady, is there really any need to rush? He will accept us in time.”

Roland was a diligent man. He believed he could gradually win Fidel over, taking time to show just how much of a hard worker he was. It was this side of him that Gina had fallen in love with, and she was satisfied with his answer.

“Right. I’m sure he’ll accept it if we just do our best.”

“Yes.”

Vera watched them smile as they linked hands, a cold overtaking a part of her chest. And she hated herself for it.

*Personally, I think it would be quicker to have him pull off a large project.*

Knowing Fidel’s personality, Vera thought it would be easier to gain his approval through some grand success than through diligent work.

Roland was indeed a sincere and respectable man. He was honest with his work, and had it not been for Gina, Fidel would have surely taken a liking to him.

However, that seemed to be where it ended for Roland. That was his limit.

“Why don’t you try for something big?” Vera jokingly suggested. “I’m sure papa will see you in a whole new light. Roland, how about you join me on my ship and seal a business deal? Just kidding.”

It was Gina who took the joke seriously. She put a hand to her chin in thought, then lifted her face.

“That might just do it.”

“Huh?”

Gina grabbed Vera’s hand with both of hers, looking her straight in the eye.

“Sis! Please! Help Roland prove himself.”

Vera had been the one to suggest it, so there was no way she could refuse. And so, she found herself taking Roland on her next business venture.

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“House Tres is gathering up adventurers?”

It had been a few days since we returned from the dungeon. I was resting at the inn when my comrade, Miranda Circry, paid a visit to my room.

Miranda was like the older sister of our group—reliable, and capable of handling most everything. With her light-green hair and green eyes, she had a



gentle, mature look that made her seem kind and gentle at a glance. However, under the surface, she was a tad extreme.

The reason Miranda had come to see me was because she had gathered some profitable information.

“That’s right. It’s the massive merchant family, House Tres. Apparently, they’re sending out a merchant vessel, and they’re looking for adventurers to serve as guards. By the sound of it, they’re hoping to form some exclusive contracts, so this job is practically a trial run.”

*A massive trading firm like House Tres searching for adventurers?*

“You’d think such a prominent merchant would use his connections to find guards. There has to be something else going on.”

Curious, I pressed her for more details. And as if she’d been waiting for that, Miranda immediately began to elaborate.

“The adventurer party they’d previously contracted is setting up a mercenary company, so they’re resigning. Plus, it seems like they’re interested in taking a look at the younger adventurers. Well, the real reason is that regardless of skill level, the younger, less accomplished ones will have a lower contract cost.”

*So they’re pitting young adventurers against each other to hire the cream of the crop for cheap. I can see it.*

With my new understanding, I considered whether or not to take House Tres’s request.

“It’s a good chance for us to sell ourselves directly to House Tres.”

Miranda had evidently picked up on that too. She quickly raised an issue. “The problem is that we’ll be on a ship. We’ve never experienced sea travel before, so it will be rough.”

Once, I took everyone on a fishing boat to try it out. We’d come to Baym, and it only made sense to experience the ocean. But, well—we all came down with terrible seasickness.

Most of us were rendered completely immobile, and it was terrible. Believe me.

Would we be able to complete a job while on the open sea—on a ship?

“I understand that you want to think it over,” Miranda urged me. “But there isn’t much time. You’d best be quick about it.”

“There’s not much we can do without preparation time.”

“We might be able to secure a few days. But I doubt we can do too much with that.”

This was out of our area of expertise. Normally, I would have rejected the offer, but I didn’t want to let such a rare chance slip by.

As I thought long and hard, my ancestors spoke up from the Jewel.

“It’s not like you have time anyways,” the third said in his usual, flippant tone. “Why not give it a go?”

The fourth head also seemed worried about time. “From what Gaston said, war is near. You should try out whatever you can. I doubt you’ll come by many opportunities to advertise yourselves to House Tres.”

Both of them were insisting that it didn’t matter if I failed—to just give it a go. The other three seemed on board with that.

“By the way, does whoever’s in charge of the ship have authority within House Tres?” the fifth asked. “If they’re just some hired captain, there’s no point.”

Given our tight deadline, we didn’t have the time to work our way up from the bottom. An executive in the business would be ideal.

“Miranda, do you know who’s in charge of the ship?” I checked with Miranda. She smiled, almost like she’d expected that question from the start.

“Do you think I’d bring you a pointless proposition? That vessel is headed by a big shot in the company. It’s the president’s daughter herself.”

“His daughter?”

“That’s right. She’s around our age. Still so young, but she’s been entrusted with a large ship.”

*The daughter’s in charge? Is it one of those nepotism things?*

But the moment he heard that, the sixth head perked up. *He sounds more serious than usual. Did he think up some brilliant idea?*

“Daughter? And Lyle’s age too? Lyle, ask if she’s got a lover.”

Trusting the sternness of his voice, I passed on the question straight to Miranda. But, I quickly realized...

“Miranda, does the girl have a lover?”

My question made Miranda narrow her eyes. Her smile no longer went beyond her lips.

“What is the purpose behind that question, I wonder?”

“Huh? Ah, no, um...?!”

The question almost made it sound like I was trying to get my hands all over a rich man’s daughter. As I hesitated, Miranda turned away and said, “There was no mention of it in any of my intel.”

“All right, go get that girl, Lyle! Do whatever it takes to make her fall!” the sixth boomed as soon as that info came in.

This was just terrible.

As an enemy of all women, the sixth’s brain worked differently than mine. He casually threw out ideas that would never even occur to me.

And naturally, from the Jewel, the jeers of my ancestors—did not rain down upon him. Even the seventh, who was always so quick to refute him, reluctantly agreed.

“That is the quickest solution, but how vile.”

By the sound of it, he was reluctant but saw no way around it. The others seemed to have similar opinions.

The fifth head didn’t refute the sixth’s opinion. He didn’t, but he seemed very unamused. “It’s an effective measure, but I don’t know what to think about the guy who immediately thought it up.”

“Lyle was the one who said he’d do anything to win,” the sixth said, laughing off his father’s words. “In the first place, you just need to make her happy after

you seduce her. No lies. What's the issue?"

*It's nothing but issues, you damn fool.*

I wanted to slam this accursed Jewel into the ground at this very instant, but Miranda's presence held me back. I pretended to think it over while gripping the Jewel and rolling it with my finger.

That was my way of saying, "No! Hell no!"

Then, reluctant as he was, the fourth head tried to persuade me. There was no power behind his voice.

"It's a method I really don't want to resort to, but considering what's to come, it's the most effective one. Lyle, for our future, you must get close to that girl."

*Those motives are way too impure; to be honest, I don't like how it sounds like I'm using her.*

But I didn't have any better ideas.

*It would probably be best to meet her, talk to her, and take things from there. Even if I manage to talk down my ancestors, I get the feeling they'll ultimately talk me into it, so I'll just let them speak for now. Let's just see what happens.*

Seeing me let go of the Jewel, Miranda spoke up.

"So what are we going to do? If you want to accept, you'd better do it fast."

"Let's take the job. I'd like to start preparing as soon as possible, so let's gather everyone up and have a discussion."

"I see... I'll put in a word to everyone, then."

Without another word, Miranda left the room.

Once she was gone, the fifth head began whispering to me. Even though no one else could hear the voices of the Jewel, he still seemed mindful of being overheard.

"Seducing a rich guy's daughter is all well and good, but you'd better not mention that to any of the girls."

A rather fearful agreement came from the sixth. "I get that. Miranda wouldn't accept it, I'll bet. I can see Aria and Sophia complaining too."



“Things have finally started to settle down within the party,” the third fretfully said. “I wouldn’t want to make any waves. If they find out Lyle’s going after another girl for her money, it might become a pain.”

*Not just “might.” It will.*

I didn’t want to do it either—if there was any way out of it. If I could just have a normal conversation with her about financial support, that would be our best option. I wouldn’t have to do anything unnecessary so long as the daughter of House Tres became our patron.

The fourth head, sick of the strained mood of my party, insisted, “Lyle, keep it a secret.”

That was where a rather obvious question occurred to me.

“Um, hypothetically. Let’s say the seduction really works. Won’t everyone find out after that, then?”

If it failed, recapturing Zayin would become much harder, and that was bad too. But if it actually succeeded, wouldn’t I lose all my standing within the party?

Wooing a rich man’s daughter for funding—wasn’t that the absolute worst?

Four ancestors fell silent. I just knew that they’d all run out of ideas. There wasn’t any more brilliance to go around.

After a moment of silence, the seventh head reassured me: “Lyle... I know you can do it.”

“Don’t avoid the question. At least give me some advice.”

*Is this really going to work for us?*

## Chapter 109: Fidel Tres

The adventurers had gathered at the port of Baym. They were congregated around a merchant vessel with large paddle wheels affixed to its sides—a specialty of House Tres. When all the other ships around were sporting sails, a paddle steamer was a rare sight in Baym, and it drew a fair bit of attention.

The port was bustling with goods being briskly loaded and unloaded; the ships came and went almost as frequently as the stevedores.

It was in such a lively port that Fidel stood on the ship's deck, glaring down at the adventurers with a look of displeasure.

“Why is it nothing but young men?”

The source of his frustration stemmed from the demographics of the adventurers. It irked him to think that strangers—young men, no less—would be boarding a Tres vessel alongside his precious daughter Vera.

Roland spoke up from his nearby station. “Boss, the rest of the crew are men too, aren't they?”

“My sailors—my subordinates—are different from impertinent fools like you. They know better than to lay a hand on my beloved daughter!”

He scowled at Roland, making no attempt to hide his personal feelings. But it was true that the sailors would never dare approach Vera. It wasn't that she completely lacked charm; far from it. But for the sailors, Vera was an awe-inspiring presence, too revered for anyone to even consider it.

Noting Roland's confusion, a middle-aged sailor explained, “Roland, don't you know what they call her?”

“As I recall...” Roland thought back, “Wasn't it the Goddess of Good Fortune?”

“That's right. As long as the young lady is with us, there is no sea to be feared. To us sailors, she truly is like a goddess. But those adventurers down there—they're a different story.”

The sailor cast a glance down at the adventurers below, most of whom had come from who-knows-where. While they'd done their best to gather young and capable adventurers, there was no way to know their true skill level until they were thrown into the thick of it.

And, if they didn't know anything about Vera, it was entirely possible that some might try to get close to her.

"The Goddess of Good Fortune," Roland muttered. "Is it really true? Sure, they say any ship will return safely from a voyage as long as she's on board, but probabilistically..."

"Whelp! You doubt my precious Vera?!" barked Fidel. "That's the impertinence I'm talking about! The same impertinence that brought you to Gina. Aaarrgghh! How could my dear Gina have fallen for someone like you?!"

He was so worked up that he was beyond words. Fidel took on the weary eyes of many sailors.

It was at that point that Vera herself appeared, holding a parasol overhead. She stepped onto the deck, her cheek twitching. "What are you talking about, might I ask?"

Fidel hastily tried to compose himself. "Vera! You look stunning today!"

"I already heard that this morning."

"You're always stunning, so what can I do?"

She sighed. "Well, thanks."

Ultimately, she'd opted to brush off her father's excessive praise. Of course, even to those unaffected by bias, Vera was beautiful. Below the short skirt of her black dress protruded two shapely legs which extended into her boots. Her attire stood out among the hardworking sailors, but no one would criticize her for it.

After all, the ship was Vera's personal possession.

No one could oppose the captain. And the sailors had no desire to either. That was simply how much trust she had earned over her numerous voyages.

"I'm sorry, Roland," Vera apologized. "Please forgive my father."

“Oh, it’s quite all right. I’ll keep working hard to earn his approval.”

Vera smiled at his optimistic response, but Fidel, on the other hand, bared his hostility.

“There is no way I will ever approve of you. Not now, not ever!”

He glared at Roland with bloodshot eyes while the middle-aged sailor scratched his head. Perhaps in an attempt to change the subject, the sailor glanced at the gathered adventurers and burst out laughing.

“Now that’s a rare sight. Boss, and you too, Captain. Get a load of that. We’ve got ourselves a harem party.”

The moment she heard the word “harem,” Vera gripped the ship’s handrail, leaning out over it and looking out over the port. Roland followed her gaze, spotting a group of female adventurers surrounding a young man with blue hair. They were young compared to the other adventurer parties, and they certainly stood out.

“A harem party? You mean they’re all women?”

Roland didn’t quite seem to get it, so the sailor jokingly explained, “A party like that one, with one guy and a bunch of ladies. By the look of it, he might even have a relationship with all of them.”

“Huh? That... That’s just not right!”

The innocent young man Roland’s face turned a bright red as he struggled to accept the very idea of such an inappropriate relationship. As for the sailor, he couldn’t help but laugh at his innocence.

“You’re too straitlaced, kid. But seriously, why are they all flocking to such a scrawny guy? We’re far more appealing, don’t you think, Captain? How about you? Who’d you go for?”

The sailor flexed his muscles in a playful appeal, which got a laugh from Vera.

Sailors were a rough and tough bunch, and this kind of banter was nothing out of the ordinary.

“Sorry to say, but you lot are way out of my strike zone. Try another one.”



“Ouch. So cold. Is that blue-haired beanpole more your type, then?”

Without giving it much thought, Vera answered, “Well. He’d have more of a chance than you, that’s for sure.”

Hearing this, Fidel felt his hair practically stand on end.

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In a corner of the deck, Fidel gathered up Roland and the sailors. As the man gave off an unsettling air, Roland stepped forward to ask the question that was on everyone’s mind.

“Umm, boss? Why have you gathered us?”

Fidel’s closed eyes shot open as he fixed them with a sharp glare, silencing both Roland and the crew. They felt a distinct sense that opposing him now would be the last thing they did.

Fidel spoke quietly and calmly. “I trust you all understand this, and I’m sure I don’t have to explain. Yes, I’m sure I don’t need to repeat myself, but let me go over it one more time.” His face broke into a smile as he placed a hand on the guardrail. “I love my daughters.”

Everyone wore a face that seemed to say, “Tell us something we didn’t know.” But before anyone could voice these thoughts, Fidel lowered a fist onto the rail.

“In an ideal world, Vera would be staying at the estate, helping me with managerial work. No, she’s still young, so she could still be playing around like a kid should. There’s plenty of time for her to focus on serious matters later... But. There is one thing in this world that I absolutely cannot tolerate. Do you know what that is, whelp?”

Roland shook his head as the question was posed to him.

“Men who get their grubby little paws on my precious daughters!” Fidel exploded. “Any scoundrels who dare approach my adorable little girls without the appropriate resolve... I’d happily turn them into fish feed if I could. Surely any father with daughters would feel the same; don’t you agree?”

Roland and the sailors could only nod furiously.

Fidel nodded back, satisfied he had them on board. “I’m not saying my daughters cannot fall in love or marry. But I do want them to choose men who are worthy of them. I’m sure you understand what I’m getting at.”

As everyone continued their feverish nodding, Fidel’s smile grew broader. But quickly, it faded; he turned expressionless as he gazed out at the sea.

“If any scoundrel gets too close to my dear Vera, I think it’s only karmic justice if an unfortunate accident occurs to them. Wouldn’t you agree, gentlemen?”

Everyone present understood his order—all ruffians who dared approach Vera were to be tossed overboard. Seeing Roland’s pale face and the other men turning meek, Fidel smiled again. It seemed Roland feared that he was next on the chopping block.

*Hmph. Serves you right, Fidel thought to himself. But I can’t get rid of this whelp.*

“Don’t misunderstand me,” Fidel continued. “When a worthy man comes along, I’ll give him my blessing. And as for all of you—you have nothing to worry about. Even you, Roland. I expect you to return safely to Baym.”

*As much as I want to, I can’t. I just know that Gina will misunderstand my intentions. I can’t let Roland die no matter what happens.*

If anything happened to Roland, even if it truly was an accident, Fidel knew that he’d be the first person Gina suspected. And if that happened, he feared Gina would say, “I hate you, papa!”

The mere thought shook him to his core.

He placed a hand on Roland’s anxious shoulder. “Once you get back, we can have a nice, long chat.”

“Y-Yes, sir!”

Roland’s expression relaxed as he realized he wasn’t in danger. But Fidel’s grip tightened until Roland’s shoulder was letting off an audible grating sound.

“And make sure you keep a close eye on Vera. Keeping a lookout to ensure those foolish adventurers don’t make a move on her—that’s your responsibility.”

Roland gulped and gave a deep nod.

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The adventurers who'd gathered to guard the merchant vessel had all boarded and were now standing assembled on the deck. Rather than the actual reward, most of the parties were more interested in becoming adventurers working under the wing of House Tres. As a result, there was quite a bit of enthusiasm going around.

I overheard the conversation of a nearby party of heavily armored adventurers.

"We'll be up there with the greats if we can get Tres' backing."

"You're telling me. I bought a whole new set of equipment for this. I'm going to prove myself no matter what it takes."

Yet as they psyched themselves up, an older adventurer approached them in a teasing move. He was lightly equipped and armed with a spear.

"No matter where you go, it doesn't take long to find an idiot."

"Huh?"

This older adventurer was leading a party of younger adventurers. He seemed far more experienced as he offered some unsolicited advice to his heavily armored compatriots.

"What is that heavy armor going to do for you on a ship? If you fall off, that's a one-way trip to a watery grave. For your sake, you better take it off now or give up on this job."

I was worried a fight might break out, but it seemed the man was just trying to be considerate. His attitude, however, was a different issue. The hot-blooded adventurers grew irritated, not wanting to hear it from such an old and dreary-looking man.

"We're fine as we are!"

"As if we're dumb enough to fall overboard!"

"Quit acting high and mighty when you've only got that flimsy stuff, old man."

After the armored group stormed away, the older adventurer stroked his stubbled chin and muttered, “I was trying to be kind...”

He seemed to be reflecting on his poor approach.

One of his younger comrades asked him, “Did you really have to warn them?”

“It’d leave a bad taste in my mouth if they died completely preventable deaths.”

As I listened in on that conversation, Clara called out to me. She was a petite woman with disheveled blue hair and glasses and a mechanical left arm. She carried a large bag on her back and acted as the support for our party.

“The Tres family’s prestige is nothing to scoff at. There are quite a few skilled adventurers here.”

After taking in the surrounding faces, Clara seemed to deem them skilled.

“You think so? I do think heavy armor is pretty scary to have on a ship.”

“I agree with you where equipment is concerned. However, everyone is far more composed than I expected.”

Adventurers were mostly ruffians, and it wasn’t unusual for tempers to flare and for fights to break out. Despite this, neither the older adventurer giving the words of advice, nor the younger adventurers being cautioned had started anything. They’d both backed down voluntarily.

“So the reason you’re rating them so highly is because they’re not at each other’s throats? That sounds like a low bar,” I suggested.

“With that said, being skilled was essentially a prerequisite. It is to be expected.”

Strength was a given. They’d gathered adventurers with discipline to boot.

From the Jewel came the seventh head’s voice, filled with his usual anti-adventurer disdain.

“You can never count on adventurers. Rating them highly just because they’re not pulling out their weapons? Such a disgrace. Right, Lyle?”

*Do you really expect me to agree with you? I’m one of those same adventurers*

*you hate so much...*

“With that said...”

The seventh head was a die-hard adventurer hater and it was pointless trying to change his mind. Instead, I focused on scanning the deck and counting the number of adventurers the Tres family had amassed.

“There’s quite a lot of them...”

This was partially a test run, granted, but there were still far too many guards for a merchant vessel. *Couldn’t they have whittled it down more?*

The answer to my question came from Miranda.

“Word is that ships have been sinking quite frequently lately. They’re taking extra precautions.”

“Sinking? Are they running into some sort of issue?” I wondered aloud as I glanced around, observing the sailors. They didn’t seem nervous at all.

This seemed to bother Miranda as well. “I’ve heard that the other ships have been hesitant to set sail. But this one seems to lack those same tensions.”

There wasn’t a single anxious sailor to be found. Before I could dwell on that fact, a commotion suddenly broke out among the adventurers, followed by one of the sailors raising his voice to catch everyone’s attention.

“The head of Tres Firm, Fidel, has some words for you!”

A man in an expensive-looking suit strutted straight into the center of the crowd, the adventurers making way for him as though it was the natural thing to do. All eyes were on him.

With a refined demeanor, the man smiled and addressed us.

“Thank you for gathering today. I’m sure you’ve all heard horror stories about the state of the seas lately, but with so many fine men here, I’m sure this deal will be another success. As some of you may know, the Tres family is seeking to employ exclusive adventurers. Your performance on this mission will determine if this offer will be extended to you.”

These words straight from the head of the firm filled the adventurers with

motivation. Earning the backing of a large merchant firm in Baym essentially meant being accepted into the big leagues.

Clara seemed a bit put off by the intensity surrounding us.

“They’re very enthusiastic.”

“We’re aiming for something even bigger than that,” said Miranda. “Lyle, are you sure about this?”

We couldn’t let the chance to get Tres backing slip by. But my means to that end—I’d kept my party members in the dark on that one.

“Well... Yeah.”

My wishy-washy response did little to ease their concerns.

“You do have a plan, right?” Miranda pressed me.

Clara added, “Lyle, it’s going to be hard for us if you don’t show a little more confidence.”

As the leader, I had to be firm or I’d only breed anxiety.

It was at that moment that a girl entered the ring of adventurers. She had her black hair styled in pigtails, her elegant clothing setting her apart from everyone else on board.

“That kid’s the ship’s captain, the little lady of House Tres,” whispered Miranda.

The little lady of House Tres, Vera, had entered the scene.

From the Jewel came the third’s voice. “Oh, how adorable. Lucky you, Lyle.”

*What’s so lucky about that? I’m feeling sicker by the second.*

Vera immediately addressed the crowd. “You have my gratitude for accepting this escort request. I’m Vera. Vera Tres, captain of this ship.”

She greeted us with a smile, but by the next instant, she was shooting us a sharp look.

“On this ship, you follow my orders.” She lowered her voice to an intimidating timbre. “I make the rules. Is that clear?”



Once she was satisfied that no one would challenge her, her smile returned.

“Good. This journey will take us north, so be wary of the cold. My subordinates will fill you in on the details; make sure to heed their words.”

Her speech was over and the adventurers dispersed. But feeling a set of eyes on me, I glanced over to see the head of House Tres, Fidel, glaring at me.

*Huh? What did I do?*

As I reflected, confused, the sixth head teased me, “It’s because you’re out to seduce his daughter. He’s got to scare you straight.”

*You’re the one who told me to seduce her!* I thought with a sigh, growing increasingly worried that I’d done something to offend the man. *If I did, it would really throw a wedge in our plans...*

Fidel approached me. He didn’t have the same smile he’d shown off to the rest of the adventurers, and he was letting off a rather intimidating aura. Once he was standing right in front of me, he took on a condescending attitude.

“That’s quite a flowery party you’ve got there. I must say, I’m envious.”

*It doesn’t sound that way to me...* Even I could tell he was being sarcastic. As his attitude became even more apparent, I could hear the seventh head seething in the Jewel.

“A mere merchant thinks he can lord over Lyle like this?”

From the point of view of a feudal lord, a merchant probably seemed lowly in status. It was understandable that he was irritated with Fidel’s attitude toward me... No wait, was it really? I was starting to have my doubts.

In any case, Fidel couldn’t hear the seventh’s words, so it wasn’t an issue.

With a troubled smile on my face, I tried my best to be as inoffensive as possible. “I get that a lot. But they’re all very skilled, I assure you. They’re my reliable comrades.”

“That’s wonderful to hear. Reliable adventurers are always welcome. If they have the skills to back it up, that is.”

*I’m pretty sure this is our first meeting... Doesn’t he hate me a little too much?*

*I know I'm trying to seduce his daughter, but I haven't even done anything yet! Isn't this a bit much?*

The sixth head seemed to take an interest in Fidel. "He's really wary of you. Must be all the women around you. He's not wrong!"

Perhaps it was only natural that he was being cautious around me. In fact, his reaction could be seen as perfectly natural for a father.

Fidel drew even closer to me, bringing his mouth to my ear. "If you value your life, I suggest you don't lay a hand on my daughter," he said in a low voice before walking away.

Clara, who'd heard it all, looked up at me with concern. "It seems you made an enemy right from the start."

I'd gotten on the bad side of the head of House Tres. I'd suddenly been thrown into the worst possible situation.

"I was hoping to secure his support, but...this might not work out after all."

I was on the verge of giving up, only for the sixth head to egg me on. "It's too early to lose heart. And the outcome is still up in the air. That Vera girl—she's young, but she's been entrusted with a ship of this size. Worse comes to worst, you might be able to manage with her support alone. Lyle, stick to the plan—and charm her!"

All the other ancestors voiced their agreement. They saw it as unavoidable if we wanted to resolve our financial woes. Even the third—normally so carefree—contained his usual personality when money was involved.

"It would be a huge help if she just went and fell on her own like the others," he said.

"Lyle is surprisingly popular with the ladies. It should be easy if everything goes as it usually does," the fourth head agreed.

*What exactly do you people take me for?*

The fifth head evidently didn't want to get involved with these things. But he did offer some advice—or rather a warning. "Make sure to take responsibility. That is all."

*Say something. Give me something to work with.*

In the first place, was this really necessary? Couldn't I just come out and ask her for support like a normal person? Seducing her, stringing her along, it all seemed far too much.

As I looked over at Vera, I decided I'd have a straightforward conversation with her, keeping my true intentions hidden from my ancestors.

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Once we'd gone through a more detailed briefing, we entered the cabin room that had been allotted to us. It was a large room meant for the entire party to share. Some of the other parties would have to share rooms depending on their numbers, so we were quite fortunate to have a private space to ourselves.

"I might have made an enemy of Fidel, but at least we're receiving the same treatment as everyone else," I said with a wry smile.

Sprawled out over a wooden crate, May spoke up. She had blonde hair and blue eyes, looking younger than most of my party despite being the oldest among us. She was even older than Gaston.

Her true form was that of a divine beast—a qilin. She merely took on the form of a young girl. With that said, she was just as old as she looked if we were going off qilin standards, what with their long lifespans.

In that sense, it was hard to say her appearance was completely misleading.

"Humans are such a pain. He'd have some peace of mind if he hurried and found her a mate."

As she wasn't really a human, May couldn't help but be somewhat dim when it came to human emotion.

Eva replied to her with a shrug. She, too, seemed to have a hard time processing Fidel's overprotectiveness. "Most human fathers don't take it that far either. As far as I'm aware."

"Humans really are a mystery."

"You've got that right. I might just be feeling it more since elves are pretty hands-off with their kids."

As the topic of fathers came up, Shannon's face clouded over. She twirled a lock of her long, fluffy, light-purple hair around her fingers. Shannon was younger than us, and her relationship with her father wasn't the best. The topic seemed to be a hard one for her.

I could relate, honestly. All of the memories I shared with my own father were negative. All I remembered was how my parents had pushed me away and doted on my younger sister, Ceres. I'd been so envious of her, doing everything I could to get their attention. And it was all for nothing.

Miranda and Shannon both seemed envious of Vera—and so was I. He'd shown me so much hostility, yet it had hardly stirred any anger within me.

Looking at me and Shannon, and sensing the mood, Novem got the conversation back on track. "It's unfortunate what happened with Mr. Fidel, but we have other things to focus on. Shouldn't we be thinking about what's to come?"

*What's to come... The recapture of Zayin.*

Our eyes all turned toward the hooded figure of Thelma. Beside her sat Gaston.

They'd both fled from Zayin following the coup, the former holy maiden and high priest presiding over the nation. I'd managed to take in the two central figures of the theocracy, but since I couldn't leave them in Baym, I had to take them along.

"Holy Maiden," Gaston said to Thelma, "have your feelings changed?"

In order to recapture Zayin, we needed the assistance of the former holy maiden. Our *just cause* would have no legitimacy without her. But the betrayal she faced, alongside the death of her comrades... It had been one brutal happening after the next, and Thelma seemed weary of it all.

"As I've said time and again, I will not go back to being the holy maiden. And for what? No matter how hard I tried, that country never changed. It's pointless to even try."

Thelma and Gaston had once been part of the so-called moderate faction—the ones who sought to avoid war and instead invest their resources into

strengthening the nation.

The faction that favored war had staged a coup, and the two of them had been driven out.

Seeing as we wanted to usurp Zayin, Thelma was absolutely essential. Yet without her will to fight, we were at an impasse.

We were short on funding, and our *just cause* Thelma was uncooperative. There were a mountain of issues to tackle and the war hadn't even begun.

Tears fell from Thelma's eyes, and she struggled to wipe them all with her fingers.

"I plan to ride this ship until we reach a land where no one knows me. I'd live out my days quietly there. That's all I want now."

Gaston fell silent at these words.

Perhaps it had been a mistake to take Thelma aboard. I'd kept her close out of fear of assassins, but...she seemed determined to use this opportunity to flee the country.

"Everywhere I look, there's a new problem."

And so began our voyage—a voyage wrought with uncertainty about whether we'd be able to reclaim Zayin or not.

## Chapter 110: Vera Tres

The Tres merchant vessel set off for a port of a major country to the north. The static ocean view surrounding us didn't seem like it was about to change anytime soon.

Also...

"Sorry. Can't."

The seasickness was getting to us.

Aria lay on the floor in the cabin we'd been assigned, wrapped up in a blanket. Her face was pale and she looked to be in pain. She wasn't alone. Sophia looked like she wanted to head back already, and the rest of my party seemed to share the sentiment.

"A-Are we not at the port yet?" Sophia asked, clutching a bucket with vacant eyes while Novem rubbed her back.

"We've only just set sail."

"I-I can't take it anymore..."

Using a limp, exhausted Clara as a pillow, Eva was jotting down some notes. Her face was practically green. "Of all my people...I can't imagine many have ever...ridden a ship...this big... Urp..." She pressed a hand to her mouth.

Honestly, I admired her determination, but for now, I wished she would get some rest.

It was up to our resident automaton Monica to look after all our seasick comrades. She seemed very displeased as she handled the cleaning among other things. Her long, blonde, well-maintained hair was tied into puffy pigtails, and she wore a striking red maid uniform that she truly adored. Right now, she was handing a drink to Thelma, who was lying down, unwell.

Along with the drink, she also passed over what seemed to be a medicine of sorts. "This is motion sickness medicine. It will make the seasickness ease up."



“Huh? U-Um, why didn’t you pass that around before we set sail?”

All eyes were on Monica. She heaved a deep sigh before stealing a glance at me. “I wanted to look after a certain useless chicken while he was down with the sickness. Unfortunately, he seems to be one of the *few* unaffected, so I figured I might as well hand them out.”

Thelma shot her a doubtful look. But still, knowing the medicine would put her at ease, she still took it and said her thanks.

Eva—still suffering—reached out a hand to Monica. She was downright terrifying as she glared daggers, her face deathly pale. “F-Fork over the...medicine...”

She was desperate, but Monica sneered at the sight of her, mockingly holding up a box of pills. “Oh, what to do? What to do? If my damn chicken insists, then *perhaps* I wouldn’t mind sparing a *bit* of medicine.”

*How is this woman so insufferable?*

“Just give her some already.”

“Fiiine. Here, swallow and be grateful.”

Eva hastily took a pill and some water, gulping them down as fast as she could before curling into a ball. She seemed to be in a lot of pain. “W-We have to go back by ship too, right? How about we try our luck on land? I mean, we should be fine as long as we have Porter, right?” she pleaded.

But a land route would take more time and would be impossible considering our contract with Tres Firm.

I could only shake my head. “I don’t think that’s possible,” I said, trying to turn her down gently.

And Eva burst into tears. “Lyle, you demon. I’m suffering so much, and you don’t understand my pain in the slightest.”

Seeing Eva’s melodramatic performance, Monica gave an exaggerated shrug of her shoulders. “Looks like the useless elf is starting to feel better already.”

Seeing my comrades in such pitiful states, I decided it was best to step out for a bit.

“We’ve got some time left until it’s our turn to patrol. I’m going to get some fresh air.”

“Well, what else can I do but accompany you?” Monica asked slyly, preparing to join me.

With her appearance, she tended to draw a bit of attention, so I wasn’t keen on having her tag along. “You stay here. Look after everyone.”

“Huh? Wh-Why?!”

“Bringing you along will be more trouble than it’s worth.”

*And it’ll be more convenient for me if I go alone.*

Monica dramatically teetered to the floor, biting at a handkerchief in frustration. “Oh, woe is me. But I cannot go against orders.”

Ignoring her theatrics, I left the room. *I need to have a talk with Vera.*

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On deck, I could see both the sailors at work and the other adventurers. Some of them were keeping watch, while others were on standby, ready to act at a moment’s notice. A few of them were lying down in the waiting room with pale faces. Evidently, we weren’t the only ones being tormented by seasickness.

I walked around searching for the girl I wanted to talk to.

Soon enough, I spotted Vera at the bow, holding a parasol overhead.

She was gazing out at the direction the ship was headed and was—most conveniently—alone.

“Target sighted! Lyle, just do what you always do. Show her what you’re made of,” I heard the sixth head cheerfully cry out from the Jewel. From my point of view, it was none of his business; in the first place, he made it sound like I was seducing women on a regular basis.

*I find that very offensive.*

I raised my right hand, calling out as I approached her. “Do you have a moment?”

Vera turned. “Do you need something from me?”

She had the same violet eyes as Novem and Aria, and for a moment I felt I might be sucked into them. At first, I thought she might brush me off, but she instead rather casually asked what I wanted. I felt a little apologetic as I went on.

“Actually, I had a little favor I wanted to ask of you.”

Seeing my troubled smile, she smiled back. But it felt as if she were building some kind of wall between us. Despite her jovial expression, her eyes remained stern. “How about I take a guess? You want my support, or the support of Tres Firm. Am I right?”

“Huh? Oh, uh, yeah pretty much.”

While I was caught off guard and confused, the voices of my ancestors erupted in panic.

“What are you doing, Lyle?!”

“This isn’t what we discussed!”

“Hey, are you losing your nerve at the last second?”

“That’s no good, Lyle. It’s a bad move.”

“While it’s not wrong as a human being, you’re too soft, Lyle.”

Though Vera maintained her smile, a tinge of sadness crept into her expression. She took her eyes off of me and said, “Judging by that look on your face, you’re wondering how I got it right off that bat. That’s easy enough. The only reason adventurers ever approach me is for Tres support. Well sometimes, it’s just for *my* money. But it’s rare to come across anyone else.”

*Did I...already mess it up? Approaching a complete stranger for money seems like the worst thing you can do,* I mused.

I’d come to ask for her support—straight and to the point—but for Vera, it seemed to be more of the usual.

She turned her eyes back to me. “I’ll hear you out, for what it’s worth. We’ve got time to kill until we reach our destination.”

“I was planning to raise a mercenary brigade,” I explained hastily, trying to

present my case. “Um, there’s been some unrest on the border between Zayin and Lorphys, and I thought we could do some service there.”

There wasn’t much I could actually tell her—my desire for Zayin and my access to the former holy maiden had to go unspoken—so my reasoning ended up sounding terribly ambiguous.

*Huh? Wait, wouldn’t it have just been quicker to seduce her at this point?*

As I regretted my decision, the sixth head’s voice of disappointment came from the Jewel.

“Aww, you messed up.”

He was right. Vera turned away and handed down the verdict.

“So you want the support of Tres Firm to set up a mercenary brigade, hmm? It’s good that you’re well-informed about Zayin and Lorphys, but asking for financial assistance for that... Hmm? What’s the word? Average, yes, very average. You sound like a typical young adventurer with a dream. Nothing too out of the ordinary.” She shook her head. “Unfortunately, neither I nor Tres Firm can provide any support. We get requests like that almost every day, and to be honest, we can’t be assed to deal with all of them. And besides, I don’t sense any passion from you.”

“Passion?”

“Yes, passion. That sort of ‘I’ll do it no matter what it takes!’ attitude. It just feels like you’re going with the flow. You don’t seem serious about it. Would you want to support something like that?”

“No, I would not.” I nodded, satisfied with her explanation.

Vera looked a little surprised for a moment before holding her stomach in laughter. *What was so funny about my response?*

“What’s with that? You do realize we’re talking about *you*, right?”

It seemed my response had struck a chord as Vera’s merry laughter drew the eyes of those around us. The sailors took notice of me, and a young man approached.

He looked a little panicked. “You there! What do you think you’re doing?!”

the earnest-looking young man called out to me. His face was stiff.

Vera wiped the tears from her eyes and told him, “It’s fine, Roland. Don’t worry about it. His response was so funny it made me laugh. He’s ridiculous—get this. He came begging for support, and when I told him why he wasn’t getting it, he accepted it just like that.”

Roland—as she’d called him—glared at me. “Please stay away from the young lady.”

From the perspective of Vera’s subordinate, having an unknown adventurer approach her for support was understandably unpleasant. I noted all the eyes on him and went along with his request.

“I’m sorry. I’ll be more careful from now on.”

“I’m glad you understand. And, young lady, you don’t need to waste your time on everyone who comes up to you.”

Vera seemed to feign an expression of regret. “Well, sorry about that. It was funny.”

She seemed to take quite a liking to my answer, as simply remembering it had her laughing again. Shooting her a weary look, Roland promptly led me away from the scene.

Feeling all the surrounding stares, I gripped the Jewel in my right hand. And in that moment, I sensed the hostility directed at me. Within the three-dimensional map that formed in my mind, the symbols that represented the adventurers were largely yellow. Neither enemy nor ally.

However, a red signal—a hostile color—came from the sailors who had overheard my conversation with Vera. Vera herself... Yellow? She didn’t seem to hate me.

But within all of that, there was a single indicator that stood out in blue. It wasn’t one of my comrades; it was the person right in front of me.

Once he’d led me back into the ship, Roland turned to me and issued me a stern warning. “You mustn’t approach Lady Vera so carelessly. Understood?”

“The sailors were glaring at me.”

“To them, milady is the Goddess of Good Fortune. They believe any hurdle on the seas can be overcome so long as she’s aboard. There’s practically a religion around her.”

Even though he’d been the one to pull me away from the scene, Roland was ironically the most well-disposed toward me.

“Why did you help me out?”

Roland seemed surprised, as though he thought I’d resent him for interrupting my conversation with Vera. “You noticed?”

“You stepped in for my sake, didn’t you?”

“I have my reasons... Anyway, it’s better if you don’t approach Lady Vera unless you have a very good reason. You’ve, um...got your comrades, right? It’s not like you’re short of female company.”

Roland’s face turned red as he said it, and he was quickly on his way.

I gripped the Jewel again, and as expected, my ancestors were cold.

“Stupid Lyle,” the third head chided me.

I rested my back against the wall as I tried to defend myself. “I just thought it would work out better than trying to woo her. But I admit I failed badly. Even if I try to seduce her now, she’ll definitely think I’m only after her money.”

Though inside, I was relieved I hadn’t had to lead her along. The fourth seemed to notice my smile, growing irritated.

“Looking at that face you’re making, I could have sworn you never wanted to succeed in the first place.”

“Ah, you caught on? I mean, the idea of approaching her just for money is downright deplorable.”

“And that should come as nothing new to you,” the fifth head said with palpable frustration. “Have you forgotten what you said? You said you’d do whatever it takes to defeat Ceres.”

Certainly, I’d vowed to become a villain if that’s what it took to defeat Ceres. But this wasn’t exactly what I had in mind when I said that.



“I’ll find another way. I’m going to give up on getting Tres support.”

The head of the family already hated me. And to seduce and abuse Vera, who was loved so dearly by her father—I just didn’t have it in me.

The seventh, at least, seemed to show some understanding of how I felt. “So you can’t bring yourself to deceive an innocent girl, huh? I’m glad you haven’t lost your humanity, but this is still a massive setback.”

He was critical but somewhat sympathetic. And even as he chastised me, there was a kindness to his words. He seemed to share some of my reluctance.

“We’ll overcome this with our own strength. We’ll earn money as adventurers and—”

“Shh!” The sixth suddenly cut in. “It’s Miranda and Shannon.”

I frantically held my tongue, turning to see Miranda and Shannon down the corridor. Neither had come down with seasickness, so they’d gone out to explore the ship.

Shannon spotted me and immediately began to insult me. “I heard about how your support request got shot down! I knew you couldn’t handle the negotiations! Such a disgrace.”

*How did they find out about that?*

Shannon pointed at me and laughed. Miranda, on the other hand, wasn’t smiling as she approached me.

“The rumors are already going around. Care to explain?”

“It’s true,” I said honestly. “I told her I needed her support, but Vera said I lacked passion and turned me down. When I accepted that, she burst out laughing. It was a mess, I tell you.”

As I jokingly recounted the scene, Shannon interrupted, “What’s the point of this request if you’re going to fail this quickly? We’re just wasting time now. Urgh, it’s all your fault.”

“Oh shut it.”

I pinched Shannon’s cheek to silence her, but when I turned back to Miranda,

I saw her staring straight at me. I was so startled I let go of Shannon, who also seemed to sense the change in Miranda. Shannon went quiet, rubbing her aching cheek.

“Lyle.”

“Yes?”

Miranda’s question came slowly, almost like she was interrogating me. “You went out of your way to take on this troublesome request for the express purpose of securing support from Tres Firm, correct? You took some time out of our incredibly busy schedule for this, correct?”

“Y-Yeah.”

“Then why did you give up so easily? You were thinking about it so seriously before we started the job, but now you’re backing off without a fight.”

Miranda didn’t know what my true intentions were—that I’d arbitrarily come to terms with the fact that I didn’t have to try seducing Vera. It made perfect sense that she couldn’t accept it.

“This is bad. Lyle, answer carefu— Hmm?!”

Right after offering some loud advice, the sixth head cut himself off with a gasp. Shannon was staring wide-eyed at the Jewel.

*Th-This girl...can she see that the ancestors are raising a ruckus inside?*

Since he could no longer speak to me, I had to carry on without his guidance.

“I do feel bad about messing up. What I was thinking so hard about before we took the request, well, it’s not as important as you think... You don’t have to worry about it.”

I averted my eyes, but Miranda wasn’t letting up. She inched closer and closer, until finally I had my back pressed against the wall and her face was right up against mine.

“I’d love to hear about your initial plan. Lyle, what sort of strategy did you have in mind? I’m sure we could have provided support if you told us.”

“Well, it’s already over...”

Having her support would have been reassuring, but how was I supposed to involve other women—my comrades no less—in trying to seduce a rich girl?

As I looked away, Miranda grabbed my chin and forced me to look her in the eye. “Won’t you tell me? I’d love to hear it, Lyle.”

Miranda finally smiled, despite a dangerous glint in her eyes. Shannon’s presence meant that lying was pointless—she’d see right through it.

I steeled myself. “I was going to seduce Vera and make her fall for me,” I mumbled.

Then Shannon, who’d been quiet up until now, immediately lashed out. “You’re awful! The worst! Sis, we should punish him. He needs a spanking! A hundred times, at least!”

Despite her anger, she also seemed to relish in the fact that she’d found a weakness to exploit. And seeing as I couldn’t say anything back, I just had to take on her wrath.

*Yeah, I was in the wrong this time.*

But just as I thought that, Miranda slammed her hand against the wall right beside my face. I let out a strange sound in my shock.

Miranda was clearly upset, going off the furrow in her brow. Even though they couldn’t speak up, I could sense that even my silent ancestors in the Jewel were startled—fearful, even.

A whisper leaked from the sixth head. “She’s reminding me of my wives.”

The fact that he casually threw out a plural there amazed me. *What? They were all like this? He managed to surround himself with multiple women as scary as Miranda? That’s honestly impressive...or not. Yeah, not really. That’s his fault.*

Shannon, noticing a drastic change in Miranda’s attitude, shut her mouth and averted her gaze. She seemed to decide it was best not to get involved.

I looked at Miranda’s face. *Yep, she’s definitely angry.*

“S-Sorry. I thought seducing her was out of my wheelhouse, so I changed the plan halfway through. I straightforwardly asked for her support, but it didn’t

work out.”

*I can't blame her if she explodes on me.* At least, that's what I thought. But the reason for Miranda's anger—lay elsewhere.

“Lyle, we're not playing around here. If you're going to do it, then seduce her seriously.”

“Huh? Oh, okay.”

Simply completing the request wasn't enough. This was an important stage that would heavily influence our future. Miranda was criticizing me for my lack of resolve.

“Why didn't you stick to the original plan? You saw it when we boarded the ship, didn't you? The weakness of the Tres family is its daughters. If you could seduce one of them, there's a good chance you can draw out substantial support.”

Mr. Fidel's weak point did seem to be his daughter Vera. His affection for her was palpable. That was what made my—or rather, the ancestors' idea of seducing her seem just that much worse.

Miranda relayed the info she'd gathered around the ship. “That young lady is quite beloved by her crew. When I praised her a bit, they happily shared all sorts of information. Right, Shannon?”

Startled by her sudden inclusion in the conversation, Shannon gave a few frantic nods. “Y-Yes! She's the actual owner of the ship; it's not company property. Also, umm, it seems she has a lot of personal wealth.”

Her statement was vague and uncertain, but it seemed that Vera was quite rich in her own right.

“Even if you can't secure the firm's backing,” Miranda added, “her personal funding will be enough to get through this... You understand, don't you, Lyle?”

She was saying we would have achieved our objective if I hadn't changed plans midway.

“That's true. But that's the issue—I just don't think I would have succeeded!”

I didn't have the confidence to seduce her. But when I voiced those doubts,

Miranda got even closer—so close our lips were almost touching.

“Even if you’re set up to fail, you need to give it your all. Lyle, I’ll say it again—we’re not playing around here. If you’ve decided to seduce her, then take it seriously. We’ll help however we can.”

“Huh?”

*Miranda’s going to help me seduce Vera...?*

That seemed a bit counterintuitive.

“Are you really going to help? Me getting close to Vera would mean, um, that...”

Miranda parted from me with a shrug and a bemused laugh. “Oh, what’s the harm? It would be pathetic if a man aiming to take over a country was unable to overcome something like this.”

I never expected her to cheer me on when I told her I’d have to pursue another woman. Was Miranda really okay with it? Could it be she no longer saw me as a man?

As my worries crept in, Miranda seemed to pick up on it. She leaned in again, this time with a gentler smile. “You don’t have to worry one bit. It doesn’t matter how many more rivals I get. I’m going to be your number one in the end. Just remember that.”

I should have been happy to hear that. And yet, for some reason, I felt a chill run down my spine. At the same time, I instinctively knew there was no escape.

“Now then, let’s win over that young lady,” said Miranda. “We have until this ship returns to Baym. You need to make her fall by then... Understood?” Her tone dropped to a threatening tone just for that word.

Inside the Jewel, my ancestors were whispering up a storm. Things like, “Huh? She’s helping?” and “That’s unexpected,” or “She’s kinda freaking me out,” and “She definitely has auntie’s blood.”

The sixth was the only one who stayed out of the conversation, fearfully muttering, “Sh-She’s just like my wives.”

They were all whispering because Shannon was watching. Perhaps they

thought she'd spot them if they raised too much of a ruckus. But right now, Shannon was looking at Miranda, not me.

Miranda was staring at me with all seriousness. "Do you really understand? I am going to support you with everything I have. What's your answer, Lyle?"

I straightened my back and replied, "Y-Yes! I'll seduce her with all I've got!"

"Very good. For starters, let's gather everyone up and have a strategy meeting."

Out of everything, Shannon's weirded-out face left the strongest impression. "Huh? We're seriously getting everyone in on this?"

It frustrated me that we were on the same page. But I agreed with her on that one.



## Chapter 111: Sea Monsters

“Hello, Vera. Lovely weather we’re having today.”

The ship’s deck was bathed in strong sunlight as I cheerfully called out to Vera. She turned to me, parasol in hand, sending me a bit of a fed-up look. It was as if the words “You again?” were written all over her face.

“Lyle, you’re doing a splendid job learning absolutely nothing. Unfortunately, my answer to your support request is still a resounding no. No matter how many times you ask me, I don’t show any favoritism when it comes to business.”

“Oh, don’t be like that. I never said anything about support.”

Since that day, I hadn’t said a word about support to Vera. However, she’d clearly seen right through me and knew full well why I was approaching her.

“Once I refuse to support them, they always try to cozy up to me. I’ve met plenty of people like that before. I’m sorry to say that I turned them all down. Besides, even if I agreed, papa—my father wouldn’t. In business, he’s not one to show mercy. Not even to his own daughter. Family or not, he’s someone who prioritizes profits.”

“It didn’t look like that to me.”

“Yes, he might be sweet on me and my sister, but he’s still one of Baym’s top merchants. He’s not soft. In fact, they say he’d be perfect if not for us.”

She was right about that. Seeing him dote so heavily on his daughters was practically watching him show off his weakness to the world.

Fully aware that Vera had seen through my motives, I continued the conversation.

“I’ve given up on getting support. Now, I just want to put all that aside and get to know you better.”

She put on a smile at my proposal. A very clearly manufactured smile. “Oh,

how sweet—I might have considered playing along if you hadn't outed yourself from the get-go."

She'd already put up a wall between us. Seducing her seemed impossible at this point. Even so, I continued talking to her because Miranda and the others had instructed me to.

"Ouch. That stings, but very well. Could I at least have permission to talk to you now and then?"

"If I'm bored. But, Lyle, don't forget to do your job."

"Why of course. I may not look like it, but I'm a rather competent adventurer."

"Are you really? Don't think I don't know that your comrades have been sick in bed since day one."

Perhaps having so many bedridden comrades made me look unreliable.

"I'm also personally competent."

"I'll have to see you in action before I make the call. But you might not get the chance."

"What do you mean?"

We were passing through what was rumored to be a very dangerous patch of ocean, yet Vera and her sailors didn't seem the least bit concerned. It bothered me.

"Do you have something to go off of? Before we set out, I heard we'd be passing through some dangerous waters."

"Are you talking about those merchant ships that sank? It's concerning, but we've made preparations for that."

Since I'd found a good conversation starter, I pressed her for more details. "Preparations? Could you tell me more? I think I should know a few things, seeing as I'm working as a guard."

"It's not like we're hiding anything. This ship is—"

But just as Vera was about to explain, in came Roland, the nuisance.

“What are you doing there?!” he demanded, strutting over. He looked flustered as he stood in front of Vera and glared at me. But he was doing it purely out of goodwill, so I couldn’t exactly blame him for it.

“Hey, Roland.”

“I told you not to get close to Lady Vera, didn’t I?” Roland said.

Vera looked a little pleased. If I wasn’t imagining things, it seemed she had a thing for Roland.

“You’re overreacting. I was just making small talk with Lyle.”

“Please consider your position, milady. And you too. How many warnings must I give you?”

I gave up on continuing the conversation with Vera, shrugged, and walked off with a wave of my hand. “I’ll be more careful next time.”

“Please take my words more seriously!”

Even though I made my way out, Roland chased after me, matching my pace. Walking beside me, he began to lecture. “Listen, you and Lady Vera are in completely different positions. If you’re trying to get close to her for financial support, you should stop while you’re ahead... The boss shows no mercy to any man who dares approach his daughters.”

Though he tried to reprimand me, he started to lose steam halfway through. He seemed to be getting bummed out by his own words.

I stopped and asked, “Is there something going on between you and Vera?”

Roland looked surprised for a moment. But quickly, he shook his head. “Me? Definitely not. I’m Lady Gina’s attendant. I’m only on this ship right now because of Lady Vera’s kindness.”

Roland didn’t seem to have any special feelings for Vera. But there seemed to be more to it. I tried digging a bit deeper.

“Lady Gina? As I recall... She’s the second daughter of House Tres, right?”

“I used to do minor work for the firm up until Lady Gina took me in. There was a time when I served under Lady Vera too.” Roland hung his head as he spoke.

“I was doing odd jobs around the port when Lady Gina took a liking to me and hired me as her attendant. Thanks to her, my pay has gone up a good deal.”

Bemused, the sixth head said, “Sounds like a class-spanning romance to me.”

The other heads were less impressed, especially the seventh.

“He doesn’t know his place. That Gina girl should go looking for someone more appropriate for her standing.”

He seemed unable to understand a relationship that put more emphasis on love than anything else. Despite his attitude, he married my grandmother for love. Sure, their social standings were a good match as well, but it apparently caused some trouble at the time.

“Are you really saying that? Didn’t you marry Zenoah for love?”

“W-We both had something to gain from it.”

“You’re always like that. Putting yourself on a pedestal while nagging me over every little thing.”

“I don’t want to hear it from you!”

The sixth and seventh began fighting, so I decided to ignore the voices coming from the Jewel.

Roland was an obstacle when it came to wooing Vera. But...maybe, just maybe, we could actually get along.

Roland heaved a deep sigh. “Anyways, just stay away from Lady Vera, okay?”

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A few days ago, Miranda had told me to share the news about how Vera had refused to provide any support. And in a room with all my comrades, I’d been completely surrounded.

“Seducing a merchant’s daughter for funding?” Aria said, her spear propped against her shoulder. “You’re getting up to some nasty things, Lyle.”

Aria was a cheerful, upstanding girl who despised this kind of thing. Seducing a wealthy woman to get her to fork over some money? That was an inexcusable move only absolute scum would think up.

Sophia gripped her battle-axe in both hands, her face stiff. “To think you were off on your own doing something so shameless... You’re the worst.”

What could I even say to that? If I didn’t make sure they understood it wasn’t my true intention, I’d end up being seen as scum forever.

“No, even I thought it was a bad idea. But I didn’t see any other options, so I thought I’d give it a shot.”

Clara—though she stared at me coldly—calmly assessed my actions. “Indeed, securing support from Tres Firm will resolve our issues on the financial side.”

Considering what was to come, our financial issues needed to be addressed.

Eva—who’d heard it all out with a smile—spoke up. Her words were laced with sarcasm. “A guy who seduces a woman he doesn’t love just to get her money? He’d be the villain in most stories.”

*A-A villain. I know I was told to become one, but I don’t want to be this sort of villain.*

For a while now, the Jewel had remained silent. Until finally...

“Oh? What’s this? Isn’t everyone a little scary today?”

“This was bound to happen as soon as they heard about the plan.”

“That’s why I wanted to get it done in secret. Well, they would have found out eventually.”

The third through fifth heads spoke out, while the sixth remained silent.

“Miranda’s approval is really complicating things,” the seventh capped it off.

Some of my comrades despised the idea of seducing Vera, while others, like Miranda, offered their earnest support. While I was being cornered, May—sitting on a wooden crate in the corner—sent me an amused look.

“Aww, what’s the big deal? A strong male attracts a lot of females. It’s natural. And when he’s already got so many, one more isn’t going to change much.”

Despite her human appearance, May was a qilin with a different set of values. She cackled away, bathed in the weary eyes of the four women surrounding

me.

In the opposite corner, Thelma, Shannon, and Gaston were watching me in disbelief.

Thelma looked utterly disappointed in me. “Trading lovers for money... I don’t condone it. A relationship between a man and woman should be purer than that.”

“Well, the world is filled with political marriages and loveless marriages,” Gaston chimed in with a sigh. “Unfortunate as it is.”

*Wait, why is Shannon over with them?*

“Lyle’s the worst, what else is new? Hey, Thelma, you want some sweets? Monica prepared them.”

“Hm? Oh, sure. I’ll take some.”

Shannon seemed keen on looking after Thelma, or rather doting on her. Seeing that Thelma’s mood had stabilized somewhat, perhaps it was best to leave it in her hands.

Realizing the conversation was going nowhere, Miranda clapped her hands to gather everyone’s attention.

“Now, now, you’ve condemned him enough. He already reflected and gave up before he even began.”

Though she was defending me, Miranda was unfortunately on board with the plan.

“We need Tres Firm’s support, right? It can just be temporary. If we can maintain it until we reclaim Zayin, we can search for another option from there.”

And surprisingly—no, was it even surprising at all?—Novem, who was usually at odds with Miranda, also approved. Here I was, hoping she’d be against it.

“I looked into it, and Ms. Vera is a wise and courageous woman. She has the qualifications to marry Lord Lyle, so there I see no issue with seducing her.”

*Yeah...she’s a little off as per usual.*

The qualifications to marry me—Novem was still dragging along House Walt's marriage precepts that the family had upheld for generations.

"Err, I don't think this has anything to do with marriage, does it?" I grumbled.

Novem strongly reasserted her stance. "It has everything to do with marriage! If you put your hands on her, it is only natural that you take responsibility. Using someone and discarding them is unthinkable. Even if you must part ways, it must not be done in any way that leaves lingering resentment."

"Y-Yes, ma'am."





As I was being pressured by her heated enthusiasm, the voices of my ancestors resounded from the Jewel. They weren't directed at me but rather at the sixth head, who'd been silent for a long while.

"You heard her."

"It's not right to avoid responsibility."

"You were terrible. You might be dead already, but reflect on it."

"Lyle is one thing, but this is one lecture I think you need to hear."

The sixth was surely frustrated, but after all he'd done, it was hard for him to argue back.

"Y-You lot, you've done plenty of bad things in your day."

Ignoring the chatter from the Jewel, I turned my attention back to the matter at hand.

"The thing is, I already failed. Vera saw through my intentions, and with all eyes on me, I can't get any closer to her."

When I suggested giving up on the plan, Monica tilted her head.

"Oh? Are you giving up?"

"Whether I give up or not, it seems impossible now."

"Is that so? Miranda seems eager to proceed. Isn't that why you gathered us all to ask for our cooperation?"

Our eyes gathered on Miranda again.

"Naturally," she said with a smile. "If we're going to do this, we're going to do it seriously. Lyle, you will make Vera fall for you. You have our support. And I'll start gathering information too."

"Considering what's to come, Tres support will be a massive boon," Novem agreed. "I approve as well, and I won't hold back on cooperation. Let's do our best together, milord."

I was at a loss on how to reply to her smile.

"Y-Yeah," was all I could muster in reply.

Surely everyone was wondering if this was truly the way to go, but Miranda and even Novem were on board. They seemed to have lost the will to oppose it.

Miranda addressed the whole party: “If we’re doing it, we’re giving our all.”

\*\*\*

A few days later, I returned to the room after parting ways with Roland, and shared my results.

Scratching the back of my head and giving a sheepish smile, I told them, “It didn’t work out.”

As soon as I said that, Aria let out a deep sigh.

“What are you even doing?”

“Hey, I told you it’s not going to happen. Maybe there was a chance at the start, but at this point, Vera knows what I’m up to.”

It was no secret that I was only after her money.

*Given the circumstances, isn’t it impossible to turn this around?*

Currently, the room was occupied by Aria—alongside Shannon, May, Thelma, and Gaston. The others had gone out to gather information.

Aria still couldn’t move much, owing to her seasickness. Her face was pale as she heard me out; her expression was strangely understanding.

“If you’d just told us from the start, things might have gone differently.”

I did regret not sharing the plan with them sooner. *But please, just think about it for a moment.*

“What was I supposed to tell someone? Hey, I want Vera’s money, so help me seduce her?”

Aria thought for a moment, then shook her head. “I’d have definitely punched you. And I’d lose a bit of respect.”

“I know, right? It was doomed from the start.”

“Look, I’m fine with giving up. But Lyle. Behind you.”

“Huh?”

I turned to find Miranda. Her eyes were cold as she stared me down.

“Lyle, I told you to get serious, didn’t I?”

“Miranda?! Well, you see. Some things in this world just aren’t meant to be. For starters, it’s not like I have a knack for charming women or anything.”

*I’ve never even seduced anyone before.*

Miranda seemed to understand this. By the sound of her voice, she hadn’t placed much hope on me. “At the very least, have some conviction. Still, it’s troublesome that we haven’t run into any trouble yet. Can’t a monster hurry up and attack us already?”

Aria shrugged at her ominous suggestion. “And what then? You want Lyle to beat it up and show off how reliable he is? Do you think that’s enough to make her fall?”

“I’d say there’s a possibility. Worst case, even if she doesn’t fall in love, she might still recognize his skill. Falling for him would be ideal, of course.”

Why was she so adamant about making her fall?

“If I just need to show off my strength, then is there really a need for me to seduce her?”

“Well, if no monsters show up and you don’t get any opportunities to prove yourself, you’ll be left with no way to appeal to her. We have to give it everything we’ve got.”

We were gathered as guards. If we didn’t prove our worth, our services wouldn’t be called for again. Our reputation would remain at rock bottom.

I gave my honest feelings on the matter. “I’m a little anxious about fighting at sea.”

“It’s not like I have any experience either,” Miranda agreed, “but if we can’t overcome this, liberating Zayin will be a distant dream.” She lowered her voice as she glanced over at Thelma, who was talking to Shannon.

Thelma seemed to be in slightly better spirits, but she hadn’t yet regained her determination to take back Zayin as its holy maiden.

*We'll have to watch over her for a little longer.*

Aria, as she looked at Thelma, seemed to be close to giving up. "Wouldn't it be better to let her be free?" she asked.

And though Miranda sympathized somewhat, she shook her head. "We can't. She has assassins on her tail. Are you going to abandon her when she could be killed at any moment? She has nowhere to run—none of us do."

At Miranda's words, an image of Ceres's face crossed my mind.

I was gathering strength to face off against her once she eventually made her move.

"Let's put our heads together and—"

Before I could suggest coming up with another way—whether it involved seduction or not—the deafening, ear-rending sound of a bell resounded through the ship.

"Enemy attack!" a voice called from the speaking tube. "Enemy attack! Adventurers, grab your weapons and get to the deck! The monsters are coming."

Aria blinked, startled. The monster attack we'd just been talking about had happened right away; she seemed to find it far too convenient.

"Speak of the devil, as they say."

We hurriedly got our gear in order and rushed out of the room.

As we burst out on deck, we were greeted by the sight of adventurers and sailors scrambling around to get to their stations. Everyone was armed.

Clambering over the rails were humanoid figures with glossy skin ranging from blue to green. Their fingers were webbed, while fins ran down various parts of their bodies. They were like strange amalgamations of humans and aquatic creatures.

With their naturally hunched backs, they seemed to be around human height at a glance. But straightened out, they would be at a towering two meters tall or more. Their bodies and limbs were thicker than an adult man's, and each of them carried a harpoon-like weapon.

If we were just going off of appearance, they seemed to possess incredible brute strength.

A sailor, holding up what looked like a gun with a knife fastened to the tip, observed the monsters and cried out, “It’s a school of sahuagin! Keep them at range!”

The seventh head was practically buzzing with excitement at the sight of the guns the sailors used.

“Oooh! Guns at last! And those knives... I see, you can use them like spears when the bullets run out!”

This was presumably a weapon that hadn’t existed in the seventh’s time.

As I drew my saber to join the fray, Miranda raised her voice in surprise. “Hey, what’s that little lady doing out here?”

Aria, still pale-faced, made a move to rush out and help Vera.

“For now, I’ll—!”

But she was still unaccustomed to the movements of the ship. The swaying deck made her unsteady, and it was far too different from fighting on land.

Meanwhile, Vera folded up her parasol and handed it to a nearby sailor. “This is my favorite. Make sure you take good care of it.”

“Aye!”

Despite their captain—a delicate young lady—entering the battle, the sailors didn’t seem too concerned.

The third head caught on to something. “Those sailors have better moves than most of the adventurers. And...Vera is strong.”

With her hands freed from the parasol, Vera reached around to a holster on her lower back and pulled out a golden pistol. A heavily ornamented handgun that looked rather weighty.

She pointed it at one of the sahuagin; the moment she had the muzzle trained on its head, she pulled the trigger.

Immediately, its head was blown off and the monster fell to the deck.

The seventh simply couldn't take his eyes off his weapon.

Excitedly, he explained, "A revolver! And it's got to be a Demonic Tool with that power output. Very nice. Very nice indeed! Guns are definitely the weapon of the new era!"

He was so terribly noisy.

But leaving everything to Vera and her sailors would defeat the purpose of our job as guards.

"Miranda, Aria, we're joining in."

Miranda nodded and glanced at Aria. She wasn't moving too well with her seasickness, and it seemed Miranda was ready to support her.

"Aria, don't push yourself."

"S-Sorry."

Forced to fight on the unsteady deck, we locked on to the encroaching sahuagin and took up the challenge. Yet the ship lurched just as I took a step forward, throwing off my charge.

"Tsk!"

When I swung my saber, the sahuagin intercepted it with its harpoon. My blade chipped.

"Another one ruined."

I'd been aiming to slice it down without these complications, but fighting on uneven ground made that difficult.

Miranda shot strings from her fingertips, binding my foe's movements.

"Now!"

"Thanks!"

Now that it was immobilized, I quickly plunged my blade into its flesh and quickly backed off. And just as I thought I'd finally taken down one of them, I saw quite the astounding scene overtaking my surroundings.

The adventurers were struggling to maintain their advantage. But compared

to them, the sailors were putting up a splendid fight. They used long guns furnished with knives, their fights ending with gunfire and the occasional thrust. And the one putting in the most work was Vera.

She moved freely all across the deck, expertly wielding her revolver. She was systematically mowing down the sahuagin, hitting a vital with each shot, but—  
“Not good!”

She eventually ran out of bullets. I was about to rush out to help her, but a sailor stopped me.

“It’s fine. Forget about the captain, and focus on keeping yourself safe.”

“Huh?”

The sailors made no attempt to save her. They weren’t abandoning her; they seemed to have complete faith that she would be just fine.

A group of sahuagin swarmed her now that she was defenseless. Some raised their harpoons for a swing, others pulled theirs back for a stab. And in the moments that followed, Vera nimbly evaded every attack, sliding between their legs to freedom.

Aria’s eyes widened as she watched Vera pull off such a tricky performance on the unstable deck.

“You’re kidding me!”

Miranda and I were just as surprised.

Shooting to her feet, Vera expelled the spent casings with an experienced hand and deftly loaded fresh rounds. As soon as she was done, she resumed shooting down the sahuagin swarming her.

It was Vera who took down the very last foe on deck.

Her right hand kept a firm grip on her revolver; she pointed around with her left hand while barking out orders.

“They’ll climb up again. Drive them back!”

“Got it! Hey, adventurers, get an eyeful of this!”

*What are they doing now?*

As I was lost in thought, the adventurers by the handrails started to make a commotion.

I went to see what they were so worked up about, and saw that cannons had emerged from the side of the ship. They were longer and thinner than the ones I was familiar with.

“They improved the cannons too?” the seventh gasped. “A mere merchant house has access to these?”

“Huh? What’s so different about them?” asked the third.

I wasn’t too sure either, but the seventh head couldn’t elaborate. By then, Vera had approached us. She already had her parasol out again.

“Mind your ears, you three,” she said.

Under the shade of her parasol, Vera stared down at the sahuagin that were peeking up from the water’s surface.

“There’s an awful lot of them today.”

The monsters wasted little time in resuming their attempts to climb up the side of the ship—until suddenly, there was a thunderous roar.

Boom after boom, the sounds of successive explosions filled the air. The cannons on the ship’s broadside were breathing fire; I could see the splashes of shots hitting the water in the distance.

“You’re telling me they can reach that far?”

It was one surprise after the next for the seventh.

The cannons’ roar and the columns of water were enough to scare the sahuagin into a hasty retreat.

Aria sat on the deck, covering her ears with her hands.

“Uuurgh, my ears hurt.”

And Miranda, though similarly aching, began counting the cannons.

“You’re packing quite a lot of them.”

Vera glanced at me. While we were struggling with the noise, she seemed



quite used to it.

“I believe I told Lyle already. There are many dangers at sea, so we’ve taken precautions to protect ourselves. Monsters aren’t the only threat; there are pirates too,” she explained with a smile.

But therein lay the question. “Huh? Then why did you need guards?”

“We don’t strictly need you, but I’d feel bad if I put all the burden on the sailors. Plus, the more hands, the better.”

*I’m starting to doubt if we were ever needed at all.*

Still, Vera offered us some praise. “You all did pretty good. If you can fight that well on an unfamiliar ship, you’ll be as good as you are on land in no time,” she said before leaving with a wave of her hand.

We stood there, dumbfounded as Novem and the others—who’d been fighting elsewhere—approached.

“Are you all right, milord?!”

Novem rushed to me with concern. But behind her—Eva and Clara both looked like they were dying.

“We’re fine. How are things on your end?”

Novem gave a troubled laugh. “No one’s injured. But, err...moving around made the seasickness worse.”

Eva and Clara were teary-eyed—yes, even Clara, who rarely showed emotion, looked like she was about to burst into tears.

“I-I just want to return to land... I miss the solid earth.”

Eva was in a similar state, holding her hands over her mouth.

“I-I’m never going on a boat ag—urp!”

We did our best to assist them.

As for Vera, she didn’t seem fatigued at all as she continued to give orders from the deck.

As I stowed my saber away, I gave up on the idea of proving my worth in

monster slaying.

“No matter how strong I am, it’s not going to impress anyone here,” I muttered.

“Did you say something, milord?”

“Well, I was thinking I could prove my worth to Vera as an adventurer. But, now I’m not so sure. She and the sailors are just too strong.”

A few minor achievements wouldn’t get me any recognition.

*This is bad. I can’t think of anything... Am I at a dead end here?*

## Chapter 112: The Sixth's Memory

As soon as we returned to the room, Eva and Clara collapsed from their worsening seasickness. Even Aria looked drained, likely from pushing her body too hard.

As she tended to the three of them, Monica let out a loud sigh. "What a sad state the world is in when I have to look after someone apart from my useless chicken."

"Just shut up and work."

"So cruel! What a cruel waste of chicken life you are! But that's why I love you."

Her theatrics got her stern glares from the seasick trio.

"G-Give me medicine," Eva groaned, grabbing Monica's ankle.

Monica scoffed. "Fresh out, unfortunately. I only prepared enough for the chicken, so there's none left to go around."

Eva looked devastated—so devastated I had to look away out of sympathy.

Sophia, turning away, opted to change the topic. "That aside, Vera and her crew were very strong. They seem very well-versed in fighting on a ship, and they might even be stronger than us in this environment."

Hearing that, May sulkily piped up, "I wish I could have seen it. If you guys didn't lock me in here, I could've been out there, making history."

"Indeed," Monica agreed, "if we had been out there, we could have shown off this chicken dickwad's true power."

May and Monica drew too much attention, and not in a good way. I didn't doubt their strength, but May was a qilin—a divine beast. If I let her do as she pleased, we risked sinking the boat. As for Monica—she was just incomprehensible. It was safer to keep her inside.

"Anyway, leaving the two troublemakers aside..." I said, attempting to put an

end to that conversation and get us back on track. “To be honest, seducing her seems impossible at this point. And even proving our strength will be tough so long as we’re out at sea. Sahuagin, was it? Given how easily Vera and her crew were dealing with them, I doubt they’re expecting much from us.”

She’d acknowledged us somewhat, but considering how the head of the Tres family treated us—or rather, treated me—before we left, our prospects of any future cooperation seemed awfully slim.

Miranda, perhaps sharing my thoughts, couldn’t see a solution either. “We’ll need to think of some other way in.”

Novem sank into her thoughts. She pressed her fist to her lips and muttered to herself. “If it’s stronger than a sahuagin, or maybe...”

*What’s she thinking about?*

Then Sophia, unable to come up with anything either, jokingly said, “We’re not getting anywhere by thinking about it. Perhaps the issue is that you failed from the start, Lyle? When courting a lady, you must appear as dashing as a knight and speak as intelligently as a gentleman. Oh, why don’t you give that a go?”

At first, I wasn’t sure what she was on about. But she was talking about how to woo someone.

“Like a knight? Do you think I can do it?”

“Please don’t respond so seriously. It’s just a joke. But still, you can’t help but admire knights.”

*So a knight rather than a prince on a white horse, huh?*

As I pictured the scene, Monica joined the conversation.

“If I was dealing with this useless chicken, I’d accept his proposal the moment it left his lips. You flesh-and-blood women are far too demanding. Oh, but... If you really want to seduce me, I would appreciate it if you dressed up like a baby and let me tend to all your needs.”

Watching her blush and wriggle in excitement, I coldly spat, “Not on my life.”

“Come ooon! I’m already making so many compromises here!”

Why in the world would I have to dress like a baby? And before that, the baby stuff was her compromising...? Monica was definitely broken.

I tried to change the topic, but the women had begun heatedly discussing how they wanted to be courted. Even Miranda was contemplating it.

“For me, I think all I’d need is sincerity,” said Miranda. “Even if he doesn’t say much. A simple ‘Come with me’ would be enough.”

Sophia listened seriously and nodded. “That’s a surprise. I thought you’d have higher standards, Miranda.”

Meanwhile, Shannon and Thelma were talking in another corner.

“I need me a prince riding a white horse! What about you, Thelma?”

“M-Me? Yes, well... I won’t ask for much. I just want someone who will let me live a peaceful, quiet life. Someone who’ll tell me I don’t have to try so hard anymore.”

Her true feelings were on full display. *Do you really hate being holy maiden that much?*

Even Eva and Clara, who were down and out, joined the conversation. They were weakened from seasickness and fatigued, and perhaps that was why they were letting out thoughts they usually kept to themselves.

Eva had her own ideal sort of confession.

“I-I absolutely want to be confessed to onstage. It has to be with the sort of lines you’ll hear in a play. And the more spectators...the better.”

*So she wants a live audience? Elves really do love to stand out.*

Clara was just as particular as Eva.

“A bookstore... Surrounded by shelves upon shelves of books, with lines from a classic we both adore. It should be something most people wouldn’t understand. But the two of us would know exactly what it meant...”

Her weakened state of mind had her let slip the fantasies she usually kept to herself.

Before I knew it, the conversation had turned into a discussion on how each

of them wanted to be confessed to. Just as I thought things were getting out of hand, I heard the fifth head's fretful voice from the Jewel.

"Lyle—write this down."

*Huh?*

"Just do it. Jot it all down. You'll need it eventually. Actually, just memorize it for now. You'll absolutely need it."

*What is he so afraid of? All I see is everyone having a lively chat.*

\*\*\*

That night, as everyone settled into their beds, I sent my mind into the Jewel.

My goal? To train.

Inside the Jewel, I could fight with the heads of House Walt. No matter how grave my injuries, I would immediately regenerate, so I could keep pushing myself through a succession of impossible battles.

I couldn't physically train my body, nor did I develop any muscle memory. But I could at least accumulate combat experience.

"Come on! What's wrong? What's wrong?!"

Today's opponent was the sixth head.

Swinging around a sizable halberd, the sixth head was a massive man who had an edge over me in physique. I felt pressured just standing before him.

He swung his halberd down at me, and I dodged to the side, quickly judging that I wouldn't be able to block it with my saber. After my side step, I intended to get into striking distance with my saber, but in the next instant, his boot was closing in on my face.

"Crap!"

"Still too soft."

I rolled along the ground after eating his kick. "Urgh!"

As I scrambled to get up, the halberd blade was already pressing against my throat.

“And that’s the match.”

He let out a hearty laugh as he slung the halberd over his back. His large frame paired well with the weapon and gave him an admirable aura of strength.

“I lose,” I admitted, taking his offered hand to get back on my feet.

Just like this, I’d been challenging my ancestors almost every night but I hadn’t won a single fight. Everyone from the third to the seventh—they were all so strong that I was losing over and over again.

As the sixth head stabbed the halberd into the ground, the weapon faded away. We were in a world of memories where weapons could be summoned and dismissed at will.

“Hey, you’ve gotten pretty strong.”

I couldn’t bring myself to accept his compliment. After all, I’d just lost again, and all these losses were starting to wear on my confidence.

“I still can’t beat any of you. Yet again, it’s nothing but losses today,” I replied. If I hadn’t lost count, I’d already been bested six times tonight.

“Well, we’ve been at it for a lot longer than you. It wouldn’t look good if we lost too easily.”

“For a long time, huh? Speaking of which, you were in military service longer than anyone else in the house.”

“Aren’t I amazing?!”

In the history of House Walt, the sixth head—Fiennes Walt—was known as a tried-and-true warrior. He took part in countless battles and always fought his way to victory. He was known for expanding the territory by a significant margin.

Indeed, he was a man who’d led an army to perform incredible feats.

“From what I’ve heard, you really made a name for House Walt. Especially in military matters.”

“Military matters, eh? I sense some cynicism there. But, well... It’s not a mistake.”

“Huh?”

“Lyle, why do you think I was so successful on the battlefield?”

“Because you’re strong. Both individually, and as a leader? Is that not it?”

My image of the sixth was that of a tactician skilled at scheming nasty strategies. Combined with his personal strength, I could see him being a terror on the battlefield.

“As an individual, sure, I was strong. Right now, I’m confident I won’t lose to my old man. With that said—the real strength came from that old man... The fifth head.”

“Huh?”

His usual boisterous demeanor faded, replaced with a somewhat sad smile.

“Lyle, what do you think about my relationship with my old man?”

I recalled how the two of them would always be at each other’s throats when I saw them in memories. It wasn’t like that in the Jewel; here, while they’d still bicker, it never felt like they were really on bad terms. It was hard to make the call.

“It’s complicated.”

“Then let me show you something.”

With that, the scene in the sixth head’s world of memories shifted. We were now somewhere in the Walt estate.

The door to the office was violently thrown open as the sixth head—a younger Fiennes Walt—stormed in.

“What the hell are you doing, old man?!”

He closed in on the fifth—middle-aged Fredriks—who was doing paperwork at his desk, and slammed both his hands on the table.

This scattered the papers, but Fiennes didn’t seem to care. Fredriks took him on with an exasperated sigh.

“You’ll have to be more specific. Don’t assume I always know what you’re angry about.”



“It’s about Erun! What insanity led you to marry her off to that family?!”

Erun—that was the name of one of Fiennes’s younger sisters. The house he brought up was a baronet house that had long been at odds with House Walt. They were smaller in scale, yet there never seemed to be an end to the skirmishes between both sides.

“Soon, they will serve under us as vassals. Is it wrong to establish blood ties by sending a daughter?”

Around that time, House Walt had been actively marrying off sons and daughters to various other houses. More and more noble families were being linked by blood ties.

“You really think they’ll listen to a word you say?! They’ve done nothing but mock us as upstarts! They’ve made us swallow insult after insult! Have you ever stopped for a second to think about how they’re going to treat Erun?!”

They’d been so hostile for many long years. What would happen if House Walt sent a girl for a political marriage? If they were rational about it, then all would be well. But they weren’t that sort of house, and that was why Fiennes was so furious.

“I know. I sent her with full knowledge of that. Their territory is a key location in the area. Small, but troublesome. We need to bring them under our control.”

Fredriks seemed fully aware of the situation. Yet still, he chose to send his daughter there.

“Just the kind of reasoning I’d expect for someone who loves his beasts more than his children! If that’s the case, then just wipe ‘em off the map! You know how much they’ve tormented Walt territory! They’re enemies, goddess-dammit!”

“We don’t have the time to deal with them right now. We have other enemies to worry about. We can’t start unnecessary wars without good reason.”

At the time, House Walt was surrounded by enemies on all sides. From small baronet houses to barons and viscounts, they all detested the up-and-coming House Walt. As a result, they couldn’t spare the manpower to invade the territory in question.

“Enough! What’d I even expect from you?!”

Fiennes’s footsteps boomed as he stomped out of the room.

Watching his back, Fredriks muttered, “As it should be.”

The door shut.

“That was, um...quite harsh.”

“Terrible, right? Can you blame me for how I turned out?”

I didn’t know how to feel after witnessing that moment between the sixth and fifth. The fifth’s decision made sense from a noble’s perspective, but as a person, I wanted to support the sixth.

The memory accelerated, speeding to a point three years in the future.

The sixth head had a repentant look on his face. “It would’ve been easier if I could just hate the man.”

A great many people had gathered in the same office as before. Most notable was a woman who had crumpled to the floor in tears. She wore a tattered dress as she made a plea to Fredriks.

“I am not a tool! I am no tool of yours! Once I gave birth to a child, they took him away from me. I couldn’t even raise my own child. They treated me like a servant! If I resisted, they threw me into the stables! Even after all of that, you expect me to shut up and obey?”

The crying woman was Erun. Fredriks’s daughter, and Fiennes’s sister. She was the woman who’d been married off to the hostile baronet house.

The sixth head crossed his arms and explained the situation: “We must have been pretty hated. Erun received unimaginable treatment at the house she married into. She barely escaped with her life.”

Erun wept, begging to see her child.

“It hurts to watch.”

“It does.”

As the sixth head fell silent, the brothers—especially Fiennes—erupted in rage. His hair stood on end, the veins on his forehead bulging out.

“You’re just going to stay silent? Say something, old man!”

Fredriks stared at his enraged son Fiennes in silence. The other brothers raised their voices, but Fredriks simply shifted his eyes to his beaten daughter, still without a word.

“What was the fifth head thinking?” I asked the sixth.

He scratched his head—embarrassed that he didn’t have the answer.

“I don’t know. Even now. Maybe he didn’t want to think about anything.”

Mad with fury, Fiennes grabbed Fredriks by the lapels, lifting the smaller man off the floor.

“You seriously want us to stay silent after this?” demanded Fiennes. “Aren’t you the one who taught us that a noble is done for if they’re made to play the fool?! If you won’t do anything, I’ll kill you and take over! And I’ll save my sister!”

His brothers shouted out in agreement, united as one in their hatred of Fredriks. The sixth head watched on with sorrowful eyes. The man I saw before me was almost a completely different person from the fifth head I knew.

“Fifth...” I called out, pointless as it was.

This was a memory. I couldn’t interfere, and my voice wouldn’t reach him. But Fredriks smiled ever so slightly.

He couldn’t have been smiling at me, surely. But for some reason, it felt like my heart stopped.

“You fools. It took you long enough,” Fredriks said as he grabbed Fiennes’s hand and applied a joint lock. Unable to bear the pain, Fiennes was forced to release his grip, and Fredriks dropped back to the floor.

He gave a command.

“We’re heading out. Gather every soldier we can muster, and march on the house that spat in our face.”

And with those words, Fredriks left the room.

The scene changed. We were standing before a town whose walls were made

of thick logs lined up side by side.

“Where are we now?”

I turned my head to take in the sights, but the place was unfamiliar to me.

The sixth head glared at the town. “This place? It’s the town of those bastards that treated my little sister like livestock.”

Even now, the memory seemed to infuriate him.

“From what I heard, they hated us for rising up in the world. We were both baronet houses in the third head’s time, but the Walts kept climbing higher.”

Jealousy had festered as House Walt continued to grow in influence.

“Did they really turn hostile over something like that?”

“Indeed they did. It began as petty harassment, but it escalated from there. The minor stuff that started in the fourth head’s time had them raiding our village when my old man was the one in charge. It got so bad they were wreaking havoc all over our land.”

As the years went by, jealousy gradually turned itself into full-blown hatred.

“That’s terrible.”

“It’s common enough. We should’ve crushed them earlier, but the fourth and fifth head just didn’t have the time to deal with them.”

So they allowed an enemy to swim free, eventually marrying a Walt daughter into their family to reconcile.

“But isn’t that strange? If they took her in as a bride, shouldn’t that have changed how they interacted with us?”

“What’s common sense to you is someone else’s absurdity. And to them, their idea of ‘normal’ was to treat Erun like shit. You’ll only get hurt if you think everyone thinks the same way you do.”

After some time, the sixth said, “They’re here.” An army appeared to surround the town.

Armed and in formation, the troops advanced from the roads to the east, west, south, and north.

Thousands of knights and soldiers had mustered to take down a single town.

They were flying the banners of House Walt. No, there were some other flags among them—but every unit looked near identical. Their equipment and formation could easily have me mistaking one army for another.

“Are they Walt soldiers?”

“That’s right... That’s the army my old man built up.”

“The fifth?”

From the town’s size, there couldn’t have been more than a few hundred knights and soldiers. Yet House Walt surrounded it with a force ten times in number. It almost looked like they were taking things too far.

The sixth head started walking, his sights set on the main camp of the Walt army.

A tent had been set up, and inside were Fredriks, Fiennes—and all their other siblings.

Before them stood a man, presumably a messenger from the town. The messenger was trembling with fear, desperately pleading with them.

“House Walt’s anger is perfectly justified! But still—but still! If you could trust us this once and make us vassals of House Walt, we would serve you like loyal horses and dogs! Please reconsider!”

Fredriks rose from his chair, approached the messenger, and spoke in a voice as cold as ice. “Go back and tell your master. We are generous lords. He can have one day to prepare for battle. Take him away.”

The messenger was led out of the tent.

Fiennes watched with a face still twisted in anger. He still seemed dissatisfied.

*What was going through his mind at that moment?* I wondered as I glanced at the sixth head.

“Oh, it’s one of those things. I couldn’t trust my old man yet, see. After all he’d done. I wanted to attack ’em immediately and wipe them out. To barge straight in, get the baby, and let Erun wrap her arms around him.”

The sixth head looked embarrassed as he reflected on his past self.

Time passed; night fell.

There was a ruckus brewing outside the tent. I stepped out with the sixth—to see a town on fire. A portion was in flames. Yet the armies of House Walt hadn't made their move yet.

"Wh-What happened?"

The sixth head answered so calmly I couldn't read his emotions.

"The townsfolk, driven by fear, turned on their lord. Rather than dying like this, they probably thought they'd be better off killing the lord to save themselves."

It was so far away I couldn't see what was happening, but it still sent a chill down my spine.

Fredriks and Fiennes walked out and watched the lord's manor burn.

"They're really making a show of it."

"What are you standing around for, old man?! Your grandson might be dead in there!"

Before Fiennes could fly off in a rage, a man emerged from the dark. The man was cradling a baby in his arms. Seeing this, Fredriks gave an order.

"Get my daughter," he told a subordinate.

The woman who'd been crying earlier was brought in. The moment she saw the baby, she embraced him and began to sob.

It did seem Fredriks had made the arrangements to save the child.

"Was...the fifth head the one who incited the townsfolk?"

I had to wonder—was the riot that broke out in town instigated on Fredriks's orders?

The sixth let out a deep sigh. "Who knows? He never said. At least, he did what he could to save his grandson."

The scene changed to morning; a messenger arrived from the town to signal

their surrender.

It was the same man from the day before.

He knelt before Fredriks. A bundle wrapped in bloody cloth lay in front of him.

“Please! Please let this be the end of it!”

Fredriks looked at him coldly.

“I don’t need any knights who betray their masters,” he declared. “Off with their heads, all of them. But their families will be spared with banishment. As for the townspeople, they are forgiven. Henceforth, an official of House Walt will be dispatched to govern the land.”

The knights of House Walt led the envoy away. He had a resigned yet relieved look on his face.

Fredriks glanced at Erun who was still in the tent, holding her child.

“When the boy grows up, perhaps we can leave this town to him.”

Fiennes had a conflicted look on his face.

“Old man, did you plan this out from the start? If so, there was no need to gather us all up.”

Fiennes couldn’t see why there was a need to gather the army.

But Fredriks seemed satisfied.

“They properly came when I called for them. Finally, a proper army. Wouldn’t you say? The Walt main force, and our vassals... Yes, that’s enough.”

What was it that Fredriks wanted to do? Without spelling it out, Fredriks took the blue Jewel—House Walt’s heirloom—off his neck and handed it to Fiennes.

“My role ends here. You will officially take over as the head.”

“H-Hey! That came out of nowhere! Explain yourself!”

Fredriks left the tent. That was where the memory came to an end.

I turned my eyes to the sixth, curious about one thing.

“What was the fifth head trying to accomplish?”

“Hmm? Oh, that. He wanted to make sure that House Walt’s army was functioning properly?”

“Make sure?”

“It was terrible in his time, from what I’ve been told. He’d call for them, and it was like he was screaming into the void. Worse, sometimes the vassal lords would betray House Walt and join the enemy. We could only rely on ourselves. But we couldn’t fight alone.”

House Walt must have been pretty weak at the time. The fifth head—Fredriks—went through hell because of it.

“My old man educated us and sent us into the territory of the surrounding vassals and allied houses. Seeing the Walt ways take root through us, seeing the whole territory come together as one, he probably thought he’d done what he had to do.”

The sixth placed a hand on my shoulder.

“Lyle, I only fought leading the mighty army the fifth head built. Sure, I was strong too. But it was my old man—the fifth head—who set it all in motion.”

“I see.”

The sixth head was remembered as the man who’d accomplished the most in Walt history, but those accomplishments were built on the foundation laid by the fifth.

“I didn’t understand what he was thinking, how he felt until much later. Thinking back on it now, I realize I was the one who wasn’t thinking... Not that I can fully accept it, even now.”

I knew that the fifth head adored his animals more than his own children, and I did think that was terrible. It was perfectly understandable that his son—the sixth—was still peeved about that.

However, there seemed to be a reason—and the sixth couldn’t just one-sidedly condemn him anymore.

“Lyle, if you need to know something about preparations in these upcoming battles, ask the fifth head. When it comes to combat itself, the seventh head’s



got one up on me. That kid's reliable."

The fifth and seventh both respected the sixth head in battle. And yet, the sixth insisted they were both more remarkable than he was.

"You're not going to tell them that?"

"That'll make it sound like I lost. So no."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

*Family sure is complicated.*

As I chuckled, the sixth broke into a hearty laugh. Then, he asked me about my intentions.

"By the way, Lyle. What are you going to do from here on out? Are you giving up on Vera?"

"I see it as a dead end. I'll think of another way."

"You're actually relieved, aren't you?"

He hit the nail on the head.

"I don't think it's right to seduce her for the sake of money. I've steeled myself to become a villain, but this feels like something else."

I'd gone ahead and told him my true thoughts on the matter. I'd said it without much thought; compared to the other ancestors, the sixth head...well, he felt somewhat like a big brother.

"True, true. You'd be a real piece of trash. But listen, Lyle—if you can keep up the deception all the way to the end, then a lie can become the truth."

"Huh?"

I was startled as he laughed and thumped me several times on the back.

"Just accept her! Make her happy! Then, what's the issue?! She's got pluck, and she's a strong, independent businesswoman. She's not exactly my type, but she's a good woman. You'll need someone like her going forward."

"B-But..."

"No buts! Leave Ceres be, and what happens? Won't matter if you're all the

way in Baym; it'll be a sea of fire, far as the eye can see. If you want to save all those lives, some sacrifices must be made."

*By sacrifices, are you talking about Vera?*

I couldn't help but feel rather weary as I listened to his thought process.

"I don't want to."

"What, you don't like her?"

"I...don't *dislike* her. I think she's a good person."

"Then go get her! It'll be fine! If you make her happy, everyone will be happy! I know you can do it!"

*What exactly is your basis for saying that?*

"Well, forget about all that for now. First, you should get to know her better. If it really looks hopeless, I'll give up too. The others might complain, but don't worry about it."

*Get to know Vera, huh?*

## Chapter 113: Roland

As morning came around, Roland opened his eyes and washed his face.

It was then that a man—an office worker who rarely boarded the ships—approached him. Like Roland, he'd come along on this unfamiliar voyage for the sake of the trade deal. Strictly speaking, he was Roland's superior.

"Hey, Roland. How long are you planning to let that adventurer approach the young lady?"

"I-I'm sorry. I'm cautioning him on a regular basis."

"Hmph! Don't be so full of yourself."

"That's not my intention."

"I'm letting this slide because you're Gina's favorite, but don't think for a second a beggar like you can act out forever. Know your place."

After spitting those sharp words, the man returned to his quarters.

Roland sighed. "Yes, I know I'm hated."

Exchanges like these had become a daily occurrence for him. Many didn't appreciate that Roland was in the good graces of both Vera and Gina.

"As I thought, I don't deserve to be around Ms. Gina."

His shoulders drooped, weighed down by a hint of sadness.

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The next morning, the waves were calm, and I could hardly feel them rocking the ship. When I stepped out on deck, the sunlight was practically blinding.

Despite the battle they'd had just the day before, the sailors were going about their work as usual. Some of them were scrubbing off the aftermath with large deck brushes, and a handful of adventurers were helping them.

"Honestly, you lot are amazing. Hard to believe you need us to guard you," one of the adventurers lauded them.

The sailors flexed their brawny arms in response. “Every day’s life-or-death out on the ocean! We’re counting on you too!”

The adventurers trying to get along with the sailors—well, they were probably the smart ones. They were working hard at the scene in the hopes of being hired by Tres Firm.

But as I approached, those same sailors took on blatant faces of disgust. Apparently, my efforts to approach Vera had made me quite a few enemies.

“Well I’ll be,” I muttered.

The situation wasn’t looking too good. This ship was their territory, and turning them against me wasn’t a wise move. Yet, they were already seeing me as their sworn foe. No wonder Roland was so concerned for my safety; I could easily picture them tossing me overboard and claiming it was an accident.

As I scanned the deck for Vera, a voice called out from behind me.

“You just keep coming back. Haven’t learned a thing, have you? Unfortunately, you won’t get any support. Just give up.”

I turned to see Vera standing under her usual parasol. I immediately plastered a smile on my face.

“Oh, I’ve given up on that, believe me. But there’s no harm in getting to know you, right? How about we have a little chat?”

At my light remark, Vera put a hand on her hip. “Well, that’s not a terrible offer—as long as it’s not too boring.”

*I don’t want her expecting too much from me!*

Just then, the sixth head offered some advice from the Jewel.

“This is your chance! Lyle, don’t overthink it. Just tell her about yourself. That gets a laugh more often than not.”

*Umm... What? You’re making it sound like my life’s a comedy. I highly doubt that’s going to work.*

But I couldn’t just give up there, so I accepted Vera’s proposal.

“I can’t guarantee you’ll find my stories interesting, but I have seen a fair few

places. I might just know a thing or two that could catch your interest.”

“Yes, I’m sure you’ve been all over if you set your sights on Baym. Very well, I’ll listen; there might be something that can lead to a good business opportunity.”

The sailors were glaring at me, but as soon as Vera looked their way, every one of them averted their gaze. It was almost like they’d been threatened into submission.

*Those tough sailors can’t go against one young lady?*

“Let’s go into the shade. I’ll hear what you have to say.”

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Once Lyle and Vera left the deck, a sailor clicked his tongue. His comrades were similarly less than amused, all of them carrying much the same looks on their faces.

An adventurer, who’d been helping with the cleaning, grew curious and asked, “Hey, what’s up with your captain? The way she carried herself in yesterday’s fight was amazing, but you guys are pretty strong too. Why’re you so afraid of her?”

It was just a casual question.

“To us,” a sailor declared, “the young lady is a goddess.”

“Huh? A goddess? Well, she’s cute, yeah... But is she that cute?”

The adventurer seemed to misunderstand, assuming that he was using the word “goddess” to mean “idol” or something of the sort. But the sailors were quick to correct him.

“It has nothing to do with admiration or lust. That girl is strong, and she takes care of her captain duties just fine. Impressive for her age. But that’s not why we follow her.”

The sailors’ unwavering faith in Vera came from the countless miracles they’d experienced by her side.

“Sailing is life-or-death. No matter how sturdy the ship, one little mishap’s all

it takes to send it to the bottom of the ocean. But that's the thing; no matter how dangerous the route, we make it through as long as the young lady's around."

"R-Really? It could just be luck, right?"

"We've seen the miracle with our own eyes. Again and again. One night, in the middle of a terrible storm, the young lady stepped out on deck. She doesn't seem to remember it, but it looked like she was being guided by something. And then... The storm stopped. Just like that."

To the sailors, it had been an unbelievable sight.

Another sailor chimed in: "Back when the young lady was a child, the ship she was riding got stranded. It was a sailing ship and the mast snapped. They could barely move the damn thing. From what I hear, they were on the brink of sinking, yet miraculously, the ship drifted all the way into the port of Baym. Every sailor who knows the currents knows that's impossible."

Each story alone seemed improbable, but together, they formed a legend. A faith. They all saw Vera as a goddess of good fortune, a girl beloved by the sea.

The adventurer recalled what he'd seen before the ship set off.

"So that's why you weren't worried about heading into dangerous waters?"

"You got that right! No ship has ever sunk with Lady Vera on board. This time won't be any different."

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"Aha ha ha! What's with that?! Lyle, you're a funny kid."

"Huh?"

I found myself struggling to accept what was happening as Vera burst into laughter.

"Um, was it that funny? I was pretty serious about it."

"It was funny. Ah, what a laugh; that was more satisfying than I thought it would be."

I was glad she enjoyed it—or at least, I wanted to be glad. But I just didn't

have it in me. I'd simply told her about my experiences, and she laughed at me. I wasn't even trying to get a laugh.

"Oh c'mon, don't laugh so hard."

"I'm sorry, I couldn't help myself. Man, I can't remember the last time I laughed this much." Vera sat on a wooden crate, her legs swinging idly. "I don't hate this ship or its sailors. But they all tend to put me on a pedestal, see. I guess you can say they're overprotective. Well, you saw how papa can be, so I haven't really had many chances to talk to people my own age."

"Oh? You don't even have any female friends?"

"I did—still do. But we grew pretty estranged after I started working. And there are so many men on the crew. There are a few women, but they hold me in such a high regard. Even though I'm younger than them."

"Being respected is a good thing."

I told her I felt a bit envious of her position, and this brought a touch of sadness to her face.

"It feels like everyone's keeping their distance from me. That's why I sometimes get a bit envious when I see you and all your friends."





*She's envious of us?*

I now understood that Vera had her own worries.

My eyes drifted to the parasol in her hands. "I always see you with that parasol. Is it your favorite?"

"That's right. It was a present. Oh, but enough of that—tell me what happened next. You left Darion, and then what?"

Vera had very quickly changed the topic. It felt like she'd done so rather forcefully, as if she didn't want to dwell on the object's origin.

"Yes, well, there were all sorts of things."

Just when I thought I could resume the story, Roland appeared with a panicked look on his face.

"You again?!"

I shrugged. "Looks like that's it for today. We'll have to continue another time."

Vera shot me a dubious look, but replied with a laugh in her voice. "That's a promise. I'll be awaiting the sequel," I heard her say behind me as I was forcefully dragged away by Roland.

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Watching Lyle be led away by Roland, Vera waved until they were out of sight. As her hand dropped, her expression turned a bit sorrowful.

"I wonder if Roland even realizes..."

The parasol Vera carried around had been a present from Roland. He'd given it to her a few years back.

Back then, Roland had worked under Vera. She'd heard of a diligent young man her age working at the port and, intrigued, decided to strike up a conversation with him. They became close, and Roland had eventually gifted her a parasol.

She'd used it ever since.

But Vera hadn't been the only one to notice Roland; her sister had had her eye on him too. While Vera was out at sea on a merchant vessel, her sister had appointed Roland as her personal attendant and taken him away. By the time Vera wanted to protest, Roland and her sister were already romantically involved.

Although Vera had been the first to fall for Roland, he'd ended up with her sister before she could even voice those feelings to anyone.

Vera gave a self-deprecating smile.

"I'm such a bothersome woman. I need to hurry up and forget about Roland," she told herself before returning to her quarters.

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Back in the cabin, I folded my arms and told everyone, "Roland's getting in the way."

Aria paused, midway through the sweet snacks Monica had prepared, and turned to me. "The diligent-looking guy, right? Of course he's going to stop you if you keep trying to woo the young lady he's working for."

Sophia continued munching on the sweets as she pointed out the obvious issue with our current situation. "Lyle's reputation keeps dropping. The sailors were livid, you know. They were grumbling about a deplorable whelp cozying up to their Lady Vera."

Miranda had just a taste of the treats but kept it at that, then folded her arms in thought. After all, she'd apparently experienced firsthand how bad the situation was.

"It's not just the sailors. His reputation is falling with our fellow adventurers as well. They see us as your stereotypical harem party."

*I take offense to that. I've never seduced anyone! Not once! Umm, not that I remember...? Anyway, I never tried to build a harem on purpose. It just turned out this way before I realized it.*

Novem, the person who started it all, finally spoke. She hadn't touched a single sweet treat.

“We’re failing to properly convey milord’s appeal. But we really can’t afford to have anyone disrupting your conversations with Ms. Vera. We will have to do something about Roland.”

Eva had mostly gotten over her seasickness, but her face was still pale as she joined the conversation. She, too, hadn’t touched the snacks.

“You reckon this Roland boy’s actually in love with her himself? That would explain why he keeps getting in the way.”

Next to Eva, Clara lay. Unmoving. Silent.

It was instead Shannon who picked up where Eva left off. “Huh? You don’t know, Eva? Roland is dating Vera’s little sister. He’s trying to use this trip to prove himself to her father.”

After hearing that, Miranda looked rather surprised. She approached Shannon and pressed her for details. “I heard rumors about them being lovers, but how do you know so much?”

“I was bored, so I did a bit of eavesdropping.”

With her special orphic eyes, Shannon could see the very essence of magic—mana. If she finely manipulated the mana she could see, she could apparently eavesdrop with ease.

Miranda put her right hand to her face, realizing her oversight. “I didn’t know the full story. I thought there had to be something to it, but I didn’t know what. So, did you hear anything else?”

“Just that the sailors hate Lyle. They *really* hate him. Other than that—oh, they hate Roland too.”

“You’re kidding me,” I said, startled. “I mean, he’s diligent and...”

Shannon shook her head. “Don’t ask me. He’s just alone a lot, okay? Sometimes, he’s watching you, but he doesn’t seem to be close to any of the sailors.”

*Is there a reason behind it?*

“Oh, and...”

With Miranda urging her on, Shannon divulged everything she'd found out. There were a number of curious points she brought up, and after hearing them all, the sixth head spoke up.

"Hmm, so Roland's isolated on this ship... That's another opportunity for you, Lyle."

It did seem he'd thought up another scheme. When I didn't react as positively as he wanted, he schemed even harder.

"Hey now, be a little happier, would you? You can even get back at Fidel, that merchant whelp who picked a fight before you even set off. This is a proposal that'll get a happy end—both for you and for Roland."

"Oh? I'd certainly like to hear it," said the seventh, who reacted faster than me. "That whelp who insulted Lyle on their very first meeting certainly needs some punishment."

The fourth, though somewhat interested, didn't appear to care for the revenge aspect. "If everyone's going to be happy, then that does sound interesting."

The third head excitedly urged the sixth on. "Let's hear it. Tell us this fun little scheme of yours."

And only the fifth was left doubtful. "Wait, you're going with what he says?" he asked. "I mean, it won't necessarily be bad, but... This is the sixth we're talking about here."

Poor sixth, to have so little faith from his own father.

But brimming with confidence, the sixth began to explain his plan. "Let's see if you can say that after you hear this. First off..."

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That night, Roland came to a storage room full of seldom-used tools. I raised my hand in a friendly gesture to greet him.

"Fancy seeing you here, Roland."

"You're the one who called me here. This is about the young lady, right?"

When I summoned Roland, I'd told him I'd keep away from Vera if he did a favor for me. That had been a lie.

"Sorry, that was a lie."

"I figured as much."

Clearly, Roland hadn't trusted me from the start. I couldn't blame him, with how persistent I'd been about talking to Vera no matter how many times he told me not to.

"So why *did* you call me here, anyways?"

"No need to be angry. No one will come here. My comrades are keeping watch."

Sensing that this also meant he had no escape, Roland sent me a resigned look.

"Threatening me won't get you anything."

"I'm not threatening. But I do want your cooperation."

"Huh?"

The sixth's proposal had been to form an alliance with Roland, who seemed to be isolated on the ship. I needed his cooperation if I wanted to get close to Vera.

From what we'd been able to find out, Roland was apparently in a romantic relationship with Gina, the younger daughter of the Tres Family.

"Roland, you're pretty close to Ms. Gina, aren't you? You're dating, but no one will acknowledge your relationship."

"Hm?! You looked into me?"

"It didn't take much, what with all the sailors complaining about it."

Roland hung his head. He started muttering under his breath, "I know we live in different worlds. But she's been so kind to someone like me. She's even provided me with education for my future. She's kind and caring... Before I knew it, I was drawn to her."

I approached Roland and placed a hand on his shoulder. "What's wrong with

that? A class-defying romance makes for quite the story. We've got an elf with us, and I'm sure she'd love to use it as inspiration."

"It's hopeless... The head of the Tres Family, Boss Fidel, despises me. The boss would never acknowledge me. I know we should just end things before it goes too far."

Hearing how discouraged he was, the sixth cried out from the Jewel: "Don't give up yet! It'll work out, I tell you! You have our support. Lyle, psych him up!"

Whenever it came to vile schemes, the sixth head would always get fired up.

I looked Roland seriously in the eye. "Are you really ready to give up?"

"What?"

"Can you really give up on Ms. Gina? Do you...dislike her?"

"I-I could never!" he refuted, his face a beet red. But as his head snapped toward me, he seemed to come to his senses. "B-But...it's pointless. Everyone's always telling me to remember my place."

By the sound of things, those around Roland didn't take too kindly to his proximity to Gina. That seemed to be the reason for his isolation.

"Rumor has it you'll be acknowledged if this trade deal succeeds."

"You even looked into that? Yes, it's true that I'm involved with this deal. But that's just a handout from Ms. Vera."

"A handout?"

"She invited me onto her ship hoping that it would boost my reputation. Ms. Gina hopes my achievements here might get some people to acknowledge me."

*So that's the story behind it.*

"I see. But shouldn't you consider the feelings of the two fine ladies who went that far for you?"

"Pardon?"

That was it. That was my entry point into persuading Roland.

"What do you want to do?"

“I-I want my relationship with Ms. Gina to be accepted.”

“I see. Then I’ll help you.”

“Um, help with what, exactly? I don’t mean it as an insult, but there isn’t anything you can help with.”

*Roland’s surprisingly levelheaded.* Sure enough, if someone asked if I could directly help out their relationship, my answer would be a resounding no.

But there was something else to consider.

“Really? Let’s say, hypothetically, I got close to Ms. Vera. Then what would happen? They’d start saying I’m some opportunistic adventurer chasing after her wealth, right?”

“Would they be wrong?”

*You hit where it hurts!*

“Hear me out to the end. It’s not like I plan to use Vera and toss her aside. I’ll make her happy no matter what it takes.”

By the look in his eyes, he clearly wasn’t buying it.

I laid out the merits: “If you don’t believe me, fine. But try thinking about it like this: Don’t you think Fidel would prefer a genuine, responsible young man over a trashy adventurer like me?”

“He might...” He still looked half in doubt.

“You’ve been feeling isolated on this ship, right?” I went on.

Considering Roland’s position, I could see why others would envy him. It seemed I’d hit the nail on the head. A frustrated look crossed his face.

“I’ll be honest with you. We initially approached Ms. Vera to woo her for her money.”

“You bastards!”

Roland flared up, and I quickly urged him to calm down and hear me out.

“But that’s not the case anymore. I’m not trying to seduce her. I simply want a chance. We want to earn her approval and get her support. If that doesn’t work

out, we'll give up."

Roland sighed. "Vera takes after her father; she's ruthless in business. That was why the boss entrusted this ship to her. If she thinks you're a lost cause, there's nothing you can do."

"That's fine. And I'll never do anything to make her uncomfortable."

Roland grimaced but gave a reluctant nod. "I can at least buy you some time to talk to Ms. Vera. But I'll have to intervene eventually. Otherwise, the sailors might kill you."

"Am I...really that hated?"

Just as I was taking in the impact of that statement, Roland said something even more unbelievable.

"That's not it. It's an order from the boss. Anyone who lays a hand on Ms. Vera is to be disposed of in an unfortunate accident. We're on a ship, after all. You can prepare as many explanations as you want as to why someone fell overboard. You need to understand that you're in a dangerous position here."

*It seems Roland's been protecting me.*

At the same time, I could hear the voices of my ancestors seething in subdued rage.

"Hmm, Fidel said that, did he?"

"That's no good at all."

"Eliminate the flies that swarm around his daughter, huh? That's no laughing matter."

"It seems a painful lesson is in order."

"A mere merchant thinks he can threaten my grandson?!"

*Well...considering what I'm trying to do, I can't exactly fault Fidel for it.*

"Aha ha... I'll be careful."

"Seriously, watch out."

"On another note, Roland, do you mind if I asked you something?"



“What now?”

Roland looked like he just wanted to end it already, but there was one thing I personally wanted to know.

“What do you think of Vera?”

“The young lady? She’s a good person who’s always been kind to me.”

“Is that all?”

“Yeah.”

Roland didn’t seem to have any deeper feelings.

“By the way, about the parasol Vera carries around—do you know anything about it?”

“Parasol? Sorry, but I don’t know what you’re talking about. Ms. Vera has a lot of parasols, so I wouldn’t know which one you mean.”

*As far as I’ve seen, she carries the same exact one every day.* But Roland hadn’t noticed.

“I see. Sorry, that’s everything. You can go.”

“From tomorrow onward, I’ll hold off on interrupting for as long as I can. But seriously, watch out.”

Once Roland had left the storeroom, Miranda took his place. She looked at me with a shrug. “It’s complicated between those sisters, it seems. And Roland seems to be just as dense as you.”

I wasn’t inclined to agree, but I couldn’t say anything back, considering how I’d met Miranda.

“So, do you think we can continue with the plan?” she asked me.

“We will. Though I do feel bad for Vera.”

\*\*\*

The next day, I climbed back up to the deck to fulfill my promise to Vera.

I had to continue the story. As I spoke, I couldn’t help but eye the parasol she held overhead... She’d been using the same one ever since she first boarded the

ship.

I added all sorts of gestures as I told her a tale.

“When we were taking requests in Aramthurst, there was one where a guy asked me to play the villain so he could look good in front of his crush.”

“What’s up with that? Did you seriously go through with it?”

“I did, actually. I pretended to be a ruffian and got punched for it. But the girl in question felt sorry for me, took me to her house, and tended to my wounds.”

“Oh, what a shame for your client.”

“The girl shouted at him for being so cruel. Thanks to that, the job was a failure.”

“It’s one thing for the client to make the request, but you’re also to blame for accepting it.”

All I’d done was recount how I met Miranda, but Vera seemed to be having a lot of fun.

“It’s like that, you know,” the sixth said from the Jewel. “She’s got no young people around her, so Lyle’s stories feel fresh to her.” There was a hint of loneliness in his voice.

In reality, Vera’s position of managing a large merchant vessel at her age meant she probably had very few friends. When I asked if that made her lonely, she told me that her love for the ship and the sea made it bearable.

However—the look in her eyes when she watched Roland seemed even more bleak than before. Did it just look that way to me because I’d learned about the relationship between those two—no, those three?

Last night, I’d heard it from Shannon. “Vera’s in love with Roland,” she’d said. But it was Gina, her younger sister, who had won Roland’s heart.

*To think that both sisters fell for the same person...*

“Well, that was funny enough. So what happened next?”

Vera urged me to go on. Though at first, she saw this as my way to curry favor with her—my entry point to get her support—she now accepted my presence

as normal.

As I was about to continue, I spotted Roland approaching. It seemed my time was up.

“We’ll have to pick this up another time. I also have my work to do.”

“Oh really? I didn’t expect you to be so diligent.”

“I’m a diligent man.”

“You don’t look it,” Vera chuckled.

As Roland walked up, I glanced over and raised a hand.

“Just in time. We’re already done here.”

“I see. That’s good to know.”

As Roland led me off, I turned back to watch Vera. Her eyes lingered on him, and there it was again—that sad look in her eyes.

## Chapter 114: Goddess of the Sea

It was night, and I was pacing the deck on lookout duty. Patrolling with a lantern in hand was part of the job. We adventurers weren't just hired muscle; we were also tasked with keeping watch. There were sailors on lookout too, but if monsters did attack, it was better to have adventurers already on the scene to provide a swift counterattack.

They'd also set up a station where other adventurers were waiting on standby.

"I hope they don't attack at night. That would be a pain," I muttered, glancing down at the dark, eerie depths of the sea.

I continued watching the waves for a while before the fifth head urged me to stay cautious.

"Lyle, here they come."

I turned to see some sailors approaching. What's more, the color they showed in my head was red. It seemed they were hostile toward me.

*Are they here to push me overboard?*

Just as I was about to make a swift escape, I spotted someone stepping out onto the deck.

"Lord Lyle, it's time to change shifts," Novem called out, her voice carrying well and clear.

The sailors hurriedly scattered. Perhaps they decided not to go through with it when there was a witness afoot.

"They gave up surprisingly easily," I heard the sixth say. "It doesn't look like they were trying to kill you."

*Yeah, they might have just wanted to warn me to stay away from Vera. Or maybe get a few words in before they decided whether or not to toss me off the side.* In any case, the sailors likely thought I was overstepping my bounds.

After Novem came May, who stretched as she took in some fresh sea air. “Aaah, I’d love to run around a bit,” she said.

She was talking about reverting to her qilin form and racing around the sky. I glanced around to make sure no one was in earshot before replying.

“You can’t. There are other people on watch.”

“Yeah, and I’m not going to. I know that much. Dealing with the turf stuff around here will be a huge hassle.”

“Turf?”

“If they were friends of mine, I’d be able to talk it out. But it isn’t so easy around these parts.”

*Does this have something to do with other divine beasts?*

Novem, meanwhile, looked at me with concern. “Those men from earlier were drinking. They were all getting fired up about teaching you a lesson, so I came to make sure nothing happened.”

*Drunkards, huh? But that’s also a sign of how much resentment I’ve built up with the crew.*

“What a pain. I’m not even trying to seduce her anymore.”

“To them, Ms. Vera is a very important individual.”

“Yeah, this is about her being a goddess, right? I heard about it from Vera, and she’s not too happy about the situation. She said she feels a wall between herself and everyone else.”

“That is an issue,” Novem said, seemingly sharing my concern over the sailors’ attitudes.

But, scratching her cheek, May said, “That girl’s got something to her.”

“Huh? What do you mean, ‘something’?”

“Well, I don’t know exactly what. But she’s got a strange power. I’m pretty sure it has something to do with the sea, but I couldn’t tell you any more than that.”

If even May was picking up something, perhaps she really was protected by

some divine force.

“It’s about time to change shifts. Let’s head back inside.”

We left our post with so many questions still left hanging.

\*\*\*

That night. Vera jolted awake, drenched in sweat.

“That dream again...”

A dream where she sank to the bottom of the sea. She’d been having it almost every night lately.

Her quarters on the ship were spacious, and the furnishings were quite luxurious to boot. Vera got out of bed, poured herself a glass of water, and downed it in one gulp. Then, she calmed her breath and stared out the window. The moon—which had been hidden by clouds until a moment ago—had finally shown its face.

“The moon is beautiful tonight,” she muttered, glad that its light helped remove a bit of the gloom from her room.

She returned to the bed and sat on the edge.

“Is that a bad omen? No... That’s silly,” she said.

Her eyes slowly drifted to the parasol in a corner of the room. Though she owned several, this was the only one she used now.

It was a present from Roland, but it seemed he hadn’t noticed.

“Man, I guess I’m the only one who remembers. I feel like an idiot.”

She let her torso collapse back, lying flat as she draped an arm over her forehead.

“Tonight feels...unpleasant.”

She could feel the beating of her heart more keenly than usual.

\*\*\*

Someone was watching the sea.

In the darkness of the night, they stood without a lantern, gripping the

handrail. Suddenly, they reached their right hand out toward the waves.

A peculiar light formed in their palm, falling like a liquid into the water below.

The light melted into the dark ocean, spreading, dissipating until finally, there was no trace left of it to be seen.

The figure disappeared back into the ship.

\*\*\*

The next day brought more clear skies, and I decided to talk to Vera again.

My comrades were standing around as lookouts, our conversation taking place under their protection. It felt kinda pathetic, relying on everyone's strength just so I could get closer to a woman.

"Do you think we'll be reaching our destination soon? The air already feels chillier than it was in Baym," I said.

"It'll be even colder when we get there. Be careful," Vera replied with a gentle smile, one that seemed a bit more cheerful than before. "You never tell any stories about the north, Lyle."

"Oh, I've never had the chance to visit."

"The north has a powerful nation that's in conflict with Banseim, after all. It was probably difficult for you. But the port is breathtaking in the winter, you know. You ought to see it at least once in your life. Once was enough to satisfy me."

"You're making it sound like you don't want to go there again."

"Correct."

She'd warmed up to me somewhat and our conversations had started to flow more naturally. Now that she'd started to trust me a little more, she was beginning to bring up things she usually wouldn't.

"Lyle—do you have dreams? I mean, the sort of dreams you have at night."

"Dreams? I do. I forget most of them, though."

"I often have the same dream." Vera gazed out at the ocean. "I open my eyes at the bottom of the sea and slowly float toward the surface. But once I reach it,

my body breaks apart and I sink back to the bottom. I've been having that dream since I was a child, again and again. I'm used to it by now, but do you think there's a reason for it?" she asked, perhaps hoping I could offer some insight, seeing as I'd visited various places.

"Have you tried asking a fortune teller?"

"I've tried famous fortune tellers in Baym, and in foreign lands too. But they all say the same thing. They don't know."

If even the experts were stumped, it was hard to imagine I'd come out with the right answer.

"I don't know either."

"Oh, that was quick. Couldn't you at least give it a bit of thought?"

"I have a friend who's a scholar and I'll try asking them, but this is out of their expertise."

*Will Damian know something?* I wondered.

We chatted a bit more. But just as the conversation was winding down, the seventh head pressed me.

"Lyle, ask her about her gun. You're dying to know where she bought that revolver, aren't you? Of course you are."

The one dying to know was the seventh head. Not me. Since he had used guns himself, he was always keenly interested in firearms.

"There's no better place to find ammunition than Baym. Lyle, this is the perfect opportunity—start using a pistol. Guns are nice!"

They were certainly convenient weapons, yet the rest of my ancestors were less than thrilled.

The third head's take was especially harsh.

"You can easily block bullets with magic, can't you? And if you want a ranged attack, shouldn't magic be more than enough?"

The seventh was more than eager to explain to his unenlightened cohort. "A gun can be used by anyone regardless of whether they can use magic or not!



You can conduct ranged attacks while conserving mana for when it counts. Truly a marvel! And that's not all!"

Sensing that this was going to drag on for a while, I opted to ignore him. If I listened to everything my ancestors had to say, I'd never have any time to think.

"Lyle, you've gotten pretty tough!" the sixth head said with a laugh.

*What's so funny about that?*

Vera shifted the topic back to dreams—though now, she meant it in the sense of real objectives.

"Hey, Lyle. Do you have any dreams for the future?"

"I do."

She seemed a bit startled by my immediate response. It seemed she'd assumed that someone as unreliable and pathetic as myself wouldn't have a clear goal in mind.

"Now I'm curious. What kind of dream is it?"

"If you really want to know, then why don't you tell me about your dream first?" I asked. I couldn't reveal my dream here, and I wanted to avoid lying.

Vera began to fiddle with her parasol. Her demeanor had suddenly changed—she was less confident, less sure of herself. "I don't think living on a ship is bad or anything, but I wonder if it's what I really want. Putting my heart into business isn't bad either, but I don't know if that's really my dream."

Perhaps Vera didn't have a clear dream. Though she insisted it "wasn't bad," it looked to me like she was weary of the life she was living.

"I, well... It's been like this forever. Everyone always keeps me at arm's length. My little sister knows how to get around, but I've never been too good at it." She leaned against the railing, speaking almost like she was talking to herself. "Daughter of the Tres family, Fidel's daughter, and Goddess of Good Fortune. That's what they all call me... They all feel so far away."

Those sounded like her true feelings, but she quickly straightened up.

"Sorry, forget about it. Today was fun. Let's—"

Before she could finish, the ship sharply lurched.

“Whoa!” I cried out, grabbing the handrail.

The sky had clouded over before I’d realized it and the sea began to grow rough. The waves rose high to throw the ship back and forth.

“How could the weather change this abruptly...? I can’t believe it.”

It had been clear just a moment ago. Something was off.

Roland rushed over to us. “Lady Vera! We’re in trouble!”

\*\*\*

The adventurers readied their gear and gathered at the standby station. The ship was rocking even harder now and a few of them were visibly struggling with seasickness. The adventurers I’d seen wearing heavy armor on the first day had stripped it off, keeping only the protectors on their arms and legs. It seemed they found it far easier to maneuver on the ship like that.

“Hey, what’s going on?!”

“How am I supposed to know? Just sit tight.”

They stormed up to the veteran who’d rebuked them before, but the man had no answers.

We, too, were huddled, waiting for news to come in.

“I’m more scared of getting seasick than fighting,” Aria anxiously said. “Still, this storm came out of nowhere.”

Miranda seemed equally concerned. “The sailors looked flustered. I’m guessing this has never happened before.”

It had all dropped on them so suddenly that even the seasoned sailors were thrown off.

I gripped the Jewel, but none of my ancestors responded—none of them knew anything about the sea.

“We’re out of our depth,” the fourth apologized. “Banseim is landlocked.”

I couldn’t blame them. We’d have to overcome this with our own strength.

Looking at Novem, I noticed she looked a little uneasy as she clutched her heirloom staff.

“Is there something on your mind?” I asked her.

“No, it’s nothing,” she replied.

Novem hadn’t shown any fretfulness since boarding the ship, and more importantly, she hadn’t shown any signs of seasickness either. I’d heard some people just weren’t affected, but still, she was very calm for someone who came from landlocked Banseim.

Shannon, on the other hand, was grasping a pillar, shaking like a leaf. Her orphic eyes had informed her that something was closing in. “H-Hey, something huge is closing in on us. I-I-I-It’s not a monster, is it?”

“Hey, what do you mean by something hu—”

Before I could finish, a sudden wave of lethargy washed over my body. Combined with the sway of the ship, I collapsed, unable to keep my balance. Novem instantly caught me.

“Milord!”

This sensation—the inability to muster any motivation or strength—I was familiar with it.

“Y-You’re kidding me. I mean, didn’t this just...”

I broke into a cold sweat. How was I supposed to have planned for this coming now, of all times?

Everyone gathered on me with worry written all over their faces.

“It just had to happen now, did it,” Miranda said, her eyes narrowed wearily. “Get Lyle back to the cabin.”

Monica slung me over her back. “Oh my, it’s been so long since I saw my chicken in all his glory.”

“This is no time...to joke around...”

Even mustering my voice was incredibly painful. The surrounding adventurers were making a commotion over my fall, some of them muttering about me

coming down with the seasickness. But that wasn't it. This was...*that*.

I could hear various responses from my ancestors in the Jewel.

"Oh dear, that's some bad timing."

"Just when something was about to happen?"

"Lyle, issue some orders while you're still conscious."

"Well, this is something we just can't do anything about."

"So Lyle has to be taken off the battlefield at the crucial junction. Will the girls be able to handle this without him?"

Indeed. It was clear that something was about to happen, and I just had to be incapacitated.

\*\*\*

Meanwhile, Vera was giving orders on the bridge.

"Do whatever it takes to get us out of this storm!"

"Aye!"

The sailors followed her instructions, steering the ship through the rough seas.

Only moments ago, the skies had been clear and the waves had been calm. But suddenly, a storm had overtaken the ship, bringing tense expressions to the sailors' faces. Something felt off.

Vera felt a strange sense of unease in her chest.

*Something's coming. No, it's already here.*

Her anxiety was growing by the minute, and she shook her head to rid herself of it. Her pigtails swayed as she slapped her cheeks to refocus herself.

The helmsman gripping the rudder was visibly agitated. "Captain, we're being swept farther and farther off course!"

Vera looked outside. The compass needle was spinning wildly and they had no idea where they were. Everything just seemed downright abnormal.

"Keep pressing on! Tell the engine room to make sure that fire never goes

out!”

The large merchant vessel was being swept in some unknown direction.

\*\*\*

I was back in the cabin where we slept. The ship was rocking violently, and I’d been lying limp in bed since morning. My face was probably pale. It hurt to move, and I felt disgusting.

There was a bucket nearby, and Novem was taking care of me.

“Are you feeling any better now, milord? Do you want some water?”

The seasickness was stacking on top of my usual *ailment*, putting me in quite a terrible state. I lay there suffering, surrounded by my concerned comrades.

Next to Novem, Shannon was looking quite repulsed. “Urgh, he looks awful.”

Monica stepped in, pushing Shannon aside. “I’m the only one who gets to complain about this damn chicken, little girl!”

*Who gave you permission?* I thought. I was so fatigued I didn’t even have the willpower to put those words to mouth.

I pulled the covers over my head.

“Oh great, now he’s gone and hidden himself,” Shannon said with a sigh.

Novem removed the blanket and sat me up to give my body a wipe down. “Let’s clean you up, milord. You’ve been like that for a whole day already.”

As Novem took care of me, I heard the fourth head’s voice from the Jewel. “Lyle really is useless when he gets like this.”

“There’s not much he can do about it,” the seventh stuck up for me. “It’s just unfortunate timing.”

“We’ve been tossed around at sea for a whole day. I’m surprised the storm hasn’t sunk us yet,” the fifth head said with concern.

The ship was lurching violently every so often, and we’d been hit by massive waves more than a few times. Yet somehow, we continued to press on.

\*\*\*

Two days had passed since the ship first entered the storm. Vera, taking on her role as captain, continued giving out orders nonstop.

The first mate approached her.

“Looks like the young lady’s luck has finally run out.”

Two days in a storm had brought exhausted looks to everyone’s faces, yet the first mate was smiling. Vera felt a bit of relief from his levity.

“A goddess of good fortune? Me? Do I look like one to you?” she asked in lighthearted reply. “Don’t be ridiculous. All that nickname ever does is keep the men away.”

The first mate broke out laughing.

“That’s because no one around you’s got a good eye for women. One of these days, they’ll be flocking around you whether you like it or not.”

“Oh, I hope so,” Vera replied. Despite her cheerful tone, she was panicking internally.

*At this rate, even a ship like ours will sink. I’d love to break through the storm, but the rudder is practically useless, and the compass is all wrong.*

She had no idea where they were or where they were headed.

Just then, the voice of a lookout came through the speaking tube. Even through the howling storm, his words carried clearly to Vera’s ears.

“Monster sighted!”

Vera rushed out from the bridge to the deck, grabbed onto the handrail, and scanned the waters. “No way... It’s real?!”

She saw them on the water’s surface—the massive faces peeking over the waves. She heard tales of a beast that looked like this before. Of all the ocean’s monsters, this one was seen as a creature of legend. A creature said to bring certain death once encountered—the Trident Sea Serpent.

The appearance of a creature straight out of a fairy tale left Vera stunned.

It was a three-headed monster resembling a massive snake or a dragon, with the center head sporting great horns reminiscent of a twisted metal crown. Six

glowing red eyes were trained on her and her ship.

They could only despair at this point. It was even larger than their vessel, and to the sailors, it was practically a living calamity. They'd run into a monster of legend.

"He was right. This is where my luck ends."

The sailors on deck were crouching down, holding their heads. They'd fallen into despair at the sight of the beast.

On close inspection, Vera noticed a whirlpool that swirled with the Trident Sea Serpent at its center. She'd considered that the ship was being pulled toward something, but she had never expected it to be a monster's doing.

"Goddess of Good Fortune? Please. Like hell I'm—"

In that instant—the dream she'd seen countless times crossed Vera's mind. The boat would capsize. She'd sink into the sea, either to become monster feed or to sink straight to the watery depths.

Vera slammed her fist onto the railing. "Like hell I'm going to give up here!"

*I won't give up. I'm not going to sink. I won't let that dream become a reality!*

Vera returned to the bridge and loudly ordered her men, "Prepare for battle! Bring out the cannons. We'll defeat that monster and head straight for port! Get moving!"

But her crew of hopeless faces resisted.

"But, ma'am, that's a legendary monster."

"Nothing we can do."

"How's a cannon supposed to contend with that?"

Even the first mate seemed to have given up. That was simply how overwhelming their foe was.

Lightning fell from the storm clouds, momentarily coloring what had been a pitch-black silhouette. The monster's blue scales reflected the light in a prismatic array of colors. The serpent wasn't moving. It simply waited at the center of the whirlpool for its prey—the ship—to be pulled toward it. It was

almost like it was toying with them.

Vera raised her voice again: “Prepare for battle! I’m not letting us go down without a fight! We’ve got one of the best ships humanity has to offer! If that’s a legend, we just have to take it down and become legends ourselves! Or do you want to just give up and die? If the other option is to die without doing a thing, then fight to the bitter end!”

Her words stirred the crew, who rose to their feet, gritting their teeth.

It was then that Roland burst onto the bridge, wide-eyed.

“Lady Vera, th-there’s a monster outside!”

The pale-faced man was only a hindrance at the moment. Vera gave him a stern order.

“Out! Get out and tell the adventurers that it’s time for them to earn their keep.”

Her usual kindness was gone. Roland shook, pressing his body against a wall to keep himself upright on the rocking ship as he timidly replied, “Y-Yes ma’am!”

As Roland dashed off, Vera turned toward the bow.

“Let’s do this.”

The battle with the Trident Sea Serpent was about to begin.

\*\*\*

Roland barged into the cabin where Lyle and his party members were staying.

“Lyle! We’re under attack! Prepare for—”

He was met with quite a horrific scene. Lyle was wrapped in a blanket, surrounded by women, and letting out pained groans with his eyes rolled back. He was in no condition to fight.

As Roland reeled back, Aria—already equipped with her spear—approached him.

“Lyle’s a no-go,” she explained. “He’s been down and out ever since.”



“It’s been two days! Or...no, maybe three?”

“Well what can we do? That’s just how he is.”

She said it so bluntly there was little room for debate.

“I-I see. Then everyone else please prepare for battle. A huge monster appeared, and we’re going to have to fight it.”

Shannon dragged a wooden box over to the window, kneeling on it to get a better look. Outside, she could see the Trident Sea Serpent, whose anatomy brought to mind a three-pronged spear.

“We’re fighting that?” Shannon asked, shaking her head. “How’s that supposed to work out?”

Roland shared that sentiment. He couldn’t quite see how mustering the adventurers would do anything to better their predicament.

“A-Anyways, you have to fight. That’s what you were hired for, right?”

Aria had adjusted to the ship well by now, and she seemed to maintain some degree of composure. Sophia was the same, and so was Miranda, who began to inspect her equipment. But Eva and Clara were still lying down, pale-faced.

May, meanwhile, was having fun poking at their cheeks.

Covering his face with his right hand, Roland told them, “Those three don’t have to come. We’ll make do with whoever’s left.”

Just then, Monica stood and twirled on the spot. Her pigtails and skirt lifted airily, and before they’d dropped back down, she produced a bottle from her apron. “I thought this might happen, so I saved some medicine! Give them some time, and those two should be able to join the fight—after all, this is Monica-brand medicine we’re talking about.”

Hearing this, Eva shakily sat up, clad in a disconcerting aura. “I-If you had some, you should’ve given it from the start.”

Monica pretended not to hear her as she handed over a pill to each of them.

“It takes a while to kick in,” Clara grumbled as she gulped it down. “And once it wears off, I’ll be right back to where I started. I can’t take it...” She was teary-

eyed.

Having delivered his message, Roland left the room.

\*\*\*

When Miranda led her comrades onto the deck, they were met with the sight of a creature that was even larger than the ship. Only its long necks and heads were visible above the stormy seas, and it was impossible to tell what lay beneath.

“Good grief, what a troublesome foe,” Miranda sighed.

Armed with her battle-axe, Sophia tested her feet on the rocking ship. The deck had been splattered with seawater, making it far easier to slip.

“Our footing is terrible too.”

“There’s still some distance. I doubt leaping onto it is going to work, and it’ll be bothersome if it flees into the ocean,” said Aria, who was more concerned with their distant foe than her footing.

Miranda quickly rejected the idea. “Don’t even try it.”

Eva and Clara—alongside Thelma and Gaston, who were both noncombatants—were not present. The other adventurers continued clambering up onto the deck one by one, but many lost their nerve at the sight of the Trident Sea Serpent.

“We’re fighting that thing?!”

“That’s downright ridiculous. We need to get out of here.”

“Is that the bastard sinking all the ships? Looks like this one is doomed too.”

A majority of the adventurers wanted to run away, while some had already given up.

“What about bombarding it from afar with magic?” Sophia proposed to Miranda. “This ship also has guns and cannons. We might be able to beat it if we fire in unison.”

“That might be the only option.” Miranda nodded.

Gripping her staff, Novem sent Miranda a slight nod. “I’m ready to go

whenever you are.”

“Good. Then let’s match our timing with the cannons and—”

It was at that moment that the roar of cannons filled the air. Aria looked to the bridge, startled.

“Hey! We aren’t ready yet!”

They went off all at once, every shell flying straight for the Trident Sea Serpent. A good number of them hit the mark—despite the numerous misses—but they barely even shook the beast. They barely scratched the surface of its scales.

Miranda couldn’t help but laugh. “What an outrageous foe we’re dealing with.”

*Facing this thing without Lyle’s going to be a nightmare*, she thought with a click of her tongue.

“Not enough firepower. And we have no way to coordinate.”

Coordination between the adventurers had never been a consideration from the start. On top of that, they had no way of reporting their own situation to the bridge. Even if they wanted to use the speaking tubes, they had no clue which one connected where.

Dressed in her maid outfit in the pouring rain, Monica squinted and put a hand over her eyes. “Oh dear, that’s not going to work. A magic-or-whatever sort of barrier blocked them right before impact. This ship’s cannons won’t be able to get rid of that.”

Hearing this, Miranda quickly looked over to May. “May, can you do it?”

At this point, Miranda didn’t care if everyone saw May’s qilin form—if that was what it took to survive, she wasn’t even going to hesitate. However, May’s response was less than promising.

“It’ll be troublesome if it dives into the water. Plus, I might not be able to beat it alone. What’s that thing doing here? That monster’s way out of place.”

“So you’re saying...you might not be able to beat it?”

Out of all of Lyle's party members, May was considered the strongest. She was a divine beast, and in her true form was on a level beyond what a human could hope to achieve. If even May couldn't beat it, then it was uncertain if they even had a chance while pooling their strength together.

"Well, whatever. We just have to do it."

Miranda began racking her brain over what she could do with the weapons she had on hand.

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I lay in the room, wrapped in a blanket. Nearby, I could see Shannon—along with Eva and Clara, who were slowly recovering from their seasickness.

"Here, I brought you some water," said Thelma. "Why are you crying, Lyle?"

It was only after she pointed it out that I realized there were tears running down my face.

"Because it's frustrating."

I felt disheartened with no motivation to do anything. Even at such a crucial moment, I was holed up in the cabin unable to do anything.

"Frustrating? There isn't anything you could have done to prevent this, Lyle. Some things are just out of our control."

There was certainly a reason that I was here and not fighting. But right now, I was...happy about it. I had no drive to do anything. I didn't want to fight. I didn't want to move, and I hated it.

My heart was pleading to me, to get up for just a little bit and to grab my weapon. Was it really all right for me to be here? To not go where everyone else was?

"You've done more than enough already. You're doing a far better job than me."

"But... I have to fight."

As I moped and dallied, the voices from the Jewel reassured me.

"Lyle, you need to rest right now."

“This is something you can’t overcome with sheer will.”

“Everyone understands. This is beyond your control.”

“There is no way around it. For now, just rest.”

“But even if he recovers right now, he won’t be able to fight just yet.”

As I pulled the blanket over my head, I heard Shannon’s voice.

“Hey, are you really okay with this?”

“I’m not.”

“Then get out there and help sis.”

“I want to, but I can’t.”

I gave a pathetic response. I understood what she was saying well enough, but this was something I simply couldn’t overcome with raw emotion or willpower.

Thelma stepped in. “That’s enough. Nothing good ever comes of pushing someone when they’re in his condition.”

“I mean, he keeps going on about how he wants to fight, and he hasn’t moved a muscle! He might not look it, but this guy’s actually super strong. We train together in the same martial arts, and he always comes up with these underhanded tricks to bully me.”

“Huh? Oh, yes, well...”

*What are you even on about? Thelma looks completely lost. And you’re the one who plays dirty. You set up all those traps and had your fun messing with me when we were supposed to be fighting with Monica’s fighting style. How is that on me?*

“At this rate, my sis and the others are going to be in danger. That’s why we need Lyle’s strength. This guy, he’s awful, but he can be reliable sometimes. We’re going to lose without him!”

*Would it kill her to honestly ask for help?*

“Shannon really is Milleia’s great-granddaughter,” the sixth said from the Jewel. “She has the same kindness.”

Shannon carried the blood of House Walt. Her great-grandmother was a Walt woman who happened to be the sixth head's little sister. That made both Miranda and Shannon distant relatives of mine.

As I listened to the sixth's voice, a warm sensation began to spread from the Jewel.

"Lyle, you heard her. If you want to get better quickly, you need to rest and—Hey, what's happening?!"

The Jewel took on a bluish light as I slowly stood to my feet.

"A maiden's plea for help is poison to my soul," I said with a smile, lifting my face.

All the fatigue and listlessness had suddenly left me. How could I call myself the ninth head of House Walt if I ignored this damsel's cry for help?

"Now let's start my legend!"

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Vera was barking orders on the bridge. The reports from the crew indicated that cannon fire seemed completely ineffective. The adventurers were also demanding further instruction.

"Keep firing! We still have ammo, don't we?"

"I-I'll go check."

Each and every person seemed to want direction, but her orders simply weren't getting to them.

The merchant vessel continued to resist, but it was gradually being pulled toward the Trident Sea Serpent nonetheless. Cannon shots were missing thanks to the stormy seas, and it wouldn't be long before things took a turn for the worse.

Grinding her teeth, Vera thought to herself, *How are we supposed to fight that thing?*

The difference between them and their foe was so great she didn't know where to even begin. She had begun to grow anxious, wondering, *Can we even*

*beat it in the first place?*

Then, her first mate pointed at the bow.

“Milady! Over there!”

Walking leisurely toward the ship’s bow was a young man with blue hair.

The young man, who was supposed to be sick and bedridden, shook off the restraints of his comrades to make his way to the front. With rain pelting him, he pressed on. He faced the massive creature, raising his voice as he threw his arms wide toward the sky.

“Perfect! Wonderful! Your enormous form, your grandeur, your godlike presence! You are a worthy foe for me!”

Hearing his gleeful voice, Vera leaned in.

“What’s he doing out there?! Get him back in at once. He’s going to fall into the ocean!”

As the waves crashed into the ship and seawater incessantly splashed through the air, Lyle gestured wide with his arms like an actor onstage. He laughed in the face of the giant monster before him.

“You’re a fitting first foe to commemorate the new me. I’ll make you the first chapter in my glorious legend! Fwa ha ha... Fwa ha ha ha... Hack! Koff, koff! Swallowed a little seawater. These splashes are awful.”

Vera stared, baffled. “What’s with that guy?!” she couldn’t help but cry out as she struggled to process this completely new side of Lyle.

## Chapter 115: Trident Sea Serpent

Amid the turbulent storm and the crashing waves, I locked eyes with the Trident Sea Serpent lurking at the center of the massive whirlpool.

Novem and the others were up on deck, pleading for me to return.

“That’s dangerous, milord! Please come back!”

*Not that it really matters but—I look about twenty percent cooler when soaking wet.*

“Lyle! Get back here!” Miranda called out. “You’re going through a post-Growth. Don’t push yourself too hard!”

Miranda was simply adorable when she panicked. She was usually so composed—a bit haughty, even—but now she was shouting out of true concern for me.

*I’m so loved! Water droplets danced through the air as I flipped my hair in an elegant display. This is bad. If I had a mirror, I might have made myself swoon right there. I just know I’m radiating sheer brilliance right now.*

“Forget about that, Novem,” I said. “Compared to my usual self, about how much cooler do I look right now?”





My answer came not from Novem, but from Monica, who swung her twin ponytails into a mess as she answered, “Fifty percent, by all calculations! My memory banks are already filled with tens of thousands of pictures of you! My video quality is immaculate!”

Monica squirmed with joy, yet I couldn’t understand a word of what she was saying. Not that it was an issue for me.

“I don’t get it, but you sure know how to make a man happy. How about I up the ante and take my top off?”

Before I could act, Aria grabbed the handrail, stepping out onto the unsteady deck and yelling at me. Her eyes were fixed on our massive foe—the Trident Sea... *Too long. Tressy. Yes, Tressy it is.*

“Just get back here already!” she shouted. “Do you even see what we’re up against?! You shouldn’t be reckless now that you’re in that state! Get back, you idiot!”

Her red hair was soaked. Aria had a preference for tight-fitting clothes, and now that she was drenched, they were all stuck fast to her, showing off most of the lines of her body.

I shook my head. She just didn’t get it. “That’s exactly why I’m here right now. By the way, I’m quite confident in my physique. Are you sure you don’t want a good look?”

Sophia—in her robe—covered her face with both hands. But, I caught her peeking through the gaps in her fingers. “Why noooooow?!” she screamed. “Please hurry and return to normal, Lyle!”

But Monica was looking at me with anticipation. *Looks like I’ll have to strip after all*, I concluded, reaching for my coat.

It was, unfortunately, at that point that Roland rushed out onto the deck to relay Vera’s orders.

“Abort! Everyone get back in the ship! All adventurers evacuate below deck! You can forget about the request! Protect yourselves!”

Some of the adventurers looked quite relieved to hear that. Clearly, they

didn't relish the thought of facing Tressy. But that wasn't going to work on me.

"Abort? We can't be having that. That right there is my prey, and I'm particularly fond of Tressy's crown! It must be mine! I might as well finish the job and get my funding on top of that!"

I clenched my right fist to show my conviction, leaving my comrades and the sailors on deck at a complete loss for words. Eventually, Miranda stepped forward to voice their shared sentiment.

"Who's Tressy? You're not talking about that monster, are you?"

"Cute, right? Trident Sea Serpent is way too long, so I just thought it up."

As Miranda sighed, Roland shouted at me, "Cute has nothing to do with it! Listen up—that there's a legendary monster! Try as you might, we can't win. We just can't!"

He hung his head, frustrated. *What exactly is going through his head?* I wondered.

My comrades moved closer to me.

May took in my glorious form with a grin. "So that's what you're like post-Growth, huh? Weirdo."

"I'm not weird. I am always correct."

Then, Eva and Clara emerged from below deck, lagging quite a bit behind the others. Their eyes locked on to Tressy—its three heads poking out of the water as it patiently waited for us to approach.

"Whoa," Eva exclaimed, wide-eyed. "Should I be glad I'm seeing this firsthand, or should I be lamenting my luck?"

Clara—despite her curiosity—was quivering at the knees. "No wonder it's called a legendary monster. I'm happy that I can confirm it does actually exist, but I could have done without meeting it."

"Even I can't go up against that one," May explained. "Usually, you'd leave it to the sea's divine beasts. Are you seriously going to fight it?"

According to May, there were apparently divine beasts in the sea as well. *I'd*

*love to see them someday.*

Clara then used her Demonic Tool to illuminate our surroundings; the light from her prosthetic arm let us see Tressy more clearly than before. Owing to the thick clouds covering the sky, it was as dark as night. The rough, storm-blackened seas below exuded an air that made it clear that falling in would be a one-way voyage.

And the merchant vessel was being dragged along by the flow of the whirlpool. Though it continued to resist, we were most certainly inching closer and closer to Tressy. Everyone on the rocking ship looked upon our gargantuan foe with faces of despair.

“It’s over. This is it.”

“Even with the lady on board.”

“Heh heh, I’m sure everything up to now’s been a coincidence.”

Roland cast down his eyes, clenching his fist and biting his lower lip.

“Gina... I’m sorry,” he muttered.

I could hear the voices of my ancestors from the Jewel.

“That thing is way too big. And none of us have any experience fighting anything like it. What’s your move, Mr. Lyle?”

“Even if you get out of the current, that monster sees us as prey. Does it eat humans? At that size, preying on humans seems a bit too inefficient, if you ask me.”

“Do monsters ever feel full? But at that size, it’s too large to be cute. If only its eyes were a little rounder, I might have felt a little more endeared.”

“There you go again, Fifth.”

“With Lyle as Mr. Lyle, what’s going to become of us? Post-Growths do tend to result in horrible mistakes more often than not.”

With the hopes and dreams of all my ancestors on my back, I boldly stood tall at the bow, pointing at Tressy.

“Monica, apparently that’s a legendary monster.”

Despite the storm and the spray of the sea, her clothes and hair remained miraculously dry. She, too, stood unwavering as the ship was tossed around, her red eyes glowing as she spoke.

“Legend or not, it is still a monster. It’s just larger than most—I still sense a Demonic Stone. Oh, but it does have presence. Maybe because of the crown?”

“I want that crown! I’m sure it’ll sell for a fortune! Now then, ladies. You heard her. Call it legendary all you want, but that is nothing more than a monster.”

“And that *monster* is a very troublesome one,” Miranda said with a shrug. “Do you have any idea how to fight it, Lyle?”

“Of course! I’m a man destined to become a legend, after all! How could I hold my head high if I couldn’t defeat one measly legendary monster?”

Hearing this, Eva shook her head, laughed...and smiled.

“That’s the spirit. How are we supposed to draw a crowd if you can’t do that?”

From the Jewel came the third’s laughter. “Take down a legendary monster to become a legend, huh? Well said. If you can pull it off, that is.”

Novem’s eyes seemed to sparkle as she looked at me. *Am I simply that dashing right now? I’m so charming I even scare myself.*

“Ah, for crying out loud!” Aria shouted, roughly ruffling up her hair. “Just tell us how we’re going to win! We can really win, right?”

Touching my right hand to my chin, I confidently reassured her, “Naturally. House Walt’s policy has always been... To never pick fights you can’t win!”

As I burst into a grand spurt of laughter, the fear seemed to fade from my comrades’ faces. Even Aria conceded, throwing her hands up and saying, “Fine, do whatever you want.”

Yet there, Roland cried out to disrupt the confident mood I’d been building up.

“Don’t say things that can’t be done! Our opponent is a legendary monster. That... That thing is beyond you, and me, and all of us! Just look at it! It’s so

massive the ship's cannons didn't even do a thing. This ship is equipped with the latest and greatest cannons—so if those don't work, what hope do we have?! We've been abandoned by the goddess!"

Roland's outcry spread fear among all the sailors and adventurers who were still on deck. It dampened everyone's morale.

Then, perhaps realizing that no one was heading inside despite her order, Vera stormed out onto the deck.

"What are you all doing?! Get back inside at once!"

Roland turned to her. "Lady Vera... I know there's nothing any of us could have done about this. But... But why did you bring me along at a time like this? If only you hadn't invited me... If only you were truly a goddess of good fortune, this would never have happened."

Roland laughed and wept, and Vera froze completely in shock. Eventually, she lowered her head.

"Everyone...please go back inside."

"Aah, now he's done it," I heard the third head say.

Vera definitely had something she wanted to tell Roland. And surely Roland hadn't wanted to tell her how he truly felt. But faced with death, his emotions had gotten the better of him.

Knowing their circumstances, I could understand how they both felt.

But...this situation worked to my advantage. And so, I decided to take full advantage of it.

"You're waiting for a goddess of good fortune? That's quite the passive approach you're taking. In this world, fortune is something you seize with your own two hands! Remember this—the goddesses smile down on those that fight on."

All eyes were on me. *Is this my innate charisma at work? Even words that sound like the ramblings of a drunkard seem convincing when they're coming from my mouth. All right, this feels good, so let's put on a show!*

"Simply praying won't earn you any goddess's favor. It's those who struggle

tooth and nail to live—those are the ones they smile upon in the end. We’re in the presence of a legendary monster right now, and I intend to take on that legend... Is anyone going to join me? I might be taking center stage, but I’ll turn you all into legends along with me!”

Aria and Sophia both looked at me with light sighs.

“Why’s he so into this?”

“His personality really does a one-eighty after Growths.”

Turning my right hand to Tressy at the center of the vortex, I guided their eyes toward her. *That is our enemy. That’s what we have to defeat!*

“Such a fearsome foe came out all on her own. How can we not take advantage of this opportunity? I want to become a man of legend!”

Meeting Tressy here truly was a stroke of fortune. What was my goal? To get my name out there. To obtain wealth and fame. And—to carve my name into the bedrock of history!

*That’s right, my name’s going to go down in history—doesn’t that just get the blood pumping?*

Before I knew it, Vera had come up next to me. Her face was close. Her eyes serious as could be, showing she didn’t have the mind to put up with any nonsense.

“If we have a chance, I’m taking it.” Naturally, if we didn’t, I would run. “I, Lyle Walt, have never lost a battle in my life!”

Those words got a “Huh?!” from Clara, while Eva wearily denied my statement.

“You lost to Ceres, didn’t you? Twice, from what I’ve been told.”

“Phew,” I let out a long breath, shaking my head. She just didn’t get it. “I haven’t lost yet! My battle with Ceres is still ongoing; the victor is yet to be decided! That means I haven’t lost yet!”

Even the rest of my comrades were now staring at me, the words “H-How shameless” written all over their incredulous faces.

The voices of my ancestors echoed from the Jewel.

“That’s one way to put it!”

“I wish Lyle would show this level of brazenness more often.”

“That battle’s not over, so it’s technically not a lie.”

“That’s the spirit, Lyle!”

“Just don’t let it end with empty bravado, and it will be fine.”

*I’m glad someone appreciates my performance.*

After thinking a moment, Vera said, “Got it. I’ll bet our future on you.”

“Sorry, but this isn’t a gamble. Because I’m going to win.”

Even though she seemed done with me, Vera let out a soft chuckle. She turned around to rally her crew.

“Come on! Are you really going to leave everything to *him*? This is our ship. Are we just going to let them go crazy without lifting a finger ourselves?”

The sailors lifted their heads.

One of them raised their voice, “Boys, our goddess of good fortune says it’s time to fight! We’re not about to let those adventurers hog all the glory! If we lose, it’s over anyway. Then why don’t we go out with a bang?!”

Strength returned to their eyes.

“Dammit, we used up all our luck, eh?”

“If those guards mess up, I’m giving them a good wallop.”

“If we pull through, Lady Vera might really be a goddess.”

Though they grumbled and trembled, the sailors rose to their feet. Vera muttered a quiet “Thank you, everyone.”

I stared at Vera’s face.

“Wh-What?”

“No, you are indeed a goddess of good fortune. After all, when facing down a legendary monster, you just so happened to bring someone as strong as me



with you. That said, I do have one request if we want to win.”

Once I brought up the stakes, her expression turned serious.

So I, too, looked at her with full sincerity and said: “I want a kiss. And not just any kiss—a deep one!”

In that instant, Vera slapped me across the face.

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We gathered in a large room below deck. Having been slapped, I explained the necessity of the deep kiss with a straight face.

“And...that about sums it up. Surely I don’t need to explain further.”

Vera, Roland, and the crew—many of the sailors gripping their guns—were glaring daggers at me.

“You fraud! You just want a kiss from Lady Vera!”

“You’re asking for a bullet to the face.”

“How about I cram you into a cannon and shoot you straight into the ocean?”

I placed a hand to my hip and laughed. “Oh? Then can you win without me? I’ll definitely win. But this plan is built on the premise of using my Art, Connection.”

Connection—the second stage of my Art. It formed a mana line between me and anyone I kissed. Naturally, this was not a physical connection; it was something of an invisible, untouchable thread.

Once connected, we could hear one another’s voices and even share our vision. It was an incredible Art that even let me share my other Arts with whoever I had a link with. However, it required a deep kiss.

“Then can’t it be a guy? Go kiss the first mate or something!” one of the sailors called out as if it were blatantly obvious.

And though a shocked first mate exclaimed, “Hah?!” I wasn’t going to accept it either!

“Absolutely not! I refuse to kiss a man!”

The sailors were clearly frustrated, but for what possible reason would I kiss a man? No, definitely not.

Vera sighed.

“You’re not lying. Right?”

We’d all gathered in that crowded room, and Shannon was there too. When Vera looked at her, Shannon reluctantly nodded with disgust.

“It’s not a lie. That’s the worst part.”

*That’s the best part for me.*

“Well? Isn’t my Art incredible?”

As I crossed my arms and laughed, those looks the men gave me. Hoo boy, if looks could kill.

Vera made her decision. “Very well. If that’s what it takes to get through this, that’s easy enough.”

But there, Roland stepped in to stop her.

“Y-You can’t! Lady Vera, you mustn’t give away a kiss so lightly. Can’t you come up with a more serious plan, Lyle?”

Roland insisted there had to be a better way, but he seemed to have no alternative himself. We didn’t have the time to sit around mulling about it. Even now, the ship was being dragged closer and closer to Tressy.

“I don’t have any other plans. Coordinating through Connection is the foundation of my strategy, and the ideal candidate would be Vera who’s knowledgeable about the ship and can command the crew.”

I left out the fact that Vera was the one I wanted to kiss—but naturally, that wasn’t all there was to it. There were practical reasons too. As she was the ship’s owner and the one who could command the sailors, forming a Connection with her was essential. Using someone else as an intermediary to relay commands would be way too much of a hassle.

*I’m not making excuses just because I want to kiss her! I’m making excuses—with justifiable purpose!*

“Th-Then how about me?!” Roland offered.

“Get lost. I refuse, and I see no benefit in linking with you over her.”

“B-But this is just too cruel.”

“Don’t worry. It’s better than dying.”

As Roland continued dawdling, Vera pushed him aside. “All right. Arguing about this is just a waste of time.”

“Milady?!”

As he tried to stop her, Vera grabbed him by his lapels.

“Don’t you want to survive? If you want to return to Gina alive, then do what you can now!”

“Y-Yes ma’am.”

Vera seemed to eye Roland with a hint of disappointment as he slumped down. Perhaps, deep down, she’d wanted him to stop her. But all the more convenient for me.

As luck would have it, the ship chose that moment to lurch, and Vera lost her balance. While she would normally steady herself in no time at all, I wasn’t going to let that happen. I immediately took the opportunity to reach out and support her by the waist.

This was getting more troublesome than it had to be. As she froze, startled, I brought my face up to hers.

“I do apologize for taking your lips by force. Next time, I promise I’ll do it in a way we both agree upon.”

“What are you— Mmh?!”

I sealed her mouth and stuck my tongue in. She resisted at first, but soon accepted it as a necessity, grabbing my right hand with her left. Perhaps this was her way of getting back at me—she squeezed hard enough for her fingers to dig into my skin.



“Haaah,” the fifth sighed. “Why can’t Lyle be this assertive on a regular basis? And what was that at the end? That they’ll both want it next time?”

“It wasn’t forced, but it was far too aggressive. Seducing her seems out of the question now,” the fourth muttered, as though nursing a headache.

Some time passed before I slowly parted our lips and helped her back onto her feet. Vera retreated a few steps, wiping her mouth with her sleeve.

She looked at me teary-eyed—but that expression changed as she began experiencing the effects of my Art.

“That was the worst kiss imaginable. But I’ll forgive you this time, out of respect for this ability. And let me be clear: There won’t be a next time!”

As she scolded me, I put on a disappointed smile.

“But it feels like we can win now, right? So why don’t you tell your crew to lower those guns they’re pointing at me?”

Around me, sailors seeing blood stood, guns raised, their fingers hovering over the triggers.

“How dare he do that to the lady!”

“Let’s blow his head off!”

“He’s fish food!”

Even the first mate was glaring at me, enraged, ready to give the firing order. But Vera intervened—very reluctantly.

“Lower your weapons. As much as I hate to admit it, we need Lyle to win. Besides, things are about to get busy. Everyone to your stations! Lyle, I won’t forgive you if you lose after kissing me.”

*I’m glad I managed to pep her up.*

I watched the frustrated sailors lower their guns and head off to their stations with triumphant smiles. After the sailors had scurried out of the room, I turned to my comrades who’d remained behind.

Miranda smiled at me, her eyes cold as ice. “What a passionate kiss. I wouldn’t mind if you—”

“Oh, my bad. I was planning to take your lips too.”

Quickly closing the distance, I leaned in and kissed her. Miranda’s eyes widened as she put up a bit of resistance.

Our lips parted, a thread of saliva lingering between us.

Miranda stepped back, bashful and blushing. “The usual Lyle would never silence me so forcefully.”

“You’re adorable, Miranda.”

Miranda reddened even more and turned away at my compliment.

I issued my instructions to the others.

“Now then, it’s time for the big showdown with that legendary monster. I’m going to need everyone’s help. Miranda, you’re with me; May, you guard Shannon.”

Monica raised her hands high. “I’ll do my best.”

“Huh? You don’t need my help?” May asked, cocking her head curiously.

“I do, but I need you to protect Shannon while you’re at it. She’s going to have to do some work too.”

“Why do I have to fight? I’m pretty weak, you know,” Shannon said with discontent.

“I’m counting on your orphic eyes.”

I continued with everyone’s assignments.

“Aria, Sophia, Eva, Clara, you’ll be stationed inside the ship. Make sure Vera’s orders are relayed to every station. Novem, Miranda, you’re on deck. Don’t fall off.”

Her face still beet red, Miranda didn’t seem to have any further questions.

Instead, Novem asked me, “Lord Lyle, what are our real chances of winning?” She didn’t seem to think we had secured certain victory.

“Yes, it hurts that I can’t completely guarantee it, but I’m confident we will win. In the first place, if we don’t win here, defeating Ceres will be a dream

within a dream. Let's start by slaying this legendary beast and kick things off with a bang."

I smiled at my party, who still looked half in doubt.

"Plus, think about it. We need to get our names out there, right? This fight will practically do it for us. I really am loved by the goddess of good fortune! I'm sure there'll be a huge uproar once we get back to Baym! I can't wait!"

No doubt we'd receive a warm welcome in Baym.

Novem seemed a bit troubled as I burst into laughter. But she quickly put on a smile. "The goddesses smile down upon those that fight on. You might be right about that."

I stuck up my thumb, prodding it at my chest. "Goddess or not, I'm certain they'll fall the moment they lay eyes on me, Lyle Walt. In fact, they might already be head over heels for me. What a sinful man I am."

She must have found something I said hilarious, as Novem laughed and nodded several times. "Very much so."

Everything was supposed to end without incident—it was supposed to. Up until a group raised some objections: Shannon, Eva, and Clara. Shannon's reaction was especially fierce.

"Huh? Wait. Huuuh? Does that mean you have to kiss us too? I don't want to!"

Seeing Shannon recoil at the thought of kissing me, I informed her, "That's right. And it'll have to be a deep one too."

Shannon vehemently protested, "No way I'm doing it with the tongue!"

Watching her turn red as she desperately objected, I thought up a resolution. "If a deep kiss sounds like too much, then how about a good old smooch? See? Doesn't that sound a lot cuter?"

"It's not cute at all! And they're the same thing! Absolutely not!" She crossed her arms and turned the other way.

*Yeah, I guess I might be rushing things,* I reflected.

“Got it, you’re off the hook,” I said. “Any other objections?”

But Shannon reached out, looking a little bothered. “Err, wait—are you just going to give up like that? I mean, you know. Maybe if you cried and begged and said, ‘I need you’ or something...you know? And then, well, if you needed me that much, I might feel compelled to meet everyone’s expectations,” she complained.

But time was of the essence, so I got to work convincing the others. There were still two people against it.

First came Eva. She put her hands out front as she shook her head.

“Hold on a second. I don’t hate you Lyle, but I don’t really like you like that. A kiss is a bit much. I-I want...a grand, dramatic romance!”

She thought of me as a friend and didn’t want to take our relationship in that direction. But that didn’t mean I was about to back down!

“Is that so?”

“Th-That’s right. So I’ll be sitting this one out. I-I’ll do my best in other ways, I swear. I really will, so no kissing! D-Definitely not! I’m saving myself for someone special!”

“Oh, is there someone you like?”

“W-Well, not right now.”

I took a step closer, wrapping my arm around her waist and pulling her in as I grabbed her extended right hand. Our faces were almost in kissing distance.

“Got it. You’ve got one minute, so go ahead and fall for me—right now.”

“H-Huh?! Are you insane?!”

She turned her face away, trying not to make eye contact. But her face was bright red.

*Bull’s-eye.*

In the Jewel, the seventh head seemed to take a liking to my line.

“Go ahead and fall for me—right now. Could that be this time’s Best Lyle?”



Best Lyle—that was a game my ancestors played, picking out what they thought was my best line. Good grief, they had their work cut out for them, especially when every word that came out of my mouth was infinitely quotable.

“Hmm?” the third hummed thoughtfully. “I think I prefer when he laughed and choked on water.”

“Then I’m going with that,” the fifth head said, short and simple.

The fourth seemed to have a fair number of candidates. “How bothersome. That ‘How about a good old smooch?’ bit is hard to beat.”

Meanwhile, the sixth was putting his decision on hold. “I’m holding out. We’re not done just yet.”

“Yes, the smooch is hard to discard,” the seventh head agreed.

As everyone watched over us with bated breath, I stared into Eva’s eyes with conviction.

“Don’t worry. It’s only a matter of whether you fall now or later. If you’re going to fall in love with me eventually, then what’s the issue?”

Even still, she resisted. “It’s nothing *but* issues! I’ve got dreams, you know!”

Ah yes—her dreams. She’d been deliriously babbling about them while she was seasick.

“You want to be confessed to in a sold-out theater, right?”

“Y-You actually remembered that?! Then you should understand why we can’t do this. I wouldn’t mind if we were actors in a play, but I’m not kissing in private. I’m not that cheap!”

A normal man would pull back after hearing that—but I was no normal man!

“Got it. Then the confession can wait ’til later. I’ll take your lips first. Once I’ve made the preparations, I’ll make all your dreams come true. Just imagine it—a large stage to yourself, your figure singing the last note, looking out at me in the applauding crowd. A full house, and everyone clapping as I jump onstage! I’ll give you that.”

Eva seemed captivated by the scene I’d painted in her mind. Her cheeks

flushed as she nodded, her voice a mere whisper. “All right.”

She’d imagined it and accepted it. My dramatic confession. The girl was satisfied.

Shannon pointed at her and wailed, “Hey, that girl just nodded and gave the okay! After everything she said, she’s nodding and red-faced! What does this mean?! What does it meeeeeean?!”

Before she could overthink it, I kissed her. She closed her eyes, nervous, but the way she shook was downright criminal in its cuteness.

Connection formed a line between us. I could feel it.

“Eva,” I whispered. “From now on, you have the right to stay closest to me. To know my story better than anyone.”

She looked embarrassed but pleased too.

The fourth head sounded startled. “N-No way. He actually succeeded?”

With red faces all around, I turned to my next target: Clara. Clara was crouched down and curled into a ball to avoid any and all conversation with me.

“Clara,” I called out.

“W-We can’t. I-I-I-I-If we get into that sort of relationship, maintaining the party will become a huge pain! I am very knowledgeable about that sort of thing! So spare me, please!”

May watched her, a hand on her hip. “Aww, looks like it’s not happening. So, Lyle, do you want to do it with me in qilin form?”

“Since I already got your first qilin kiss, I’d like to do it in human form next.”

“Oh, what a shame. My first qilin kiss was with Fredriks.”

“Wh-What?!”

I grabbed the Jewel in shock as cold words rained down upon the fifth head.

“Whoa, gross.”

“To think, my own son...”

“Y-You people! Animals kiss just to show affection, that’s it!”

“What am I supposed to do with this old man?”

“Fifth, I don’t think you’re helping your case.”

I heard the fifth cry out, “Let’s take this outside, all of you!” but I ignored it and calmed my heart.

“Let’s do it in human form anyway. Incidentally, Clara.”

“Y-Yes?” She lifted her head as I sat down beside her.

“I promise I’ll create a library for you. A library made just for you.”

Her face flushed in a fluster as she was visibly swayed by the thought of having her own library.

“You are a crucial member of our party. I couldn’t ask for a better support, and I’m not going to let you go.”

“Y-Yesh!” she stammered.

And with that, I managed to win Clara over.

Meanwhile, Shannon was stomping her feet in frustration.

“Come on! You all need to resist more!”

## Chapter 116: As One

Vera very quickly returned to the bridge. She pressed her left hand to her head, trying to contain the headache pounding within. The sheer volume of information flowing into her mind was overwhelming—with each passing moment, the number of viewpoints seemed to increase. This, on top of all the details about the ship's surroundings.

With each new addition, her head felt ready to burst.

*I can perceive everything happening around the ship...even underwater. I can see inside the cabins too. With Arts this powerful, it's no wonder he'd boast about assured victory.*

But thanks to that, her headache was nearly unbearable.

"Captain?" the first mate asked out of concern.

"Throw more Demonic Stones into the reactor! We're closing in and blasting that thing at point-blank range!"

"A-Are you sure about that?!"

The first mate's surprise was met with a firm resolution.

"Our attacks are pointless if they don't reach," Vera explained. "And the adventurers' attacks won't connect either unless we get closer."

"Do you really think they'll be of any use?"

"I'll take responsibility! We're going to teach that three-headed monster the true terror of humanity. Oh, it looks like we're short-staffed in the engine room. Send reinforcements immediately!"

"Y-Yes ma'am!"

Issuing command after command, Vera carefully scrutinized the images flowing into her head.

*I can see it...even the movements of people. I can hear their voices too.*

In her head, she could hear a woman shouting.

“Damn it! Why was my kiss the only one that lasted two seconds shorter than the average?! Well—not that there was a need to do it anyway. We’re already linked, so it’s a win that I got to kiss him at all.”

“Shut it, Monica! I’m soaked and having a terrible time! Bwah! Koff! M-May, h-help...”

“Aww man, Shannon swallowed some water again.”

Monica grumbled about her kiss while Shannon was choking on seawater outside. Meanwhile, May was tending to her in her time of need.

“Clara, you’ve been awfully quiet. You’re not lost in some weird daydream, are you? Get a grip.”

“If anything, Aria, you’re the one who’s had a maiden-esque look on your face ever since the kiss.”

Aria and Clara were bickering as they thought back to their kiss.

“It’s hot! It’s ridiculously hot! They’re kinda shoving piles of Demonic Stones into this giant furnace thing! What’s this all about? Hey, what is this thing?! It’s making it way too hot! It’s steaming, for crying out loud!”

“Eva, you shut it too! We’re cold and wet out here!”

Eva was making a ruckus in the engine room, while Miranda—drenched and cold outside—scolded her.

“Wow, there are so many cannons. My ears might start ringing from this.”

Sophia seemed to be in the cannon room, marveling at the arsenal.

“Milord, preparations are complete. The other adventurers are ready to fight too.”

Standing out on deck, Novem had gathered up all the adventurers capable of using magic, seemingly preparing for a coordinated magic assault.

She could even see everything that Lyle was seeing through his eyes.

The man was staring straight at the Trident Sea Serpent—at Tressy.

“All right, it’s about time to kick this off. My legend—no, our legend—starts here and now! Fwa ha ha ha!”

His triumphant laugh echoed through her head.

*These people are way too noisy! But we might be able to pull this off...*

She could monitor every single station and immediately send orders with absolutely no delay. Lyle hadn’t been wrong in choosing Vera as his Connection partner.

Vera focused her thoughts toward him: “We’re ready too. I can count on you to time the cannons, right?”

“Leave it to me,” Lyle instantly responded. “We’ll claim victory and seize the future...! Oh, didn’t that line come out nice?”

“Splendid, milord.”

Lyle was infatuated with his own words, and Novem offered him the usual unconditional praise.

Their exchange drew Shannon’s ire.

“Take this seriously! Why are you so relaxed?! Do you not see that massive thing right in front of us?! How can you crack jokes at a time like this?!”

“I’m containing myself more than I usually would, I’ll have you know. It’s just that my aura is on a completely different level compared to normal folks, so even suppressing it takes a momentous effort. Even if I say some absolute nonsense, everyone just believes it—I guess it’s just natural talent. I was born with it.”

Lyle’s words only made Vera more anxious. With all the voices, she felt she was growing insane—she had to be. After all, she was hearing other male voices behind his words.

“It’s a talent, no doubt about that.”

“Indeed. There aren’t many who undergo such drastic changes upon Growth.”

“Hey, how about we settle on ‘Goddess or not, I’m certain they’ll fall the moment they lay eyes on me’?”

“Another bountiful harvest!”

“To think it’s only just begun... I knew Lyle was a genius. Hmm? Something feels strange— Ah!”

The voices abruptly cut out, and Vera shook her head a few times to clear it. The voices she’d heard belonged to men—not Lyle, but mature-sounding men. They sounded to be somewhere in their thirties, speaking as though they were enjoying this horrid situation.

*What’s going on? Lyle said he wouldn’t kiss a man...right?*

As Vera wrestled with her thoughts, the ship changed course and began moving toward Tressy. The change in the ship’s movement seemed to cause a change in Tressy’s behavior too.

“Captain! We’re in cannon range!”

“Hold fire! Wait for my signal!”

*Erk, I don’t have the time to think about it right now.*

As Vera refocused on Tressy, the voices in her head—the voices of everyone she was connected to—gradually grew more serious. Save for Lyle, that is.

“Ah, my catchphrase! I haven’t said my catchphrase yet! Grr! I know I have to say something. Ah, fine, the usual it is! Let’s have some fun with this! There, that’ll do it.”

He was still the same as ever.

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Standing about midway up the deck, I glanced at Monica. The weapon she had was quite large; far larger than I’d expect from a hunting rifle. It was shaped like a gun but reminded me more of a cannon.

“Monica, my dear, what’s that you’ve got there?”

“This, my love, is an anti-materiel rifle—a large-caliber firearm designed to target fortified objects rather than people. It is perfect for taking down large targets.”

“That sounds powerful. In that case, do you see Tressy sitting all posed and

elegant over there? Why don't we give her a little taste? Start with a preemptive strike."

Monica cocked her head. "Are you sure you want to provoke it? I'd recommend getting closer for a simultaneous barrage."

"I want to see just how effective your gun is."

At that, Monica smiled and said, "Oh, what a hopeless chicken you are!" as she eagerly readied her rifle. Despite her maid uniform, her form as she confidently steadied her weapon didn't seem farcical in the slightest. Or at least, I didn't think so.





“Eat lead!”

As Monica pulled the trigger, the air was filled with a deafening roar like a cannon had gone off.

“Whoa! Lyle, did you see that?!” the seventh head said excitedly from the Jewel.

I ignored him entirely.

The bullet struck Tressy dead-on, appearing to deal more damage than the ship’s cannons. The creature twisted its body in surprise. She’d felt it. But it wasn’t enough to cause any significant harm.

After a few more shots, Monica swapped out the magazine and analyzed the situation.

“I managed to penetrate the magical barrier, but I don’t see any way to take it down with my remaining ammunition. For a creature to stay in one piece after taking this rifle...that’s quite the monster.”

Raindrops and seawater sizzled against the barrel, producing wisps of white steam that rose into the air.

“It’s a legendary monster, after all. Where’s the fun if it doesn’t put up a fight? All right, my turn!”

Pulling the Jewel off my neck with my left hand, I willed the silver ornamentation to take on the form of a longbow. The large bow was even longer than I was tall, and as I poured mana into it, a bowstring of pale blue light spanned it from end to end. With Select’s secondary effect, I could aim it with perfect precision. And so, I turned to Monica with a proposal.

“I could adjust your shots if you want me to.”

“Please don’t underestimate me,” Monica said, flatly rejecting the offer. “Hitting the target is the easy part. My concept of precision is on a higher level than yours. But are you sure we shouldn’t aim for the center head? That’s clearly its weak spot.”

I’d already instructed her to avoid hitting the central head at all costs.

“That crown is mine!” I proclaimed as I majestically drew the bow, a single strand of light manifesting in the empty space between my left and right hands. Slowly, the light took on the form of an arrow. And once I was sure of my aim—I loosed it.

“You’d better not go down too easily.”

The blue arrow flew straight for Tressy’s right head. The attack didn’t go unnoticed as the monster twisted its neck in an attempt to dodge. It must have sensed the threat I posed—but it was too late. The arrow exploded on impact, causing the right head to reel back.

As Tressy lost some of her balance, I shouted, “Now! Fire!”

Not a moment later, the cannons of the merchant vessel erupted in unison. From the deck, the magicians unleashed their magic as one. Cannons, magic, arrows of light—they all burst out in brilliant explosions sending smoke billowing all around the enormous creature.

Once the smoke cleared, the head we’d all targeted was raised to the sky, roaring in fury.

I could hear the air vibrating, even as far away as we were.

The vortex grew even stronger, churning the seas even more. The ship’s tilts were growing even more precarious.

The monster’s central head opened its massive jaws, gathering an orb of bluish-white light. It grew larger, pulsing ominously. I checked it through Connection.

Seeing it through Shannon’s orphic eyes, I could see mana rapidly accumulating.

“This is bad. A direct hit, and we’ll be blown to smithereens.”

Monica glanced at me. “You seem awfully cheery, though.”

“It’s simple, really. We *don’t* get hit, easy as that. Novem, Miranda, deploy it as planned. And Vera, pick up speed. Get closer if you have to. Keep moving to throw off its aim.”

Novem and Miranda promptly replied: “Preparations are complete.”

“You make it sound so easy.”

Vera seemed to understand what I was going for, but she did complain at the unreasonable request. “Changing course isn’t as easy as it looks!”

Still, she barked orders at her crew and maneuvered the ship. As the ship shifted, the violent sprays of water intensified along with the rocking.

Tressy’s central head finally unleashed the mass of mana from its gaping maw. It was so far away that it seemed slow at first, but as it grew closer, we could finally see how fast it truly was.

I swung my right hand to the side.

“Unleash your magic shields! Don’t take it head-on! Deflect it!”

Novem, Miranda, and the other magicians worked together to deploy a magic shield around the ship. The moment the attack glanced off, it shattered instantly with a tremendous shock wave.

The orb grazed the ship before crashing into the distant sea, raising a towering pillar of water in its wake.

“Indeed, that would have obliterated us in one hit,” Monica observed. “It is going out of its way to toy with us. I’m sure it could have killed us whenever it wanted to.”

I thrust my right hand forward.

“That arrogance will be your downfall! Fire!”

Cannons erupted once more from the starboard side as I activated Select, ensuring the shells found their mark on Tressy’s outer heads. But as the shots landed, I noticed a faint glimmer coming from Tressy’s body.

Monica calmly analyzed the situation. “That’s a very thick wall of mana. The attacks are not entirely ineffective, but we’ll need to land hundreds of them at this rate. And I doubt that creature is about to let us do that.”

“I see. I suspected that long-range wouldn’t be enough to take it out,” I agreed, my eyes locked on to Tressy.

She was glaring right back at me with those red eyes of hers. And for the first

time, I sensed her composure slipping.

“I’m glad you’re finally taking us seriously. So what’ll it be, Tressy? Are you going to keep firing, or are you going to take the fight to us?”

“The latter, it seems,” Monica answered. “Congratulations. You’ve made it angry.”

As Tressy charged, I drew my bow with a smile. This time, I conjured multiple arrows, aiming slightly higher before letting them fly. Those several arrows multiplied into hundreds, arcing beautifully before raining down on the encroaching monster.

“How about this?!”

Each resulted in an explosion, but that faint shimmer shielded Tressy, protecting her from any decisive damage. And then—Tressy dove beneath the waves.

This seemed to cause the whirlpool to vanish.

“The whirlpool has stopped,” said Monica. “Looks like playtime is over.”

“Now’s our chance. Make sure she doesn’t catch us,” I ordered Vera.

“Yeah, easy for you to say! Ah, damn it! Hard to port! Hard to port!”

The ship slowly turned leftward, picking up speed. We were now on the run.

“All right, let’s aim for the moment she resurfaces.”

Monica and I readied our weapons again—her with her anti-materiel rifle, and me with my bow. I fired the first shot, and she pulled the trigger right after. There were two splashes in the water. Tressy’s movements were dulled momentarily, widening the gap between her and the ship.

I could hear cheers from the Jewels.

“Huh? Is it really going to end like this?”

“No, I doubt this is the end of it.”

“That thing is pretty tough. I’d say we’re still at a disadvantage.”

“That disadvantage is what makes it exciting.”

“But that size, that absolute size is what gives it a real sense of presence. Anyways, it’s big.”

Tressy’s heads—her two side heads—poked out of the water, the mouths glowing with a buildup of pale light.

Sighing, I swiftly readied another shot.

“If you can’t fire fast enough, you’re just a sitting duck.”

I released two arrows, striking both glowing mouths, and causing the masses of mana to burst. The ensuing explosion caused Tressy to suffer harm from her own attacks. Slowly, Tressy slunk back into the water, her movements dulled again. She seemed to be trying to regain her poise down there.

“Ha ha ha! Time for a follow-up!”

Acknowledging my cue, Monica and the others joined in.

“Understood.”

Monica repositioned her rifle for another shot. The attack began the moment she locked aim.

Amid the countless splashes and a barrage of spells, Tressy’s movements became even more sluggish, allowing the distance between her and the ship to grow.

Realizing this, Vera chimed in with a proposal.

“We can escape now!”

“We’re getting too far to hit hard. Get us closer.”

“Huh?”

“Huh?”

*Did I say something strange? I thought we were all in on defeating Tressy, but it seems Vera’s changed her mind.*

“H-Hey, are you seriously planning to fight when we have a perfectly good opportunity to escape?!”

She’d chosen flight over fight.

“If we let her go, she’ll keep causing casualties,” I explained. “Plus, that’s my war funds right there!”

“Y-You fool! I’ll give you your damn support, so let’s just run away!”

“Nope, not running. But I do want the support.”

“Oh, enough out of you! We’re running!”

As Monica changed out her magazine, she reported, “It seems we’ve made it furious.”

Glancing back at Tressy, I saw her center head finally emerge, snapping at the other two. She sank her teeth in, hard, and tore off one of the other heads as it thrashed about in a wild frenzy. The remaining head was fighting back, exchanging bite for bite.

“Now. Attack!” I commanded.

While Tressy was generating that whirlpool, she’d been kind enough to wait for us. But did that mean we had to wait for her? No. She was distracted, and we were going to use that.

Monica was delighted.

“Such a brutish chicken you are! But that’s what I love about you! Let’s shoot some more!”

“I love you too, Monica!”

“Huh?! What did you just say?! Argh, I wasn’t recording! Say it again, please! With the same, refreshing smile, if you will!”

“Ha ha ha, you won’t get it out of me that easily. Now then, on to the next phase. I’ll whisper as many sweet nothings as you want once it’s all over. To all of you!”

*I’ll whisper love to all the adorable ladies connected to me! Why was I never able to convey my honest feelings before? All right, since I’m here, I’ll say it!*

I put my heart into it, raising my voice so it would reach.

“I love you all!”

“Take this seriously!” Shannon yelled to hide her embarrassment. “He’s an

absolute idiot, right?! See? I'm not alone here, right?!"

As she yelled, teary-eyed, in protest as she stood on deck, I shot her a smile. Under May's protection, she was keeping her orphic eyes trained on Tressy the whole time.

"All right, let's collect Tressy's Demonic Stone and materials already."

"W-We need to end this fast! Time's running out! We need this done before the damn chicken's fever time runs out!"

While Tressy was fighting with her own body, we mercilessly bombarded her with cannon fire and spells. It was under this rain of carnage that Tressy finally managed to tear the second head off.

Blood was flowing from where two heads had once been.

"So you're down from three to one, huh."

But as I said that, Tressy stuck that red-eyed glare on us again, roaring to the heavens above. It dove back underwater, its movements sharper than before as it surged toward us.

It was moving faster than it was when it had three heads.

"Is it stronger with fewer heads? Vera!"

She seemed to understand what I was trying to say; the ship was back to taking evasive maneuvers to keep ahead.

"Lyle, the ship doesn't go any faster than this."

It seemed this merchant vessel had already reached its limit.

Observing Tressy, Monica let out a weary sigh. "It's no wonder that firearm development has lagged so far behind. The defenses you have are just too unfair. What even is a barrier? A magic shield? I can see why guns never caught on."

Her complaints were seconded by the seventh in the Jewel.

"My thoughts exactly. No one will appreciate them if their firepower can be mitigated like that, and when they cost so much money. Even though they're truly excellent weapons."



They were undeniably excellent, but were far from reaching widespread use.

I drew the bow again and fired an arrow into the water. The bolt pierced the surface, found its way to Tressy, and exploded. However, unlike before, her movements weren't slowed at all.

"So three heads were slowing you down, eh? Well, you're moving nicely now, Tressy."

While I was observing her, impressed, Shannon situated herself in May's arms for protection.

She looked at me and shouted, "What are you so happy about?! Go defeat Tressy before it gets serious."

Sure, she had a point. But we hadn't managed to take her out thus far, so what were we supposed to do? Even going all out didn't change the outcome.

"I'd love to do that, but it's not enough to finish her. Not that I hate whittling her down, but it's about time to move on to the next stage."

Monica nodded in agreement, moving on to the next preparations.

"My calculations show that your ranged attacks aren't enough to defeat it. As for myself, my ammo is running dangerously low."

Shannon's eyes teared up at those words.

"W-We're going to win, right? I can't swim, you know!"

I used my right hand to brush my damp hair aside. "Don't be ridiculous. If we lose, we die—end of story. Why waste time worrying about what happens after that? I live my life only thinking about winning."

Shannon began to thrash around in May's embrace. "Once this is over, I swear I'm going to beat the stuffing out of you!"

"Hey, settle down. It's hard enough holding you as it is," May grumbled.

All in all, Shannon still seemed to have some fight in her.

"That's the spirit! I'll keep you company after we win. Now then—"

Just then, Miranda's voice came in from the stern.

“Hate to interrupt the fun, but Tressy’s about to catch up. If she gets us, won’t she grab the ship and drag us straight to the bottom of the ocean?”

I reaffirmed my grip on the silver bow. “Not a problem. As I am right now, I’m more than a match for a Tressy or two. Everyone brace yourself—we’re about to speed up.”

“As I told you, we can’t go any faster!” Vera protested.

“We can! I can make anything possible—Differential!”

The fourth head’s art, Differential, raised movement speed while lowering the movement speed of enemies. The instant it activated, I could feel the ship’s speed increase while Tressy’s movements dulled. But even so, Tressy was gaining on us.

“Even that’s not enough?”

With the other two heads out of the picture, Tressy had become quite the bother.

Stroking my chin, I mused, “Three heads might have been easier to deal with.”

Then, I heard Clara’s voice through the link.

“Once this is over, I think I’ll chronicle all of this. Not that it’s certain another of these monsters will appear. Also, I have the results.”

Through Connection, Clara had been supplied with a constant stream of information.

Clara’s Art was called Walking Library. As the name suggested, it stored and preserved every book she’d ever read in her lifetime. She was using it to gather and process information on past sea expeditions. I’d tasked her with looking into aquatic monsters in the meantime.

What sorts of attacks would they use, and what weaknesses did they share? Shannon had investigated monsters resembling Tressy to see what came up. Her research suggested that most large sea creatures attacked by pulling ships underwater.

“They drag ships under, huh? If that’s the case, we’ll need to keep a lookout for that. As for—”

My thoughts were interrupted by Novem, who stood at the prow. Her tone was a little more urgent than usual.

“Lord Lyle, ice is forming ahead of us. It is spreading rapidly.”

I confirmed it with her field of view—but Vera had checked even quicker than me.

“Hard to port!” she shouted. “Everyone, grab onto something!”

The ship suddenly and rapidly lurched, only narrowly avoiding the mountain of ice that had manifested out of nowhere. But the sudden course change allowed Tressy to close the distance.

She slickly emerged from the sea, her massive body looming over the tilted ship, prepared to slam her belly down and sink us.

But...

“You should’ve played your cards sooner, Tressy!”

I laughed as I loosed another arrow.

The light-spawned projectile stabbed into her exposed belly, but the wound was shallow. Though some blood did splatter onto the deck, it was hardly enough. It seemed my attacks were even more ineffective than I thought.

The magicians joined in, peppering her with spells, but the magic shield covering Tressy’s body ensured they didn’t deal any significant damage.

The ship barely slipped under her body in time, causing her to crash into the water and create a massive wave that rocked us violently.

As Monica rushed to my side, she pointed her anti-materiel rifle.

“Chicken dickwad!”

“I know. Looks like we’ve got company.”

Glancing around, I saw that sahuagin had swarmed the ship as it dropped speed. They were more numerous than they had been the last time we’d fought them.

Vera shouted orders to the crew and the adventurers.

“Sailors, to arms! Get the adventurers out there! Don’t let a single one of them get inside!”

I reverted the bow to its pendant form. I was fine with pointing it at a distant foe, but with its unstable state, I feared damaging the ship if I used it on the sahuagin.

With a snap of my fingers, I used the seventh head’s Box Art, two sabers flying into my hands from a magic circle. I gripped the two blades, slicing horizontally through a sahuagin that burst straight up from the water’s surface.

Elsewhere, Miranda drew a knife to protect the magicians, methodically dispatching one sahuagin after the next.

“It’s smart for a monster that bit off its own heads.”

Tressy had apparently directed a school of sahuagin right into our path. She’d blocked our way forward, forcing us straight into the sahuagin. Meanwhile, Tressy slowly poked her face out of the water, her massive mouth open wide.

This time, it wasn’t a mass of mana. She gathered seawater and began to compress it.

“Novem!” I immediately called out.

Not a moment later, several sizable walls of ice rose up right in front of Tressy. Novem’s ice magic would serve as our shield. The blast of highly compressed water easily pierced through the ice. But Vera wasn’t just sitting still.

“Hard to starboard!” she ordered.

The ship veered sharply, narrowly avoiding Tressy’s attack. As Tressy advanced on us, I sliced through a nearby sahuagin and issued another command.

“May, how are things on your end?”

“This much is nothing. I can handle this even with Shannon.”

She continued protecting Shannon as she went around fighting sahuagin.

But more and more of the monsters were gathering; despite May’s assurance,

the sahuagin had broken down the doors and had begun infiltrating the ship.

I selected Sophia to take care of the ones getting in.

“Can you do it, Sophia?”

“Leave it to me!”

Sophia rushed from her post at the cannons, navigating the ship’s interior to deal with the sahuagin that had made it in. And on deck, a fierce battle continued.

As I moved through the fray, I crossed paths with Miranda.

She’d produced threads from all ten of her fingertips, using them to wrap around sahuagin and shred them to pieces.

“She really is a spiderlike woman,” the fifth muttered.

Not that I disagreed with him there.

“You’re like a spider, Miranda,” I said.

With a smile, Miranda swung her right hand and dismembered another three sahuagin. “Oh? Would you like to be caught in my web?” she asked me.

I decided to be upfront and honest with her. “You’d better tie me down tight if you don’t want me to get away. Or maybe I should stick with the spider motif and say wrap me? Capture me? But whatever; I welcome it! Bind me with those threads, however you wish!”

Miranda chuckled a bit. “I see. Then I’ll go right ahead. Just remember—everyone can hear you.”

“Is that a problem?” I asked, straight-faced.

She seemed to be having the time of her life. Personally, I couldn’t understand what she was finding an issue with.

“Fine. I’ll spare you the teasing on *this one* once you return to normal. But do make sure to whisper sweet nothings, even when you’re in your right mind. Okay, Lyle?”

“Whenever you want!”

As I sliced through the sahuagin around us, I could tell my blood-coated sabers were beginning to chip.

“Time to swap out.”

I stabbed both of my blades into the nearest foe, and left them in, kicking the sahuagin back. Again, I used Box to produce another two new blades. Like a top, I spun to dodge the harpoon thrusts of two sahuagin that had tried to take me by the flanks, slicing through them in that same motion.

“You there!” Aria’s voice cut through. “Quit flirting on the battlefield! They’re making it to me now—drop dead already!”

It seemed the sahuagin had made it to Aria’s station, and she was spearing them dead on sight. Borrowing her field of view for a moment, I could see the sailors drawing away a bit at the sheer brutality they had just witnessed. They just didn’t understand how cute a slight tomboyish side could be.

“Are you sulking? I love that rowdy side of you too, Aria,” I said with a laugh.

This got me a scolding from Vera. “Can you shut up for a second?! Ah, sorry, that was on my end. Don’t go out to meet them; keep formation in front of the doors to hold them back! Right now, we need to focus on Tressy! No... I mean the Trident Sea Serpent!”

She seemed to be a bit out of sorts, mixing up her conversations with us and her conversations with the soldiers.

“What’s wrong with Tressy? It suits her just fine.”

I thought it was a cute name, but Vera didn’t seem to like it.

“So hot,” came Eva’s pained voice. “And there are sahuagin at the door—my clothes are dripping in sweat.”

Clara seemed to have it easier. “We’re still holding up here for now. We have guns, and everyone’s holding the line.”

Monica approached me, kicking aside the sahuagin before me.

“Damn chicken, they’re targeting the bridge. If they secure it, we’re done for.”

At the same time, I got an urgent report from Novem, who was keeping her

attention on Tressy.

“Tressy is coming to sink us again. What shall we do, milord?”

The bridge was in danger, and Tressy was charging again. I was faced with a threat on two fronts and swiftly made my choice.

“Simple—we handle both!” I declared, sprinting off toward the bridge.

The bridge hadn’t been spared from the flood of monsters, as fierce combat ensued with the monsters that had wrenched open the door.

“Urgh!”

The sahuagin had breached the emergency exit and were pouring into the room.

Vera drew her handgun from the holster on her back, firing off a shot at the swarm. The sailors—too—grabbed nearby weapons to take them on.

“Stand back, Captain!”

As the ship rocked, Vera was desperately fighting on the bridge.

“What good would it do if I backed off alone?! Focus on yourself!” Vera snapped back as she released the revolver’s cylinder to swap out the bullets.

But her attention wavered as Tressy’s menacing form loomed closer and closer, rendering a few shots nonlethal. Three sahuagin left.

*Dammit! I’m almost out...*

She fired again, taking out two of them. But as she pointed the barrel at the last one, her revolver clicked—empty. Even with half of its head blown off, the sahuagin staggered toward her.

Her first mate was struggling to reload. The ship had never swayed so violently before, and the sight of Tressy closing in did not help. Vera’s anxiety mirrored what her crew was going through.

Vera, however, stepped forward.

“Out of the way!”

She built up momentum, leaping and delivering a powerful kick to the

sahuagin, sending it flying through the open doorway.

But then...

“Crap!”

The ship lurched again, causing her to fumble her landing. And just like that, she, too, was thrown out the door. As her body drifted through the air, she could see Tressy closing in.

The beast was right before her, its gaping maw open wide.

Vera stared at Tressy and thought, *I see. So this is where it ends.*

Time seemed to flow strangely slowly as Vera turned midair to get one last look at her ship, her hand reaching out into nothingness.





On the bridge, the first mate and the rest of the sailors were reaching out as well, reaching out to her even when they couldn't possibly reach. They were shouting something, but Vera couldn't hear a word of it.

Staring at her own outstretched hand, Vera felt the scene overlapping with the dream that had haunted her for so many years.

*So it was a premonition after all.*

The hand she'd extended in a last-ditch effort to keep herself from sinking to the sea's depths—in the dream, it would always crumble to pieces. She knew it now—that vision had been a sign of her impending death. The thought brought tears to her eyes.

*I see... So this is it. If I'd known it would end like this, I would have told him how I really felt.*

As Tressy's massive maw grew closer and closer, Vera closed her eyes and braced for the final moment. The faces of her family came to mind. And the face of her beloved—just before she could picture it, she heard a voice.

"Perfect timing!"

Her outstretched arm was grasped, and when she opened her eyes, there was Lyle.

Lyle gave a fearless smile as he looked at her.

He pulled her in close, and she found herself embracing a body drenched in seawater, rain, and blood.

Lyle laughed as he threw himself into Tressy's open mouth. They were about to be swallowed whole together.

"Y-You idiot! What the hell are you doing?!"

Vera chastised his reckless actions, but Lyle was completely undeterred. In fact, he was acting as though certain victory was upon him.

"If the outside's no good, I'll attack from within! Just you try to endure this one, Tressy!"

Lyle clutched his blue Jewel in hand.

The mouth shut.

For a moment, they were enveloped in complete darkness before Lyle's Jewel began to glow, illuminating the rows of sharp teeth. A moment later, Lyle was holding a massive silver greatsword.

*The necklace transformed?*

As Vera was taken by surprise, Lyle strengthened his grip on the greatsword's hilt, pointing its tip deeper into the creature's gullet.

"Take all my mana!"

His body was cloaked in a pale blue flame, but it didn't burn Vera when she touched it. Instead, she felt a reassuring warmth.

*What are these flames? It's almost like they're protecting Lyle.*

The greatsword trembled and shone, rattling so hard it almost sounded like the roar of a beast. It let off a blast of wind unlike any sword she knew, accompanied by a shock wave that felt like a great explosion. Lyle had infiltrated Tressy's body to attack the beast directly—an action so suicidal it beggared belief.

"Wh-What are you! Eep!"

The ensuing impact forced her to close her eyes.

\*\*\*

On deck, Novem watched as Lyle leaped into Tressy's mouth. After swallowing Lyle, Tressy's head turned to look at the heavens as it seemed to writhe in agony.

Before long, its body swelled dramatically from its neck to its abdomen before its mouth opened once more. And from within crawled Lyle, the silver greatsword in his right hand, and Vera in his left.

Then, it happened. Tressy's stomach and neck burst from the inside, showering the merchant vessel in blood.

"It's falling! Take cover!" the sailors on deck cried out.

Tressy's massive body swayed before collapsing against the deck. The beast

was leaning on the ship, locking eyes with Novem in its final moments.

Novem could see those massive eyes wavering in hesitation, in fear. She placed a gentle hand on Tressy.

“You’ve done your duty,” she said gently. “Now rest.”

The light faded from Tressy’s eyes as the monster breathed its last.

Novem immediately turned her attention to Lyle’s safety.

“Milord!” she called out, rushing to his aid. But the sahuagin that remained on deck were still swarming, blocking her path. Novem looked at them coldly.

“You are in my way... Begone.”

A faint glow resided in her violet eyes as the sahuagin found themselves frozen stiff. Their faces contorted in fear.

Novem pointed her staff. “Burn,” she muttered.

This was not a spell, not an incantation. With just a simple word, Novem manipulated the surrounding mana to summon flames. The flames coiled around the sahuagin, burning through flesh and bone. It wouldn’t go out, even in the rain and seawater—yet, nor did it spread to the deck.

Novem searched for Lyle in a hurry. She grabbed the handrail and peered into the ocean to find two familiar bodies floating in the water.

Lyle was gripping House Walt’s blue Jewel in his right hand.

Relief washed over Novem and she let out a sigh.

“Thank goodness.”

Next to Lyle was Vera, who was supporting him up and keeping his head above water.

“Do you not know how to swim or something?!”

“I regret to inform you that I’ve exhausted all my mana. I can’t move,” Lyle replied with a refreshing smile. “So, Vera, I’m relying on you.”

“Why does that sound like an excuse to me?! You were so cool just a minute ago!”

“When I use the greatsword, I can’t move for a while after. And retract that statement—I am *always* cool!”

Seeing him refuse to back down despite the pathetic state he’d been left in, Novem gave a troubled smile. By the time she realized it, the sahuagin on the deck and inside the ship had all been defeated.

In the bridge, the sailors cried tears of joy as they confirmed Vera’s safety.

“Milady!”

Vera swam, burdened by Lyle, waving her hand.

“Save us already!”

“Y-Yes! Boys, get the young lady out of there!”

The sailors made haste, scrambling to ready a boat.

Meanwhile, Novem watched Lyle and thought to herself, *He looked just like Lord Basil when he dove into the monster’s mouth. As I thought, Lord Lyle carries on the Walt spirit.*

Reckless as his actions seemed, they still yielded results. Novem found herself reminded of Basil Walt, the founder of House Walt. She thought back to him, his face clear in her mind. And that wasn’t all. Novem knew far more than what she could have learned from portraits and legends being passed down to her.

As she continued reminiscing, she was approached by May, who had Shannon on her back.

“Novem! Big trouble!”

“What’s wrong?”

“The whales are gathering! They were probably chasing after Tressy! If they were going to come anyways, they should have come a bit sooner!” May angrily grumbled.

But Novem wasn’t surprised.

She gazed out at the sea, at the gathering white specks.

“Is that so?” she muttered. “So the divine beasts of the sea are here.”

The divine beasts that protected the sea were the whales. These creatures of legend were now swimming circles around the ship.

The sailors and adventurers were beginning to make a ruckus, pointing and shouting.

Then suddenly, the sea beneath Lyle and Vera swelled up, lifting the two of them into the air.

“Wh-What is it this time?!” Vera cried out, not understanding what had happened.

The two found themselves atop the back of a white whale.

“It seems they’ve been saved,” muttered Novem, finally at ease.

\*\*\*

Dragged aboard the ship, I found myself soaking wet, seated across from quite the dashing woman. The sailors and adventurers had formed a circle around us, their gazes shifting between me and her.

Incidentally, I was sitting on the floor because I was too exhausted to stand. Both my stamina and mana were spent, and even my Connections had been severed.

The woman wore nothing but a white cloth that strategically covered the important areas. Her skin was pale, her golden hair nearly long enough to touch the floor. Though she had a rough and tough vibe to her, her face bore a gentle smile.

Her sea-blue eyes were striking, her beautiful face and curvaceous figure drawing the attention of every man present.

Her left hand clutched a golden three-pronged spear. The ornate weapon, though heavy-looking, was effortlessly held up by her slender arm. It was clear she possessed strength beyond her appearance.

After all, the woman before me was the white whale. A divine beast.

She looked bemused as she said, “I believe you humans called it the Trident Sea Serpent? Just when we thought I’d personally venture out to slay it, I arrive to find it already slain by human hands.”

Her eyes shifted briefly to May, but it seemed she intended to keep quiet about her qilin identity. They continued on to Tressy whose body still leaned against the ship. The white whale made a rather perplexed face as her gaze finally settled on Novem.

Novem showed no reaction.

“Heh heh... So that’s how it is. This certainly is the guidance of a goddess. Sometimes it pays to live as long as I have. To be blessed with such fascinating encounters.”

I couldn’t understand what she was getting at.

“What do you mean?”

“If you don’t know, then so be it. But tell me—are you sure you are the one I should be speaking with? If you are too exhausted, you can switch with another.”

Though I was grateful for the offer, I’d worked quite hard to defeat Tressy. Also, I wasn’t about to pass up this rare chance to speak to a divine beast of the sea.

“I don’t plan on conceding this opportunity to anyone else.”

“Very well. Now, as for the purpose of my visit...” The white whale shot Vera a brief smile before turning back to me. “It is a fine day. Surely you want to repair your ship, no? I will lend a hand for a while.”

“That’ll be a huge help,” Vera thanked her, relieved. “There are so many checks I wanted to run.”

“Think nothing of it. This isn’t nearly enough to repay my debt.”

“What debt?”

“Do not concern yourself, O Goddess of the Sea.”

The white whale’s words caused murmurs to break out among the sailors.

“Hey, did you catch that? Straight from a divine beast’s mouth.”

“I-I knew it. She really is a goddess.”

“Goddess of the Sea—I like it!”

Before the conversation could derail, the white whale returned her attention to me.

“Now then, amusing human.”

*Amusing?* I thought. It seemed that divine beasts and humans had different standards. After all, she looked at me and didn’t call me handsome, cool, or drop-dead gorgeous. Just amusing. No, perhaps *amusing* was actually high praise in her culture.

*Either way, I should set the record straight.*

“*Badass* is the word for people like me. You can even fall for me if you want.”

My remark seemed to strike a nerve. The ship shook violently as the white whale’s smile, filled with thinly veiled murderous intent, hung in my vision.

As panic spread, only Shannon seemed to grasp the divine beast’s mood.

“Stop provoking her, you idiot!”

“I thought it would work. I mean, I’m pretty cool, right?”

“Shut up!”

Shannon smacked my head and Vera stepped in to apologize.

“I’m truly sorry. He’s not in his right mind thanks to a Growth. He’s usually a good guy.”

And following on from Vera, Novem stuck up for me too.

*I’m so loved!*

“My sincerest apologies. Please forgive us.”

“I’ll let it go this once,” the white whale easily relented. “Human, know that I remain loyal to my late husband, and refrain from such trivial remarks... I’m genuinely amazed that this is the man who took it down. Tell me your name.”

She’d given me a spotlight, and I figured it was time to rise and say it with pride.

“Very well, I’ll tell you! The name of the man, the myth, the legend in the making is—!”



I tried to stand only to trip over myself and fall backward, slamming the back of my head into the deck. As I writhed in pain, it occurred to me—*Oh no. I've turned falling into an art form.*

From the Jewel, the fifth head appraised my spectacular tumble.

“Why do you always have to ruin the mood? Well, at least you’ve got the white whale laughing. Just don’t get her mad again. Divine beasts can be scary when mad.”

He was right; the white whale’s mouth was open wide as she laughed.

“Aha ha ha! What an amusing human. What do they call them on land? Comedians? Amusing indeed. I haven’t laughed this hard in decades.”

I was a hit—her ill humor from moments before had completely vanished. *It’s just as I feared. No matter what I do, it always goes well for me—that’s the kind of man I am. Honestly, I scare myself sometimes.*

I stood up as if nothing had happened.

“Lyle Walt. That’s the name of the man who’ll go down in legend. Remember it—it’ll serve you well.”

The white whale seemed to react to the name “Walt.”

“Walt? I swear I’ve heard that before. A few hundred years ago, perhaps? Was it three hundred, or more? I heard tales of a land hero who went by that name.”

“I don’t remember anything like that,” the third head offered. “If there had been a hero who shared our name, I would have gotten curious and looked into it.”

Divine beasts were long-lived, their memories oftentimes unreliable. They did not originally live in human society, so perhaps they lacked interest in the finer details.

“Someone with the same last name three hundred years ago? Do you remember their full name?”

The white whale tapped her heavy spear against her shoulder, thinking a bit before shaking her head.

“I can’t recall. I do remember the name Walt, but apart from that... I think the other one was Fuchs? There was a Ban-something too. It has been three hundred years, you see. Back then, I was living on land with my husband, but I was never too interested in human affairs.”

It didn’t seem like I’d get anything else out of her. *Should I ask Clara about it later? But if she knew something, surely she’d have mentioned it by now.*

The white whale gave me a smile.

“Lyle Walt, be wiser about who you hit on next time.”

“Don’t worry. I don’t go after women who are spoken for.”

“Hmm, my words fall on deaf ears. But it has little to do with me, and so be it. I will take my leave.”

With that, the white whale approached the handrail. She turned back to us.

“Oh yes, I remember now. It was Agrissa—the hero who defeated Agrissa. That was it. Yes, what a pleasant feeling it is to remember. Farewell.”

My hand shot out, to no avail.

“Wait, don’t just end it there!”

Ignoring my plea, the white whale leaped overboard, diving into the sea. Moments later, she emerged in her true form—a massive and white aquatic beast.

She spouted seawater into the air before raising her tail high and diving deep below the waves. Even now, I found it hard to believe that the woman and the whale were one and the same. Divine beasts truly were mysterious creatures.

“It’s a shame we couldn’t hear more about the hero with the Walt name,” the fourth head said, sounding disappointed.

As the rain clouds cleared up, the sky turned to a beautiful orange.

I collected the materials stripped off of Tressy and stowed them away in the seventh head’s Box Art.

“These will go for a fortune!” I rejoiced, only for Shannon to glare at me.

Weary-faced, she grumbled, “Oh, shut it you fool. Do you have any idea how many times I almost died because of you?”

I looked her up and down. Yes, I had a pretty good idea as to why she was so angry.

“What, you wanted me to whisper sweet nothings to you? Don’t worry, I’ll do it right now. You don’t have to be so angry.”

“Hell n—” The seventh head desperately contained a laugh. “I don’t think that’s the case, Lyle.”

My ancestors seemed to be enjoying themselves, but they seemed to have some doubts now. They were more subdued, and that was no fun for me.

“Don’t kid yourself!” Shannon shouted, her anger clearly her attempt to hide her embarrassment. “Don’t delude yourself into thinking everyone and their uncle’s just going to fall for your smooth-talking! Don’t think that we’re all that easy!”

I chuckled softly. “Relax, everyone’s easy when I’m around. You’ll be part of the club soon enough, Shanneasy.”

Shanneasy—the name I’d thought up was so adorable I had to admire my own creativity.

Shannon, however, was less than amused. She flailed her arms around and charged at me, but I held her off with one hand on her head.

“Who are you calling Shanneasy?!”

“My bad. You’re just so cute I can’t resist teasing you. You’re adorable, Shannon.”

“Why are you so— Just go to hell!”

“It was really cute how you closed your eyes and clutched your hands together, standing on your tiptoes while waiting for me to kiss you.”

Shannon lashed out even more violently, but before I could have my fun, Vera appeared.

“We took care of all the sahuagin that boarded the ship. The emergency

repairs are done too. We're ready to depart, but... Is there a problem?"

Shannon's shoulders rose and fell with each angered breath as she told Vera, "None! No problem! I've just had enough of this trip!"

She was cute with a red face too, but I still had some unfinished business with Vera.

"Actually, there's still something important we still have to discuss."

"Wh-What? Why do you look so serious?"

She instinctively took a step back, so I took a step in. I took her hand and pulled her close.

"That last kiss didn't count. Give me your first proper one. Be mine, Vera."

Vera's face twitched as the sailors around us observed the scene. I thought they'd get in the way, but their reactions surprised me.

"I mean, he showed no fear when talking to a divine beast. He's got guts, at least."

"Honestly, a man like him might be just what the young lady needs."

"But she's going to inherit the firm, right? Is that really okay?"

They were surprisingly on board with it. It seemed they'd finally recognized my worth.

"Could I have an answer?" I asked.

That's when my comrades returned, having already changed clothes before I knew it.

Eva shot me a glare. "This bastard. It hasn't been a day since he seduced me, and he's already out boldly hitting on another woman. I'm not surprised, but it still pisses me off."

Spinning toward Eva with gusto, I pointed a thumb at myself.

"I don't do love in secret. That's not my style!"

My retort made the third head burst into laughter. "No, no, I think you have this backward, Mr. Lyle! You can't confess to another girl in front of your

girlfriends! But that was a great line, I'll admit."

The fourth head sounded like he was holding his belly in laughter.

"This, coming from the kid who usually can't handle love at all."

The energy on deck was at its peak when Roland stormed in.

"Lyle, what happened to our promise? You said you wouldn't touch the young lady!"

"Sorry, but I'm going to have to break it."

Forcibly separating herself from me, Vera crossed her arms and stood firmly, appraising me in a daunting pose.

"Fine. You've done enough for me to consider it. But we'll have to settle it with a challenge."

"You can't, Lady Vera!" Roland hurriedly tried to put a stop to it.

"Quiet, Roland. So, what do you say? Will you take me on, Lyle?"

How could I possibly stay silent when she was provoking me like that?

"A challenge, you say? I, Lyle Walt, may lose battles to win wars, but I'm always the one who triumphs in the end. Are you sure about those terms?" I warned her with a flip of her hair.

Vera chuckled. "Bring me a barrel of ale and a glass," she ordered her crew.

That seemed to be enough to clue the sailors in on what the challenge would be.

"Oh, you're doing that one? But what are you going to do if the boss already knows about it?"

"Don't worry, just hurry up."

Before I knew it, the sailors were already calling me "boss."

*Now then, how shall I handle our little challenge?*

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The sun had set. The deck was dark as I stood across a table from Vera, staring at her by the lantern light. On the table sat what looked like a plate—a

shallow bowl, perhaps—with a firm base. But this was supposedly a cup, a foreign design in Banseim.

Vera gestured toward a barrel of alcohol.

“Pour it up to the rim. If you can down it one hundred times, then you can do what you will with me. Fail and don’t worry—I will still reward you handsomely for your achievements.”

We were surrounded by sailors, adventurers, and even my comrades who were watching with concern. The liquor in the barrel was potent, and the large cup could hold a hefty amount of it.

The sixth spoke up, clearly catching on to something. “Drink it normally, and you’ll either break yourself—or pass out before that. Even a heavy drinker wouldn’t make it through a hundred... If you drink it normally, that is.”

The seventh seemed to notice too. “This girl is testing Lyle. Let’s get this over with. I don’t want Lyle pushing himself too hard. So, Lyle, flip the cup over.”

I didn’t need him to tell me. I flipped the cup over, revealing a slight recess in its base. The foot of the cup—it existed as a vestige of the production process. But this slight ring of clay—too—was a *rim*, and it was able to hold only a very slight amount of liquid.

A few sailors whistled. “Looks like the young lady’s getting married!”

Vera narrowed her eyes. “You knew?” she asked.

“It wasn’t too hard to figure out,” I replied.

Hearing the sailors’ chatter, Roland scowled at Vera. “Lady Vera, this match is a mistake.”

Vera let out a slight sigh. “I lose.”

But how could it end there?

“What are you talking about?! I haven’t even drunk a hundred yet. Now sit back and enjoy the show. I’m sure you’ll have a blast.”

I dipped the cup into the barrel and scooped out a drink. Just a tiny amount. I brought it to my lips.

Even just that little sip was enough for my body to feel like it was on fire.

“Urp.”

I collapsed immediately.

“Huh?”

Vera stared at me in disbelief while Novem rushed over and held me up in her arms.

“Milord! Are you all right, milord?! It’s because you tried pushing yourself when you’ve never even drunk alcohol in your life! I-I’ll get you some water right away!”

Miranda seemed to recall something as she looked at me.

“Come to think of it, Lyle’s always stuck to water or tea. I guess even a little was too much.”

“Why can he never stick the landing?” Aria asked, a hand to her brow.

Sophia, with a face of resignation, offered, “It’s comforting, in a way, to know it’s the same old Lyle.”

“It’s good that we realized it now, but... This is clearly a failure,” Clara sighed, a conflicted look on her face.

Eva placed a hand to her mouth and laughed. “He’s that weak? That’s a little cute.”

“Your face is all red,” May said. “It must be embarrassing to lose after talking such a big game.”

Monica quickly brought me water. As she helped me drink it, she muttered, “Weak as you may be, you’re still my chicken master. Now get up and whisper sweet nothings to me. I’ll preserve them for all eternity.”

Finally, Shannon pointed at me. “So uncool! You’re such a loser!”

She burst into laughter.

My ancestors were laughing too.

“So he fumbles it at the end, huh? What, is that the end of fever time?”

“We had some real gems this time. I’m pushing for ‘I don’t do love in secret. That’s not my style!’”

““Goddess or not, I’m certain they’ll fall the moment they lay eyes on me.’ That one was better.”

“Yes, that one has a nice ring to it.”

“Tripping in front of the white whale was a laugh! By the way, Fifth, you didn’t react to the divine beasts this time. I was expecting more from an animal lover like you.”

To the seventh’s question, the fifth explained, “When they get that big, they go beyond what you could call cute or cuddly. How exactly do you expect me to dote on something bigger than a ship?”

Their voices echoed in my head.

But they didn’t seem to realize.

*This is no failure! This is the groundwork! A crucial step in winning over Vera... Ah, it’s no good. My head’s spinning... Good night.*



## Chapter 117: Reading Ahead

I was returned to the cabin and laid to rest on my bed. A towel had been placed on my forehead, granting a soothing chill. The fact that one sip of alcohol had been enough to knock me out—that was a miscalculation. But it didn't matter. I'd achieved my goal and was ready to drift away.

Everyone else had started up a banquet and my comrades had left the room for the meal.

And as I lay there by my lonesome self, Vera herself paid me a visit.

"What's this? Decided to accept my confession after all?" I threw out a playful jab.

Vera seemed to take my comment with frustration—but a hint of amusement too.

"You're so optimistic. Nothing like your usual self. Just get some rest, okay? I only came to give my personal thanks. Also, I can't respond to your feelings."

I slowly sat up, and Vera approached to pick up the towel that slipped from my forehead.

Apparently, she'd come to cool it for me.

As I grabbed her outstretched arm and pulled her closer, Vera immediately grabbed the pistol holstered on her lower back.

"That's a shame," I told her, "but in that case, you'd better be careful."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

I pulled her even closer, rolling onto the bed and pinning her beneath me. But Vera remained completely unfazed. She calmly pressed the gun's golden barrel against my stomach.

"If this is a joke, I'm not laughing. I'd appreciate it if you didn't make me shoot my benefactor."

Smiling, I shifted the barrel to rest over my heart.

“If you’re going to aim, do it here. But you’re not going to pull the trigger, Vera.”

“You’re playing dirty,” she said, frustratedly turning her face away. “You’re like the rest of them—you just want my wealth, right? Then I’ll provide that support you wanted. That way, you won’t have to come after me anymore.”

Vera seemed to be grappling with various issues, but that was irrelevant to me.

“Sorry, but I want your everything. I want your support, but I want you too.”

“What are you talking about? Do you think this is going to—”

“It’s a shame what happened with Roland.”

The moment I brought up Roland’s name, Vera was visibly shaken up. I lightly traced a finger along her collarbone, gauging her reactions.

“He’s a good man. Hardworking and earnest.”

I wasn’t about to speak ill of the man. Vera was a different story.

“Right,” she sighed. “A little dense, though. He didn’t notice my feelings and chose my sister instead.”

“He was desperate to protect you.”

“For Gina’s sake. I’m sure papa threatened him or something. I wish he could have shown a little more backbone.”

At some point, Vera stopped resisting even as my finger glided along her skin. She’d lowered her gun, spreading her arms out as if surrendering.

“Do whatever you want to me. Consider it part of your reward. But don’t show your face to me ever again.”

*She’s really underestimating me. Does she think I’m after her body? How insulting... I want everything!*

“I do want your body, but I also want your heart. So I won’t go any further than this.”

“Damn drunk... I can’t wait to see how deflated you’ll be once this Growth wears off. And what’s this nonsense about wanting my heart?”

As her averted face flushed red, I chuckled.

“Got it. How about we have a little challenge, then?”

“Again? You never learn, do you.”

Her breathing grew a tad unsteady as I explained the terms.

“The game will last until this ship returns to Baym.”

Vera—still refusing to look me in the eye—nodded.

“Fine. And what are we going to do?”

“I won’t do a thing.”

“Huh?” Vera finally turned to me, shocked by my statement.

“I won’t do a thing. But if you admit defeat before we reach Baym... Then kiss me. Be careful. Try not to think too much about me. If you do, you’ll fall.”

Suddenly, Vera burst into laughter. “Yep, you’re an idiot. That’s never going to happen. Don’t worry—I will never fall for you.”

I got up, lending Vera a hand to help her up too. She promptly left the room with one hand clutched to her chest.

“I’ll let this slide because you’re my benefactor,” she said on the way out. “But don’t get the wrong idea—there won’t be a next time. Still, thanks for today.”

And with that, she closed the door behind her.

“Looks like it was a failure this time, Mr. Lyle,” came the seventh’s teasing voice from the Jewel on my neck.

He didn’t sound too disheartened. We’d obtained all the materials and the Demonic Stone from Tressy, after all. We were all looking forward to the fortune we were about to make.

Surely we wouldn’t be pressed for funds—not for a long while. But I hadn’t given up on Vera.

Sitting alone in the cabin, I was convinced of victory.

“A failure? No, this was a complete success. Now it’s just a matter of Vera being honest with herself. Winning that silly drinking contest wouldn’t have changed her mind, you see. Rather, it would be very troublesome for me if she simply felt obligated to tag along because she lost. I need to win her heart properly.”

But time wasn’t on my side.

“There’s being a sore loser, and then there’s this,” the fourth said, his skepticism palpable. “It’s almost refreshing when you take it this far. Apart from that, you did well, I do have to admit. It was less funny and more, how to put it... You were more proactive than usual. I think that’s a step in the right direction.”

The fifth head, despite praising me, sounded concerned. “More proactive than the usual Lyle, but far too proactive, I’d say. You were placed in a situation with no escape, so it wasn’t an option. But otherwise, you should always consider retreat. We’re lucky that we could use the Growth productively this time.”

“Hey, why don’t you give him a genuine compliment? He took down a legendary monster. Lyle, you’re killing it!” the sixth head said with a laugh. He was more positive about my actions than the others.

“Personally, I’m still curious about what the white whale told us,” said the seventh. “A Walt from three hundred years ago... Do you think they’re unrelated to us?”

But the third head found it pointless to think about. “We lack the information to make the call,” he plainly declared. “That’s something we can start looking into when we get the chance. But man, I panicked when our conversations started leaking. Perhaps the Jewel is even more unstable than it was before.”

I listened in on their conversations as I closed my eyes. “I’ll do some digging once we get back. And mark my words—Vera will have fallen for me by then.”

“What confidence. I’m looking forward to tomorrow,” the fourth said over a sigh.

“If it were me, I would have jumped into the sea out of embarrassment,” the fifth added.

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In the morning, two days after the battle with Tressy, Vera let out another sigh from her captain’s chair on the bridge. Just how many times had she sighed today?

Mid-exhale, her first mate approached her. “It’d be a big help if the boss would leave his room. You reckon there’s any way to get him to use that speed-boosting Art of his?”

Vera’s body instinctively flinched the moment Lyle was brought up. She pressed a hand to her tingling collarbone.

“H-He’s probably not coming out. He had it pretty bad, right? And I hear yesterday was awful too.”

The first mate stared at her face. “Huh? Are you sure you don’t want to check in on him yourself? And here I thought...”

“H-Huh?! Why would I need to do that?! Besides, he stole my first kiss! His face is the last thing I want to see!”

“That’s a shame.” The first mate folded his arms. “That aside, this voyage’s really put the fear of the goddesses in me.”

Hearing that, Vera sighed. “I don’t want to go through that ever again. I doubt we’ll win next time.”

“We’ll manage if the boss sticks around.”

Seeing the teasing smirks on the faces of her crew, Vera flushed and shook.

“Get back to work you idiots!” she bellowed, growing sulky.

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Wrapped in a blanket, I covered my ears to shut out the noise.

“Stop it! Please stop! Don’t call me Mr. Lyle!”

I could hear the sailors outside the room.

“Come out already, boss.”

“We’re begging you, Mr. Lyle, sir.”

“The ship’s falling behind schedule. Just hear us out, Mr. Lyle.”

It was nice that the sailors were getting friendly with me. But now they were calling me “boss,” and “Mr. Lyle.” I wanted it all to stop, the reason being...

“Hey now, what happened to the Mr. Lyle from three days ago? Go on, you could at least head out and use an Art or two.”

“You can make even a goddess fall for you, right? You never know, maybe Vera’s smitten too. Why don’t you go and see the result?”

The laughter of the third and fourth heads had me screaming from within the blanket.

“Shut up! I’m never going outside! Never!”

Then, it was the women in the room reaching out to me.

“Please eat something, milord,” said Novem. “You haven’t had anything for days, have you?”

“Hurry up, show your face so you can whisper those sweet nothings,” Miranda teased. “You promised, didn’t you? I’ll listen carefully, nice and slow.”

Aria sighed at my antics. “How long are you going to sulk for? Are you planning to stay like that forever?”

“We have sweets, Lyle. Monica made them herself,” Sophia said, in an attempt to coax me out with food.

Shannon and May both straddled my blanket cocoon.

“You really are useless,” chided Shannon.

“Lyle, you’ll grow mold if you don’t come out soon,” added May.

Thankfully, Eva was ignoring me. She was busy documenting the event with Clara. However, they seemed to be at odds over the details.

“Huh? Who’s going to get excited about that? Just cut it!”

“A hopeless elf chasing nothing but narrative flair might not understand, but a

record is completely pointless if it is not precise. Those stylistic choices will only cause confusion for future generations.”

It was business as usual for them. The problem lay in the contents of their dispute.

“Okay, now tell me—who exactly *wants* to know about how Sophia went on a rampage, got covered head to toe in blood, and freaked everyone out?”

Their feud came down to Sophia’s actions during the battle.

“Detailing how Sophia cut down the sahuagin and took everyone aback is critical information,” Clara argued. “The fact that she was called a warrior woman or Amazon must be preserved for future generations.”

Eva insisted it was unnecessary, and Clara insisted it was essential.

And hearing them bicker, Sophia spoke up in a sorrowful tone. “Before I knew it, the sailors and our adventurer colleagues started calling me ‘Big Sis.’ Should I be happy about this?”

She’d put in such an impressive performance that she’d earned the fear and awe of those around her.

Monica was busying herself, busily tending to me.

“This is precisely how a useless chicken should be!” she proclaimed. “Now get out of here, you noisy lot! Oh, but your latest fever time was magnificent! I, Monica, thought I might ascend straight to heaven. Not that I would, of course!”

Pulling the blankets tighter, I screamed, “Just leave me be until we arrive!”

Then Clara and Eva shifted their focus to me.

“I do understand how you feel, Lyle. Is the fact that you confessed to Vera in your high-tension post-Growth state what’s bothering you? Or are you bothered that the confession failed? Which is it?”

The question was presumably posed out of pure curiosity, but Clara’s words stabbed into me like daggers. I was crying into the sheets now.

Eva, on the other hand, seemed disappointed. “You were so cool when you

challenged Tressy and rescued the merchant's daughter. Why are you so weak at the knees now? How am I supposed to wrap up the story like this? I'm cutting this from the song."

Clara, as per usual, offered a strong rebuttal.

"This is why elves are no good! How can anyone know the truth unless it's documented in all its detail?! I am going to write down everything. I remember it all firsthand. Mr. Lyle's words, his actions, I experienced them through the Connection!"

"Just forget it all!" I cried out. "And what's this about keeping a record?! Do you want me to be a laughingstock 'til the day I die?! In fact, just cut out all the strange parts! Writing them down is nothing but torture!"

As chaos permeated the room, Aria piped up, "Lyle, you have a visitor. Go deal with him properly. It's Roland, you know. The one you broke your promise to."

Her cynicism made me begrudgingly poke my head out of the blanket.

"Can I help you?"

A conflicted look crossed Roland's face as he saw me.

"We have a special request for you. You'll be handsomely rewarded if you agree."

For the time being, I was desperate to escape the situation. I stood, still wrapped in the blanket, and followed Roland.

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Led to the bow, I lay right back down again under the covers. The request was for me to use my Art to raise the speed of the ship.

Speeding up a massive object like a ship consumed a significant amount of mana, so if possible, I didn't want to do it. But with my mana capacity boosted by my Growth, it wasn't entirely beyond my capabilities. Thanks to that, I was being used like I was a convenient Demonic Tool.

"If I could just become one with the sea and forget everything..."



“Don’t be daft,” said Roland, who was still standing right next to me. “And don’t make any moves on Lady Vera either.”

“Hmm? Oh, yeah. I won’t.”

Seeing me agree so readily, Roland blinked a few times. It was almost like he was doubting his eyes.

“Huh? O-Oh, I see. Yes, I’m sure it was just because of all that excitement. I-In that case, I have nothing to add.”

Just as the conversation seemed to wrap up, Vera came over. Strangely, her parasol wasn’t the one she usually used.

“Don’t even think about jumping overboard,” she said.

As I slowly rolled onto my back to see her, I found myself almost directly underneath her. I looked up just in time for a gust of wind to catch her skirt and cause it to billow.

“Black, huh... Good taste.”

Covering his face with his right hand, Roland groaned, “You idiot.”

Vera’s eyes turned cold as she crouched down to peer into my eyes.

“With gall like that, I guess you’re doing just fine. That’s a relief.”

“You’re not mad? I thought you were going to kick me.”

“I wouldn’t do that to my benefactor. Roland.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Straightening his back, Roland turned to see Vera holding up her parasol.

“Do you remember this?”

“Huh? Y-Yes, I gave it to you as a present, didn’t I?”

Vera smiled. “Correct. Thank you. I’ll keep an eye on Lyle, so you get back to work.”

“B-But...”

“Do it. Captain’s orders.”

“Y-Yes, ma’am!” He dashed off.

Once he was out of sight, I asked, “That’s not the parasol he gave you, right?”

Her smile turned to a sad one—a somewhat resigned one too.

“That’s all I was worth to Roland. Well, it’s fine,” Vera said as she took a seat beside me. “I always knew he wasn’t interested in me, yet I kept dragging it on and on. It’s enough to make you hate yourself.”

I’d tensed up, expecting her to bring up what I’d done in my post-Growth, but that didn’t seem to be what she had in mind.

“The only men who ever approached me were after the wealth of House Tres. Roland didn’t care about that, and that made me a little happy... Though you’re the first person to ever say you wanted my everything.”

“I’m sorry. That wasn’t really me. It was me, but not...me.”

There was something wrong with me, post-Growth.

My apology was met with a bemused laugh.

“Still, I have to give you credit where it counts. It takes courage to be that honest.”

And then, Vera went into her dreams.

“I had a good dream last night. A continuation of the one from before.”

I recalled what she’d told me—a dream of sinking to the ocean’s depths.

“In the dream, I stepped out onto land for the first time in forever. I spread my arms wide, bathed in the sunlight, and I think I shouted something. After being trapped at the bottom of the sea for so long, I finally felt free.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

After thinking for a moment, Vera stood up. “Who knows?” she said. “I just felt like it. Oh, and one more thing—sorry, handsome. But I won’t be one of your women. That’s what I came to say. You better take good care of them, okay?”

As I watched her walk off with a smile, I reflected on my actions. What was I even thinking? What was wrong with me, when I thought that it would all work

out? I'd been ridiculously full of myself.

"Yeah, it was never going to work out, this time," I heard the sixth say.

"I didn't think I'd be able to seduce her in the first place."

"Even with all that post-Growth confidence?"

*Give me a break.*

\*\*\*

A few days passed by, and we arrived in the great northern nation of Cartaphus. A nation that had been at odds with Banseim for many long years, Cartaphus could be summed up in a few words as a "land of snow." Its people lived resiliently through the harsh cold that came without fail every winter.

Our merchant vessel docked in one of Cartaphus's port towns. Though we'd arrived later than planned, the fact we arrived safely at all was a relief.

"It's nice and cool," I noted.

Though the sun was high in the sky, it wasn't hot at all. It was actually quite comfortable.

As I disembarked and gazed at the port, Vera came up to me.

"It's pleasant enough in summer," she explained. "But the winters are long and painful."

Around us, the sailors were busy at work, and Roland was there too, helping to unload the cargo.

Drawing closer, Vera made a proposition.

"By the way, would you consider signing an exclusive contract with the firm once we're back in Baym? There won't be any complaints with your skills. You can even raise the speed of ships; I'd add a bonus to your wages for that."

It wasn't a bad offer, but we had our own goals.

"That'll be difficult."

"Oh? Is there a reason?"

When we were linked through Connection, I'd gotten a rough idea of Vera as

a person. I trusted her enough to share our purpose.

“We intend to take a country.”

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Around the time Lyle was speaking to Vera, Thelma had ventured into the port town.

She was accompanied by Gaston, who carried their luggage in hand.

“Holy Maiden, are you sure about leaving like this?”

His words did stoke a sense of guilt, but Thelma shook her head nonetheless.

“Their goal is to raise me up as the holy maiden once more to take over Zayin. While I’m grateful for their help, I have no intentions of returning to that position.”

Zayin had been a war-torn nation, constantly embroiled in conflict and exhausted up until Thelma had become the holy maiden. Whenever they lacked resources, taking them from other nations had been their preferred solution. Meanwhile, the military—the knight order—would seek out new battlefields, hungry for achievements.

The internal situation was a mess as they made a mess of foreign lands. It was a terrible state of affairs.

“Everything I worked so hard for as the holy maiden was trampled over, was it not?”

She’d been so fed up with the nation’s terrible state that she’d worked with Gaston to cut down on war. She’d invested in the nation to foster some sense of self-sufficiency, and yet her efforts were undone when the knights rebelled.

*Yes, it was all for nothing in the end.*

Though Gaston’s shoulders dropped, he still followed Thelma.

“Then I shall say no more. I will stay by your side, Holy Maiden—no, it is just Thelma now.”

“Thank you, Gaston.”

But just as the two were about to leave, a keen-eyed Shannon spotted them

and raced over.

“Thelmaaaa!”

“Shannon?!”

Thelma came to a surprised stop as Shannon latched onto her, refusing to let go.

“Where are you going?”

The question was so innocent that Thelma felt as though she was being reproached.

“I’m...thinking of saying goodbye to everyone.”

“You can’t!” Shannon vehemently objected. “Without you, who’s going to spoil me?!”

“Huh? U-Umm, Shannon. Having us around will be nothing but trouble. Besides, our pursuers won’t follow us here.”

“They will. Big Sis said so—no doubt about it,” Shannon insisted. She refused to budge on that point.

As Thelma stood there, struggling to respond, Miranda appeared. She’d been chasing after Shannon.

“It’s bothersome when you act on your own like this.”

Gaston lowered his head apologetically. “Forgive us. But Thelma no longer has the will to fight.”

“And that’s bothersome too.” Miranda narrowed her eyes. “Your pursuers will catch up to you one of these days. A quiet, peaceful life will never come to you. Will you leave, knowing that?”

Miranda was certain that the enemy would come to kill the two of them.

Thelma’s heart seemed to waver. But still, “Even so, I’m done with fighting. I’ve had enough of it.”

She didn’t want to become a tool for war. Miranda paused to think about how to convince her.

And it was at that moment that the serious atmosphere was completely shattered—by Shannon.

“Huh? If you don’t want to fight, then just dump it all on stupid Lyle.”

Flustered, Thelma replied to this childish proposal, “N-Now look here, Shannon. If I return to being the holy maiden, I’ll have to be involved in governance again. Zayin isn’t a nation where I can just leave everything to other people.”

“Oh, it’s fine. Lyle will do something about all that troublesome stuff. He just wants an army, anyway.”

“That’s problematic too,” Gaston interjected, but Shannon was unwilling to part with the only woman who indulged her. She continued her persistent persuasion.

“You’re too earnest, Thelma. Lyle said he was going to use you, right? Then you just have to use him too. It goes both ways, right? Throw all the bothersome stuff at him. It’ll be fine. He’s an idiot, so he’ll do something about it.”

Thelma thought for a moment.

“Th-That doesn’t sound like a good idea.”

*I can’t really entrust the government to an idiot.*

Everything she’d done for her country had ended in vain. When she looked at it like that, it made her feel reluctant to run away any longer.

She’d tried to make Zayin a prosperous nation—this much was true. The fact that she’d grown sick of it and taken flight once that dream was denied did embarrass her.

And, she couldn’t stomach the idea of leaving the knight order to do as they pleased.

But even so, there was nothing she could do.

“I, you see... I wanted to make Zayin a thriving nation. But I can’t do anything anymore. Even if I go back now...”

“Just do it. I know you can. It’ll be all right—you can still make it.”

Shannon’s pure, simple words brought tears to her eyes.

“Is it really not too late? Can I still go back? Shannon, do you think there’s still something I can do?”

She knew this wasn’t something she should be asking a child, but Thelma couldn’t help herself.

“Of course you can. If he’s lending a hand, he’ll do anything to make it happen. No matter how underhanded. That boy plays dirty!”

Thelma couldn’t tell if she was praising Lyle or insulting him, but she could feel Shannon’s deep trust. All in all, she felt a little embarrassed that she was genuinely encouraged by a child like Shannon. But seeing such pure sincerity, she also felt a newfound strength welling up within her.

“In that case... I shall lend my strength. I may not be able to do much, but at least, my presence will give you a just cause to rally behind.”

*At the very least, I need to minimize the battles and protect the people.*

Thelma began to place a sliver of hope in Lyle and his comrades, who’d managed to defeat a legendary monster. If they could take down Tressy, then just maybe they could reclaim Zayin too.

When she thought about it, she felt her motivation returning.

*I’m...not done just yet.*

“Oh, Thelma!” Gaston cried out, tears in his eyes. “You have finally found the resolve to fight!”

And seeing the two of them crying right in the middle of town, Miranda sighed.

“Then let’s get back already. We’re drawing too much attention here.”

Noticing the curious stares of the surrounding townsfolk, Thelma blushed and hid her face.

# Epilogue

The merchant vessel departed from the port town in Cartaphus and set off for Baym. And in her private quarters, Vera lay on the bed, absentmindedly brushing her fingers around her collarbone. Suddenly realizing her unconscious actions, she hurriedly stopped herself.

“I-It’s all his fault.”

She’d developed a strange habit indeed. The more she tried not to think about it, the more her head would fill with thoughts of Lyle.

This was why she’d proposed an exclusive contract in the first place.

Vera stared at the ceiling with a sigh.

Whether awake or sleeping, her brain was consumed by him. Just how many days had it been?

The day of their parting was fast approaching.

Once the ship reached port, they would barely see one another again. The prospect bothered her more than she wanted to admit.

Counting down the remaining days only heightened her anxiety.

“I never expected his goal to be to conquer a nation. And Zayin, of all places... Has he lost his mind?”

Zayin was one of the larger nations—at least, compared to most of the countries around Baym. If conquest was his objective, he would have had a far easier time going for Lorphys next door. At least that would feel somewhat realistic.

However, the trump cards Lyle held were certainly compelling.

“Former Holy Maiden Thelma, and former High Priest Gaston. I had a feeling those two were hiding something, but that was quite the bomb to drop on me.”

The more she thought about it, the harder it became to ignore.



“Still, is it really possible? I mean, they have a just cause and a high priest who is knowledgeable about the country’s circumstances. With my support, will they really be able to take the country?”

As she seriously began to weigh out the merits of supporting Lyle, she suddenly snapped out of it. She clutched her head.

“No, no, no! I-I could never support something as reckless as usurping a nation! B-But, if there’s profit to be had, it wouldn’t hurt, right? After all, if it benefits House Tres, it’s just business.”

Writhing in agony, Vera found herself thinking more and more about Lyle.

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Having finished its dealings in Cartaphus, the ship returned to the port in Baym.

Though we’d arrived behind schedule, the transaction itself had been a resounding success.

Eva stretched her arms wide toward the approaching port, shouting out with her clear, sonorous voice, “Solid ground! It’s been so long! At last, I have returned!”

Clara glanced up from her book, shooting her an irritated glare.

“You really are one noisy elf.”

My comrades all looked quite relieved, knowing that the job was nearing its end. This unfamiliar sea voyage had been draining in various ways, and I could understand why they were all brightening up now that it was done.

“What should we eat when we get off?” asked Aria, her first priority clear as day. “I’m done with fish and salted meat.”

May energetically raised her hand to attract Aria’s attention. “I’m going to tour all the stalls! Aria, come with me!”

“Sounds like fun.”

The two seemed to be having a good time—but I couldn’t afford to be so carefree.

“I never thought Tressy’s materials would sell for so little. What are we supposed to do now?”

Surrounded by my comrades on the deck, I mulled over the materials that had completely failed to sell.

“U-Umm, since the materials were so rare, no one knew what they could actually be used for,” Novem confessed. “So they were only really viable for research purposes. It’s understandable why they offered such a low buying price.”

The only thing that seemed to fetch a decent price was Tressy’s Demonic Stone. But even that was undervalued in Cartaphus, so we ultimately opted not to sell the stone or the materials. Sure, that just meant we would have to sell them in Baym, but the fact remained that we hadn’t earned nearly as much as we were hoping to.

Our war chest was a bit scarce if we wanted to take on a whole nation.

Like the others, I was thankful that Baym’s port was finally in sight, but in the end, we’d failed to solve a single one of our problems.

A storm of boos erupted from the Jewel.

“Get it together, Lyle!”

“At this rate, our initial seduction plan would have been better.”

“Well, the chances of that succeeding were low.”

“Looks like you’ll have to fight while short on funds.”

“What a waste of time it was. Lyle, prepare for a tough battle ahead.”

The deadline for reclaiming Zayin drew near. Autumn—after the harvest. That was when my ancestors anticipated Zayin would make its move.

As the ship drew closer to the dock, more and more adventurers gathered on deck.

“Hey, you guys were amazing!”

“Hope we meet again!”

“Let’s work together again, sometime.”

I watched the adventurers descend the gangplank as Sophia waved at them.

“At first, I was concerned about how things might turn out,” she said, “but we managed somehow or another.”

From the moment we defeated Tressy onward, the sailors and adventurers working alongside us became especially friendly toward us. Through them, our reputation would likely improve in the future.

*Yeah, it wasn't completely a waste. Let's look at it like that.*

Coming up beside me, Miranda confirmed our plans going forward. “With the reputation you’ve gained from this, we should be able to rally more people. Taking everything into consideration, I’d say we can gather around a hundred.”

But factoring in support personnel, the number of combatants would be much smaller than that.

Facing a nation with those numbers would be a challenge.

Still, with no funds to spare, hiring more would be difficult.

“Let’s earn what we can in the dungeon; we’ll keep at it up until the last second.”

I offered our safest bet, and Miranda nodded. “That’s all we can do,” she conceded.

Then, I glanced at Thelma. She was with Shannon and Gaston. The three of them seemed to get along surprisingly well.

“It’s all thanks to Shannon that Thelma found the will to fight.” Miranda praised her sister. “The lack of funding hurts, but we managed to overcome the other hurdle.”

“Nothing ever goes perfectly. We have to take what we can get.”

“Oh? What’s this? I thought *everything always* went your way. That’s what post-Growth Lyle said.”

Miranda teased me, and I had to look away in embarrassment. But standing right where I’d redirected my eyes—was Vera. She was carrying a parcel that looked a little too small to be a travel bag.

Vera didn't have her parasol today, and she seemed a bit nervous. The sailors watching over her were equally as tense.

"Looks like you did it, Lyle," Miranda whispered into my ear.

She then stepped away, ordering my other comrades to back off as well. Just as I wondered what was about to happen, Vera—without looking at me—thrust the bag out.

"Huh?"

"B-Bonus compensation. You played a big part this time. It's just a spare gun I have just in case mine breaks. But, err, I'd be happy if you could make good use of it."

"Oh, th-thanks."

I accepted it and checked its contents—and suddenly, the seventh head burst out in excitement.

"Silver! Such a tasteful design! And look at all those bullets! Lyle, you'd be a fool not to use this!"

He desperately extolled the virtues of the gun, but I ignored him and turned my attention back to Vera.

"I really appreciate it."

"Glad you like it. A-Also..."

"Hmm?"

*We've been through a lot, but it all worked out in the end*—my thought was interrupted as Vera suddenly leaned in, overlapping our lips for just a brief moment before pulling away.



I blinked several times in shock as I stared at her. Vera's face was bright red. Her head was hung, her voice quavering.

"L-Let's just say this is my loss. You haven't set foot in the port, Lyle, s-so you haven't officially arrived in Baym."

"Huh? Are you sure about that? Why?"

I found myself asking her, only for her head to snap up.

Angrily, she screamed, "B-Because I said so! I'm fine with losing!"

I couldn't understand it at all, and apparently, neither could my ancestors in the Jewel.

"You're kidding me. This can't be real, right?"

"H-H-How did you manage to woo her, Lyle?"

"This is incredible. Could Lyle—Mr. Lyle be even more impressive than we thought?"

"Wow, even I'm speechless. What kind of underhanded tactic did you use, Lyle?"

"I thought it was a lost cause."

Clearly, they all thought that seducing her would be impossible. And honestly, I thought the same thing.

But reality was proving us all wrong.

Looking me straight in the eye, Vera said, "I, Vera Tres, agree to provide support to Lyle Walt. So, I will need to know more about your future plans. I promise to offer my utmost support."

"R-Really?" I had to ask again. I still couldn't believe it.

Vera placed a fist over her chest. "Lyle, you said you wanted my everything—didn't you? But that's not what I plan to give you. I am going to ensure your victory. I, Vera Tres, am investing in you. That makes you *mine*. Understood?"

"That will be a little difficult. Not to mention I have my comrades to con—"

I showed reluctance; after all, I couldn't quite let myself belong to someone.

“I-Idiot! It’s not like you chose me. I chose you! I won’t get into the details of that transaction but don’t forget it... You got that?!”

“Err, yes?”

*What’s the difference, really? Still, could that mean...we achieved what we set out to do?*

Vera smiled at me. “We’re all in the same boat now. Just leave it to me.”

The sailors around us burst into laughter.

“Take care of the young lady for us, boss!”

“Only someone who took down that legendary monster could be worthy of her!”

“So the young lady’s finally getting married, huh?”

But amid the growing excitement, one man hastily disembarked the ship.

\*\*\*

That day, Fidel hopped aboard his carriage and hurried to the port as fast as his horses would take him.

Although behind schedule, Vera had returned.

“Oh, Vera, I was so worried. But Papa’s so happy you made it back safe and sound. Now, I need to go see her soon.”

The man had lost a few pounds from his worrying; as soon as the carriage came to a stop, he jumped off of it. As he rushed toward Vera’s ship, Roland came running toward him.

“B-Boss!”

Fidel’s face turned cold as he greeted him.

“Oh, you. I am quite busy so I’ll have to excuse myself from this conversation. I really don’t have time to talk to an *employee* right now.”

He emphasized the word “employee” before he tried to make off again. But Roland’s words stopped him in his tracks.

“Lady Vera just proclaimed she is going to support Lyle! A-Also, it seems they

have entered a...special relationship.”

Fidel grabbed Roland by his collar and began shaking him violently. “What do you mean by special?! You need to be clear about that one, kid! The blue-haired brat, right? Did he touch my precious Vera?! Is that it?! Is that what you’re saying?!”

Even as he could feel his consciousness leaving him, Roland managed to respond.

“They...kissed.”

Fidel tossed Roland aside, his eyes bloodshot, his expression turning to that of a fierce ogre. He sprinted all the way to the merchant vessel.

“That damn brat! I’ll turn him into fish food!”

Leaving his guards and subordinates behind, Fidel charged straight toward Vera’s ship.

\*\*\*

“Why don’t we get some revenge on little old Fidel?”

The third head suddenly said as I disembarked the ship.

Wondering what he was on about, I gripped the Jewel. I just knew he had a nasty look on his face. I just knew he was enjoying himself.

“Well, he’s the one who suddenly picked a fight out of nowhere. Why not rile him up a bit? Luckily, you have some good material to work with.”

The third’s attention was on Vera, who was blushing as she issued instructions to her crew from nearby. The sailors were all looking at her warmly now that she and I were officially together. And that was too embarrassing for her to bear.

“Let’s use Vera to tease him. It’s harmless, as far as revenge goes.”

*We don’t have to go that far, do we?* I thought. Then, the sixth head stepped in to persuade me.

“Lyle, inciting your foes is an important skill on the battlefield. Think of this as practice.”



*Practice by taunting my girlfriend's father? How horrible is my family?*

The other ancestors seemed fully on board.

"Lyle, I can't wait to see how you're going to rile him up," the third chided with palpable expectations.

*So I'm the one who has to think of a plan?* With little choice in the matter, I glanced at Vera, who noticed my gaze and turned toward me.

"Wh-What?"

"Well, I wanted to ask for a favor."

I proposed to Vera that we play a little prank on Fidel.

I couldn't imagine Fidel getting angry over a bit of mischief, but if I didn't do it, my ancestors would never shut up about it.

"And that's the gist of it..."

Vera looked a bit weirded out as I finished up my explanation.

"Did papa say something again? Well, whatever. If it's that much, I'll help you."

And right on cue, Fidel chose that very moment to come barreling into the port. He crashed into a stack of crates, tumbling to the ground before standing. Disheveled, but undeterred.

"Veraaaa! Are you okay?! Just hold on! Papa will take care of that brat for you!"

The hostility in his eyes as he glared at me was overwhelming—he was exuding genuine murderous intent.

Following along with my plan, Vera placed a hand on her belly—just below her navel, taking hold of my hand right in front of Fidel.

"Papa, it's time you stopped being so overprotective."

Fidel glared daggers at me.

"You've been deceived by that punk... Vera, don't worry. I'll wake you up from this nonsense right away."

He pointed at me.

“Boy, you better be ready for what’s coming for you!”

I could tell he cared deeply for his daughter. Granted, he was taking it a bit far, but I just couldn’t bring myself to dislike him.

I glanced at Vera, who gave me a slight nod before turning to her father. She began to act bashful, and as I marveled at her surprisingly good acting skills...

“So you know, papa. No, that’s not it. You’re going to be a grandpa, after all...”

“Umm... What?”

The light vanished from Fidel’s eyes, the strength draining him and leaving him in a state that hurt to look at. His hands planted against the ground, but they couldn’t hold him for long. Soon, he had collapsed right where he’d been standing.

“Mr. Fidel?!”

“Papa!”

The two of us hurried over and propped him up. By the look on his face, it was like the flame of life within him had burned out.

“Quick, call a doctor! Someone, now!” Vera shouted in a panic.

“Grandpa, grandpa, grandpa...” Fidel began muttering to himself. “No, I could never be a grandpa. I mean, my daughters aren’t even married yet. That’s right, this is a dream. When I wake up, Vera and Gina will be eating breakfast as usual. And there won’t be any men to be seen. Not that kid Roland, or that piece of garbage Lyle... It’ll be a happy world...”

*Why am I a piece of garbage?! What did I do?!*

As I stood there in disbelief, I could hear the Jewel break out in laughter.

“Hoo-wee! Nicely done, Lyle!”

“That was more effective than I thought it’d be.”

“You’re evil.”

“That’s the spirit, Lyle. You have a talent for riling people up!”

“See that, merchant brat? This is what Lyle is capable of!”

The feverish excitement of the five men had me break into a cold sweat. Perhaps I’d done something outrageous.

Even my comrades were chuckling from the sidelines.

Sitting on her travel bag, Shannon sighed.

“In the end, that woman was just as easy as the others.”

*Like you have any room to talk, Shanneasy!*

With Fidel finally out cold, the bustling port gradually descended into chaos. Honestly, I hadn’t expected things to spiral this badly.

Author  
**Yomu Mishima**

Illustrator  
**Tomozo**



**“Do  
whatever  
it takes  
to make  
her fall!”**

The sixth head  
boomed from  
the Jewel.

**10**

**SEVENTH**





I held her  
off with  
one hand  
on her  
head.

“Hey!”





**Vera** reached around to a holster on her lower back and pulled out a golden pistol.



Monica stepped in,  
pushing Shannon aside.

"I'm the only  
one who gets  
to complain  
about this  
damn chicken,  
little girl!"





**“Take all  
my mana!”**

As Vera was taken by surprise, Lyle strengthened his grip on the greatsword's hilt, pointing its tip deeper into the creature's gullet.























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by Yomu Mishima

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