

SAVENTH



2

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

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INTRO DUCTION

In a world of swords and magic, watched over by the Seven Goddesses, Lyle's party continues to grow. He adds two new adventuring-party members to the fold—**Aria Lockwood** and **Sophie Laurie**—though not without facing some setbacks along the way. In the midst of it all, the party gets a request from the lord of Darion. And what a ridiculous request it is.

“Don't you know better than to stick your head into other peoples' fights, Lyle? Seriously, it's more trouble than it's worth.”

Or so say Lyle's ancestors, who don't bother to hide their lack of motivation. The task is to mediate a rather troublesome dispute between two territories—but the situation is so dreadful that one wrong step could have both sides taking up weapons to kill each other.

The grievances between the two territories just keep piling up— but that's the nature of human relations between houses.

Will Lyle be able to resolve the dispute without issue and complete Lord Bentler's request?

Now, let the **2nd volume of 7th** begin.

Let's OPEN!!

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Prologue

The moment I left the inn, I set my feet toward a smithy renowned even among the many in Darion. Yes, that guy walking through the bustling streets so early in the morning? That was me, Lyle Walt.

I stifled a yawn as I ran a hand over my bangs, confirming that my persistent bedhead persisted still. I had blue hair, blue eyes, and a gleaming blue Jewel, which was embedded in a silver pendant around my neck. As for my clothes, I held a jacket with a fur collar in my right hand and had two belts slung around my waist. Normally a weapon would be hanging from one or both of the belts, but I happened to be unarmed for now. This didn't make me out to be the most reliable of adventurers, but I was only weaponless because my saber and dagger were currently being tended to by a blacksmith.

Novem Fuchs, the girl currently walking at my side, glanced up at me with concern in her amethyst eyes. She wore a navy robe, and her perpetually glossy fox-colored hair was done up in a side ponytail. She was a magician, an incredible one at that, who used a silver staff. She also happened to be the second daughter of a baron and my former fiancée.

Novem had decided to tag along when my own house—House Walt—had driven me out and I had to become an adventurer to make ends meet. I'd been deemed unworthy to be the next head of the house after I lost to my sister, Ceres, in a battle for succession. Zel, the elderly gardener, had taken me in as I lay there in tatters after the deadly confrontation with my sister. Zel had also passed down a family heirloom to me: the blue Jewel.

I'd lost everything, and yet Novem had decided to follow me when I left. She had obstinately clung to my side despite my attempts to drive her away. To top it off, she had even gone so far as to sell her dowry to raise funds to hire an exclusive veteran instructor to make a first-rate adventurer of me. To be perfectly honest, I hadn't seriously intended to become an adventurer when I had left my home, but Novem going to such lengths for me made me sincerely

consider it. In short, Novem was a fine woman who was quite clearly wasted on the likes of me.

With that said, she did tend to be a bit—sorry, let me rephrase that—*considerably* overbearing. Although that may have had a lot to do with how unreliable I was. I had never once left the family estate before I'd been kicked out and had become an adventurer on a whim. I had been completely oblivious about how the world worked and had turned to adventuring out of pure naivete.

But of course, the world outside my house had been a cruel one.

It had been an incredibly short time since my adventuring career had begun, and I'd already failed multiple times. There'd even been several moments where I'd nearly lost heart. It had already been a month since I arrived in Darion, and I was still clinging to Novem like some kind of annoying parasite... Knowing all of that, I think you can imagine why she was following me to the blacksmith.

"You don't have to worry about me, Novem," I said, trying to put her at ease. "I'm just going to pick up my weapons." Her anxiety remained. Was I really *that* unreliable?

"Was it wrong of me to accompany you?" she asked.

"I really am just going to pick up my weapons," I replied. "I'll head to the Guild right after that."

We'd had morning exchanges like this several times before. She always seemed rather reluctant to let me go, though she ultimately relented.

"Very well. I will be waiting for you on the second floor of the Guild."

Several shops had already opened their doors, and I could hear them loudly touting their wares to anyone who passed by. Construction was underway on the city's wall, and I could catch brief glimpses through the gaps between the buildings.

Darion was a city situated near the capital of the Banseim Kingdom and governed by Baron Bentler Lobernia. There was hardly a better place for an adventurer who was just starting out. The knights and soldiers of the baron's

house took care of the surrounding monsters and maintained the peace, allowing the lively city to focus on construction and expansion. This meant that there was plenty of work for newbie adventurers, and they could earn their bread within the safety of the city's walls. Even if they ventured out, they rarely ever ran across dangerous monsters. This made Darion quite the convenient location for newbies.

Once we hit the next intersection, Novem changed course and made off for the Guild. She turned her head several times to look back at me. I waved her off, giving her a wry smile before getting back on my way. Spring was on the cusp of turning to summer, and the heat of the morning sun had already caused a sweat to break out across my brow.

"She could put a little more trust in me," I murmured, sighing. "Despite everything, I still took care of those bandits, and I'm finally starting to make money like a proper adventurer."

I'd ended up exterminating a group of bandits who had been lurking around Darion's abandoned mines in order to save an acquaintance of mine whom they'd taken captive. Strictly speaking, my intent had been to drive them out of the area, but Lord Bentler and the lords of the surrounding territories had been dragged into the mix, and the bandits had been annihilated. Back then, I'd been advised by the spirits of my ancestors, who lived on in the Jewel embedded in my silver pendant. It was a round blue gemstone that was around three centimeters in diameter.

All of a sudden, I was assaulted by a gruff, booming laugh. "Ga ha ha ha!"

The laugh had come from inside the Jewel—though perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it came from inside my head. Despite the level of noise reverberating through my skull, no one else on the street around me heard a thing. The gruff voice belonged to Basil Walt, founder and first head of House Walt. He wore an animal pelt around his neck and boasted a head of unkempt brown hair. He was dressed like a barbarian—more like he *was* a barbarian—but that didn't change the fact that he was the one who had founded the strongest provincial noble house in the kingdom.

"You've still got a long way to go, kid," he said. "Wait until you're a bit wilder

like me.”

The second head, Crassel Walt, stepped in to rain on his parade, as was typical. “Oh, come on, you’re not wild. You’re just an unruly savage. Try not to turn out like him, Lyle.”

The second head was clad in clothing reminiscent of a hunter’s. And, as was rather obvious, he was also the founder’s son. The relationship between the two of them, however, could only be described as abysmal.

“It’s always the same old bickering between you two. I’m surprised you never get sick of it,” mused Crassel’s son, Sley Walt.

The third head was a delicate-looking man with an easy-going air about him, with blond hair that grew just long enough to touch his shoulders. Despite his appearance, he was the greatest schemer among all seven of the house’s historical heads. Although he had carved a name for himself in Banseim’s history as the Hero General, he didn’t give off that vibe in the slightest.

“Personally, I’d agree that Lyle has to put in a bit more work,” he continued.

I could practically see Sley’s son shaking his head in disapproval. The fourth head, Marcus Walt, had aqua blue hair that he kept combed to one side. Marcus had been the head of the house when House Walt had risen in peerage from knight to baron.

“I’ll have to agree with you on that one,” said the fourth head. “However, I hope you don’t mind if I say that you’re the last person I want to hear that from.”

Sley Walt had been the first Walt to die in battle, leaving the house and all its troubles to the fourth head when he was far too young for it. That’s what I’d heard, at least.

“How about you take a good look in the mirror, fourth?” demanded the fifth head, Fredriks Walt. He kept his green hair tied back behind his head, and his eyes could most commonly be found at half-mast. He rarely spoke, but he had apparently decided to join in on the morning’s conversation.

I could hear the sixth head, Fiennes Walt, sighing at his father. Fiennes was the tallest of the heads of House Walt. When he stood beside the petite form of

the fifth head, it was hard to tell who was the father and who was the son. The way the sixth head's red hair grew down the sides of his face and into his beard made him look like he had a lion's mane. In fact, his appearance was far from what I'd expect from the head of what was then a viscounty. Despite his appearance, he was an amiable man and the head who looked out for me the most. He was something of a big brother figure to me.

"Look," he said, "I see where Lyle's coming from here, and I see why Novem is anxious. You should just make sure you do a better job of putting her at ease from here on out, Lyle."

The opinion he offered seemed quite reliable to me. And yet, the seventh head was quick to cast shade on what had been the only constructive take so far. Brod Walt, otherwise known as my grandfather, had sharp eyes and hair swept back from his forehead. He was known to be a harsh and draconian man, but he had always been kind to me.

"I agree, but that doesn't quite hit home, coming from you. Regardless, you've got two lives weighing on your shoulders now, Lyle. You really must get a grip on yourself."

Two lives—I was already responsible for two whole lives. The first life was that of my ex-fiancée, Novem, who I had just parted ways with. A woman who had supported me even after I had been driven from my home. I'd sworn I would make her happy, but after coming to Darion, I'd saved a girl named Aria Lockwood from a group of bandits and ended up being forced to take responsibility for her as well. Aria was a girl whose red hair tended to curl in odd angles at the bottom; a girl with purple eyes and a cheerful smile. She'd reached out to me when I was down in the dumps after I had first arrived in Darion, so of course I had wanted to help her out.

It had all happened so suddenly.

Aria's father had faced judgment for the crime of assisting a group of bandits. This sin was considered so grave that the punishment had encompassed his entire family. I'd negotiated with Lord Bentler to save Aria from sharing her father's fate. As per my promise with the lord, I had driven the bandits from their hideout. They'd been handed over to the knights of the territories they

had run rampant in, bringing a delicate territorial issue to a comfortable resolution. In return for my help, Bentler had spared Aria.

She'd still needed to receive some sort of penalty, however, even if only in name. And so Aria had been sold to a brothel. A brothel that, like her punishment, had existed only on paper. Supposedly, I'd immediately bought her out of her bondage and therefore resolved the situation.

This plan had allowed Lord Bentler to shed responsibility for Aria since she'd been "sold off," while maintaining his honor at the same time. From the outside looking in, it appeared Bentler had sentenced Aria with a just punishment. And technically, just as Bentler had promised me, Aria had been saved from her fate. The lord had just manipulated the situation to appear as he wished using a fictional brothel.

The heads of House Walt were serpents, the whole lot of them, but Lord Bentler wasn't far behind. That said, the matter had been resolved in the way we wanted it to be. Though unfortunately, it had left a stain on Aria's good name.

But...there was just one little thing. One vitally important thing!

I had basically taken responsibility for Aria's life by buying her. I'd immediately set her free, of course. But by then, she had already been penniless with no home to return to. I couldn't just throw her out, so I'd ended up having to look after her. I could begrudgingly accept that part, but the problem was Novem.

"Hypothetically, wouldn't it be pretty normal to, you know, be angry or something if the guy you like bought himself a prostitute?!" I demanded. "Am I crazy?"

"Lyle, my boy! If you call yourself a man, then at the very least you can take responsibility for the lives of two women! I believe you can do it!" the founder replied.

The founder happened to be quite biased toward Aria, since she was the spitting image of his first love. Aria was a descendant of hers, in fact. Before we'd met Aria, the very same man who was now encouraging me to take on a harem had acted incredibly uppity toward me, demanding that I make Novem

happy. Novem hailed from House Fuchs, after all, a house that every generation of House Walt was greatly indebted to. Now he was yelling at me to make Aria happy as well.

“I never thought Novem would just accept it,” said the second head. He must have been quite fed up with his father at this point. It seemed that every sentence he spoke was punctuated by a sigh. “That was a huge oversight. But Lyle...it’s already been settled. If you don’t hate Aria, just accept that you’re responsible for her now. Oh, what a lucky guy you are! I went through my share of troubles finding a bride, you know... Mainly because of a certain someone’s house rules!”

By house rules, the second head was referring to House Walt’s requirements of any bride marrying the head of the house. They included such things as a high level of attractiveness, clear skin, and so on; there were six in total. But, you see, these requirements had turned out to be nothing more than some babble that our drunken founder had spewed out after his heart had been broken. All because he hadn’t wanted to marry anyone after his first love had married someone else.

Yes, indeed, these marriage requirements that had been carefully honored over the generations had only been the ramblings of a drunkard! That was a truth I’d never wanted to learn. Perhaps I could take away a valuable lesson from the whole situation. Perhaps this was just the way the world worked sometimes.

“I mean, it’s Novem we’re talking about,” I continued on. “*Novem*. How was I supposed to know she was okay with harems? I’m not that tactful to begin with, and I have no idea how I’m supposed to deal with two women... I see nothing but anxiety ahead of me.”

“Tact. Yes, perhaps that’s an area for improvement. The other issue though...” The fourth head muttered something quite cryptic under his breath.

I wasn’t even able to satisfy Novem despite the fact that I spent an abundance of my time thinking of things I could do for her. Now that Aria had been added to the mix, I had no idea what to do. I’d never even imagined that the number of women in my care would increase. And that wasn’t even taking my heart into

account.

“Well, it wouldn’t be a laughing matter if the genders were reversed,” the third head said, perhaps trying to address my worries. “But Novem looked pretty happy, you know. I don’t think she’s going to abandon you... In any case, she’s the second daughter of a baron, so maybe she just thinks it’s natural to have a mistress?”

Novem’s actions had thrown my plans completely out of order. I sighed one more time, then found myself outside of the smithy. Someone had been kind enough to decorate the sign with drawings of various weapons and types of armor for those who couldn’t read.

I put my conversation with the ancestors on hold. To tell you the truth, rowdy discussions like this actually took a toll on my mana. The Jewel already sucked my mana passively, and it appeared to draw on more with every sentence my ancestors spoke... If they rambled on for too long and kept draining me, I’d end up collapsing from mana deficiency. This meant that because of my ancestors, who had for some reason been revived as memories within the Jewel, I typically had very little mana left in reserve for my own use. As a result, I’d become abysmal at magic, which used to be my pride and joy.

The whole point of Jewels like mine was they were supposed to be a tool that allowed one to use Arts—convenient special abilities that differed from magic. But, to make matters worse, I couldn’t even use most of the Arts recorded in my Jewel. If you told me it was some sort of cursed item, I’d be inclined to believe you. I was already pretty convinced of the idea myself.

As for my current state, if you’d asked me to describe it, I’d have to go with something to the tune of “half-baked.”

“But at least I’m doing a little better than when I first left House Walt,” I said to myself, trying to bolster my spirits. “Hopefully... Never mind, I should just go on inside.”

The space behind the door was filled with the scent of iron, leather, and oil. The shop was already busy despite the early hour, but something didn’t seem quite right.

The shop’s manager and proprietress was a dwarven woman who had the

proportions of a young lass. Dwarves were one of the longer-lived races and tended to be smaller than humans, so it wasn't strange to discover that a dwarf with a youthful appearance was actually sixty or even a hundred years old.

The shop's proprietress fit the bill; she looked like a stocky little girl clad in a leather apron. What bothered me, though, was the troubled look on her face and the hand she had pressed to her brow. She was dealing with a young man—short, and a bit plump—whose clothes were even grimmer than the people on the street. By my estimation, he looked to be a traveler who had just arrived in Darion.

What's more, a set of metal armor had been laid on the counter between them. A full set, albeit badly dented and scratched up. There was a large opening at one point in particular which looked like it would have been pretty fatal.

"I-I'm sorry," the short man said, a fretful look on his face. "But can't we work something out...?"

"Hmm..." the third head hummed, his interest clearly a bit piqued. "Did he bring in stolen goods? Based on those clothes, he's a farmer... That armor would be a bit beyond his means. Perhaps he pinched the set off of a vassal? That's quite the bold move." Despite the truly outrageous situation, his voice had a jolly tone.

That was when the proprietress noticed me and beckoned me closer. As I reluctantly made my way to the counter, the young man seemed to panic and hurriedly packed the armor away. I only caught a brief glimpse, but I could have sworn I saw dried blood.

"I-I'll be back," he said, and rushed out of the store.

The proprietress shrugged at me once he was out of sight.

"What happened?" I asked, unable to stop myself.

"Well, his goods were clearly stolen or looted," the dwarven woman said, her eyes drifting shut as she brushed her hair aside with her hand. "I could tell he gave them a good wipe down, but there were still traces of blood on that set of armor... And get this. Instead of just asking me to buy it off him, he wanted me

to repair it. He didn't even want me to match it to his size, just asked me to mend it as is. At first, I thought someone had put him up to it."

"Strange bloke, that one," said the founder. It appeared he doubted the young man's story as well. He didn't say anything else, though, so he must not have felt very invested.

The more I heard of the proprietress's story, the more suspicious the man seemed. She appeared hesitant on whether she should take the man's job or not, and I could tell she was still curious over the state of the armor.

"The creature that did that damage..." Her voice trailed off as she dwelled on it a moment. It seemed to me like was calling on her past experience, trying to remember a time when she'd seen similar destruction. "It could have been an orc."

Now that she'd come to a conclusion, she opened her eyes and refocused on me. "As far as your request is concerned, I've got to be blunt with you, boy. It's hopeless. That saber and dagger you brought in, they're beyond saving. They're not gonna be of use to anyone anymore. You're lucky they didn't already snap in two."

When I'd gone up against the bandit's head honcho, he'd used multiple Arts against me. From what the proprietress had said, it appeared the weapons I'd used to fend off his fury were past the point of repair. I'd already suspected as much.

"I see. I should go ahead and get a spare, then, just in case. I'd like two sabers. As for the daggers... Three of them should do."

The proprietress headed to the back of the shop and took two sabers off a shelf before bringing them over to the counter. She was so light on her feet that it was difficult for me to think of her as anything but a child.

"Here, will these cut it?"

I looked at the sabers, then scanned the rest of the store. Double-edged swords leaned against the wall, and spears, clubs, axes, and bows decorated the rest of the place. All of the weapons had been made by the proprietress's husband; they had a sense of weight to them.

The sabers, however, had been ordered from Central, Banseim's capital. They were kept in stock just for the sake of having them around.

As the proprietress picked out three daggers for me, she suggested, "How about you change to something sturdier, boy? My husband's products all hold up pretty well, and they've got a good reputation."

This smithy *was* renowned among the adventurers, the soldiers, and even the knights of Darion. It had managed to gain popularity in a town where highly practical weapons were the top priority. I stared at all the unornamented pieces on the shelf, the voices of my forefathers rising within my head like a disgruntled chorus.

"If you call yourself a man, then it's got to be a greatsword."

"How about bows, eh, Lyle? They're not half bad."

"You should settle for what you're used to using... But a sturdy double-edged sword might do you some good."

"Daggers are the best. End of story."

"Ahem...whip sword...ahem..."

"Spears are good and all, but you know the halberd is the king of weapons..."

"Guns are nice, Lyle. It'll cost you, but they're the weapon of the future! Just imagine!"

As I'm sure you understand by now, the advice the ancestral heads deigned to offer wasn't always correct, or even particularly good. They typically responded with answers based off their own experiences and their personal senses of value, which could often leave them wildly off base. Worse yet, their opinions were hardly ever aligned. All seven of them would propose something completely different from the others, and sometimes they were all equally wrong!

This time was no different. Each and every one of them had recommended the weapons they'd specialized in when they were alive.

"Feckless, the lot of you! A real man goes for the big swords!" cried the founder.

“Don’t you look down on bows!” the second head roared in response. “That’s humanity’s greatest weapon, right there!”

It seemed the founder and his son were fighting. *Again*. With every word they uttered, my apprehension toward my ever-diminishing mana supply grew.

“Well, I’m already used to using sabers,” I told the proprietress.

“That’s true, I guess,” she conceded, not pushing me any harder than that. “And in the end, you’re entrusting your life to whatever weapon you choose. It’s all right to be picky. Unfortunately, my hubby can’t make one good enough to sell you. He only sells weapons he’s confident in. Let’s move on to the daggers, then.”

She pulled out six daggers in total, each subtly different in their design. “Here’s our selection,” she said, placing them on the counter. “Go ahead and pick the ones you want.”

After I had chosen three of the daggers and handed her my coins, the proprietress caught my eyes with hers.

“Now that we’ve gotten business out of the way, where’s the girl with the ponytail?” she asked. “You didn’t bring her with you today?”

“Do you mean Novem? She headed off to the Guild without me.”

She looked a bit disappointed. “Seriously? I wish you’d have brought her with you. My hubby’s in a good mood whenever that girl comes around. A good enough mood for him to pop his head out of the workshop, at least, and let me tell you, that doesn’t happen every day.”

Naturally, I was aware that Novem was incredibly popular... Far more popular than me.

“Nicely done, Novem!” cried the second head, delighted by the proprietress’s words. “I knew that girl had a good head on her shoulders.”

I waved a hand at the proprietress, said my thanks, and left the store behind.

The first floor of Darion’s Adventurers’ Guild was a wide, open space where merchants would set up their stands at the crack of dawn. The place was

practically as busy as a town market, with carriages always coming and going. Adventurers would pour into the space as they rushed back from their jobs, arms full with all the demonic stones and materials they'd gathered. Materials were the parts of a monster that could be processed into goods once an adventurer had hunted it down. Merchants would buy the materials, but the demonic stones had to be sold to Guild personnel.

The Adventurers' Guild was an organization whose branches were all independently operated. The connections from branch to branch only went so far as the rules they shared to manage their adventurers. Though they would cooperate with one another, it was more accurate to say the Guild was a collection of many independent, but similar organizations. For this reason, each Guild would be strongly influenced by the region it was situated in.

Darion was kind to newcomers, but the town felt a bit lacking to anyone with some skill under their belt. Likewise, Darion's Guild paid little mind to the adventurers who left once they were skilled enough, devoting more resources to training new recruits.

Novem crossed paths with many adventurers who were headed for the counters as she entered the second floor of the Guild building. She was undoubtedly a beautiful girl, but hardly any of the passing men spared her a glance. It was rather difficult for adventurers to develop romantic feelings for their colleagues of the opposite sex—especially for the men to fall for the women. Novem knew better than anyone else, though, that that wasn't the only reason she was being ignored.

Not that she seemed in any way bothered by this as she absentmindedly scanned the counters. There were three receptionists working at the moment, each with a line of adventurers waiting for them to finish filing paperwork. Other adventurers checked the available requests and material sales listings on the board hanging from the wall. And of course, there were others still immersed in conversation, going over their schedules.

Once she spotted two women waiting among the hustle and bustle, Novem plastered a smile on her expressionless face and approached them.

The first was Aria, who was looking around the room anxiously, her hands full

of bags. The second was Zelphy, a female adventurer with short purple hair and sun-kissed skin. She stood next to Aria, glaring at any man who tried to make a pass at the younger woman.

Aria had yet to take on the appearance of a full-blooded adventurer, and was thus subject to quite a bit of attention. Although the men completely ignored Novem, they seemed to think it was only natural to express their interest in someone as beautiful as Aria. They were quickly driven off, though, with a sharp look from Zelphy.

Zelphy had once served House Lockwood, the house which Aria hailed from. She'd drifted to Darion and ended up becoming an adventurer after House Lockwood had fallen to ruin, but she still thought of Aria as her precious little sister. She also happened to be the Guild-recommended veteran Novem had hired to teach Lyle's party the fundamentals of adventuring. She'd cost twenty gold coins—a small fortune.

Neither of the two women seemed to be dressed for work, as they were clad in casual clothing instead of armor. This was only natural, since they had no plans to work today. Instead, today would be the day Aria was formally added to the party.

“Good morning, Miss Zelphy, Miss Aria,” Novem greeted them.

“M-Morning,” Aria replied, stumbling over her words. “U-Umm... Where's Lyle?”

“Morning,” Zelphy said. She seemed to think Lyle was running behind, since she continued, “Does someone happen to be running late?”

Novem immediately shook her head as the other two women looked doubtfully around the room.

“No, not at all,” she replied. “He just went to pick up his weapons from the blacksmith. He should be here by the time we agreed upon.”

Zelphy pressed her back into the wall, folding her hands behind her head.

“Oh, right, he did end up ruining that saber of his. You know, I still can't believe that kid defeated an Art-slinging bandit chief.”

As far as Zelphy was concerned, Lyle seemed to lose consciousness over every little thing you could imagine. He nearly collapsed from gutter cleaning and most definitely collapsed whenever he used magic. He would even collapse mid-conversation! At this point, her main impression of the boy was that he was someone who was constantly keeling over.

The bandits had only been driven off, according to the official story, but Zelphy knew differently since she'd been present when they were subjugated. She was aware of how Lyle had moved behind the scenes as well, as she was an adventurer with ties to the Lord of Darion, Bentler Lobernia.

"R-Really? I think he was pretty cool..." Aria said, cheeks flushing and eyes cast bashfully down at the floor. Perhaps she was remembering how Lyle had saved her. "A-And all those times he collapsed, I'm sure he was just tired..."

Novem giggled. It appeared Aria had quite the high opinion of Lyle, much to Zelphy's discomfiture.

Opting to wait for Lyle alongside the other two women, Novem positioned herself by the wall and surveyed the Guild's interior. She noticed a familiar party of three—or rather, four—as they walked by. It seemed they had one more member with them today than was usual.

One of the four seemed to take note of Novem and her companions, pointing them out to the robed woman who was following them around. It was the affable young swordsman, Rondo.

"Ah, seems like we've found them," he said to the woman in the robe. "It doesn't look like he's here yet, but he should be getting here before too long."

"How about we talk to those three first, then?" asked Ralph, their spearman. He was a tall delinquent-looking man with a mohawk, but his tone was far gentler than his appearance would suggest.

"Hey, quit fawning over her!" cried a petite girl with a staff. She was the trio's third member, Rachel. She was quite a bit shorter than Ralph, and had ended up sandwiched between her two male party members. "She's Lyle's guest."

Lyle had gotten close to these three adventurers after coming to Darion. They had all come from the same village and formed a party together. On top of

helping out with the bandit subjugation, they were also the party of adventurers that Lyle and his companions had the most interaction with.

Novem waved as the party approached.

“The usual party, and...Miss Sophia, was it?”

The woman in the black robe had pulled back her hood and fanned out her long, silky black hair. Her dark eyes were full of pride and determination, and a large battle-axe rested on her back, serving as a stark contrast to her rather womanly build.

Novem recognized her; her name was Sophia Laurie. Lyle had returned a stolen battle-axe to her after he'd defeated the bandit chief. The axe had been a family heirloom, Novem remembered.

“Correct. I am Sophia Laurie,” Sophia said with a bow. “You did a great service for me the other day. You don't know how happy I am to have regained House Laurie's precious heirloom.”

“Sophia here came to thank Lyle,” Rachel said, smugly prodding the woman with an elbow. “She looked lost, so we were showing her the way. It kinda reminded me of when we first met you two, Novem.”

Rondo put a hand to his chin; his eyes shifted slightly upwards. “Right. Come to think of it, this is our second time showing someone to the Guild. I'm glad to see Aria's doing all right.”

“I know, right?” Ralph nodded, a happy look on his face. “I never thought that Lyle'd end up saving her like *that*. We never would've misunderstood like we did if he'd just talked to us about it.”

The misunderstanding Ralph was talking about had started when Lyle had purchased Aria. Rondo and his party had a vague idea of Lyle and Novem's relationship, so they'd been quite put off when they heard Lyle had taken Aria in. Now that they knew it was all a mistake, they'd apparently decided to take the opportunity they'd gained by leading Sophia here to apologize as well.

“Yep, we should apologize while we still can,” Rondo said, scanning the area for Lyle. “That being said, it must have been pretty hard on you, Sophia, coming all the way out here just to say thank you.”

Sophia tilted her head, confused. “Huh? I didn’t come here just to say thank you. I came to give him my gratitude.”

“We know,” Rachel said, nodding a few times. “You traveled all that way just to tell him how grateful you are. You’re such an earnest girl.”

Aria did not seem nearly as amused by this as Rachel did.

Sophia cocked her head again, this time in the opposite direction.

“Miss Sophia, just to be sure,” Novem began, seeming to notice something off about the other woman’s behavior. It was then that she asked what was quickly becoming a very pressing question. “What exactly has brought you here today, seeking Lord Lyle’s company?”

Sophia straightened her back, puffed out her sizable chest, placed her right hand on her heart, and clearly declared, “I have lost my home. With nothing left to repay him, I have come here to pay back my debt with my very body.”

This line caused the gaze of every male nearby to lock on her at once. Their eyes slid over the lines of her figure, which were clear even under the robe she wore. Rondo’s party froze, while both Zelphy and Aria looked taken aback. Aria even ended up dropping the bags in her hand.

A silence which could only be called peculiar descended upon the Guild. Lyle truly could not have picked a better moment to arrive.

“Phew,” he said, once he’d climbed his way up the stairs with a parcel in hand. “Maybe I should have left them behind. But I do kinda want to give them a test run... Oh, there you guys are. Hey, girls... H-Huh?”

Lyle had formed a sizable force to defeat the bandits. He had played quite the fool while doing so, giving him an odd reputation among the people of Darion. He’d earned himself a moniker—Foolish Noble Lyle. The title didn’t exactly fill him with joy, but it also didn’t seem like it could be the reason for the way the eyes of all the men in the Guild were currently prying into him.

“Hey! What’s going on?!”

Novem looked at Sophia. “Could you repeat that, Sophia? Would you tell us why you came here to see Lyle one more time?”

Sophia didn't seem to understand why she was being pressed so incessantly, and she replied even louder this time.

“As I was saying, I have come here to pay off my debt with my body! Now that my heirloom has been returned to me, I must repay the favor!”



Novem didn't truly believe Sophia meant to offer her body to Lyle. She took Sophia's declaration to mean the woman intended to work off her debt with physical labor. She clearly had no idea what she was saying. With this in mind, Novem turned to her with a smile on her face.

"Is that so...? Well, I can give you a tentative passing grade. It is a pleasure to do business with you, Miss Sophia."

The eyes stabbing into Lyle sharpened.

"Glad to hear it," Sophia said, but she looked even more confused than she had been. "Temporary what now?"

Zelphy gazed at Lyle with a frown, while Aria looked like she was about to cry. Rondo and his party were staring at Lyle with cold eyes, as everyone else seemed to be doing. Everywhere Lyle looked, he was met with a different sort of stare. None of them were positive.

"Huh...? What's going on? How did we end up here?"

It was at this moment that Lyle discovered he was going to be responsible for three lives instead of two.

Chapter 17: One Step Forward, One Step Back

“That’s incredible, Lyle,” the third head gleefully prattled on. “Just when you were mulling over whether you’d be able to support *two* people, a third one showed up. I think you’ve got a certain...something. Shall we say, *je ne sais quoi*?”

By “certain something,” did he mean karma, perhaps? Well, if this was karma, it was clearly the bad kind. Though if I called this situation bad karma, that implied I’d actually done something to deserve this, didn’t it?

But...I hadn’t... Had I?

Novem, Aria, Sophia, and I had borrowed a room in the Guild to discuss our future plans with Zelphy. Sophia had jumped in with us on short notice, but Novem insisted this was as good a time as any, and had added her to our party.

I thought Novem was a fine woman; she was beautiful, capable, and she clearly cared for me. Judging by how accepting she was of Aria, however, I got the feeling she wasn’t planning to keep me just for herself. It appeared that, for some reason I didn’t understand, she was attempting to surround me with women.

There were two long tables in the room, and the four of us sat with Zelphy at the one toward the front. I was sitting between Novem and Aria, while Sophia sat across the table opposite of Novem.

“Ahem,” Zelphy coughed, clearing her throat. “So, if I’m getting this right, missy over here plans to work as an adventurer to repay Lyle. Is that right?”

“Certainly!” Sophia said, nodding. Her face was filled with determination. She sat with perfect posture, her flushed face red from ear to ear. “When I said I was paying with my b-body, I meant physical labor, and I most definitely did not have any ulterior motives!”

“Physical labor, eh,” whispered the sixth head, his voice leaking from the Jewel—though regardless, I was the only one who could hear it. “That somehow

sounds indecent when she says it.”

That was probably because of what Sophia had just done. She’d proclaimed she’d repay me for my help with her body, and she’d done it right in the middle of the Guild—with an absolute ton of people watching! It only took a few minutes for me to be promoted from “Foolish Noble” to “Womanizer.”

It seemed my reputation was on a downward spiral.

“Yeah, I get it, just calm down,” Zelphy said, dismissing the topic with a wave of her hand. “I’m already getting an inkling here, but you don’t have any adventuring experience, do you?”

Sophia nodded, then lowered her gaze. “B-But I hail from a vassal house. We were knights, and I was taught combat techniques.”

She *could* walk around with that battle-axe like it was nothing. Perhaps she was trained, to a degree, but that apparently wasn’t enough to convince Zelphy of her skill. The older woman pressed a hand to her brow.

It seemed another issue was at hand.

“Lyle, I’d like you to listen to my proposal here. It’s not a bad deal.”

“What is it?”

Zelphy took a look at all of us before placing her interlocked hands on the table.

“Both me and the Guild, we owe you a favor for dealing with the bandits. Since you’ve got more people, how about you extend your instruction period for another two weeks? It won’t cost you any money, of course. I doubt the Guild will be against it.”

It took a lot of money to receive exclusive guidance from a veteran adventurer like Zelphy. More precisely, it cost twenty gold for three months of training. A free two-week extension would be a lifesaver. It really would, but...

“Err, why?”

Zelphy looked at Aria and Sophia with a conflicted look on her face.

Novem seemed to understand, even if I didn’t. She glanced at Aria and Sophia

and then nodded. “All right, that might be for the best. I think we should accept Miss Zelphy’s generosity, Lord Lyle.”

“The short of it is, those two are complete amateurs,” the second head explained. “They have no knowledge or experience of what it’s like being an adventurer. They’re just like you were when you first came to Darion. She wants to show them the ropes.”

I hung my head for a moment and thought it over a bit. Thinking back to my first month, I didn’t really understand what it meant to be an adventurer or...

Oh!

“Hold on! Then by two weeks, you mean...!” I rocked back in my seat, looking at Zelphy with horror.

Zelphy nodded, a grin wending its way across her face. “Finally getting it, are we? Then what d’ya say? Let’s get out there and do our best to complete some odd jobs! Don’t worry, these two weeks are on me.”

Aria looked at me, not fully understanding. “Lyle, what does she mean by odd jobs?”

Darion invested a lot in expansion and redevelopment, meaning there were plenty of jobs around town. This work was sent straight to the Guild, and picking up those sort of odd jobs was how adventurers without weapons or armor would typically save up for their equipment.

It was the furthest thing from adventure.

“Gutter cleaning,” I muttered.

“Huh...?”

Aria turned to Zelphy, who averted her eyes. Evidently, our instructor wasn’t going to let her skip that stage of the adventurer’s life cycle.

Sophia sprung to her feet. “P-Please wait!” she protested. “When I said I wanted to repay the favor, I was imagining something more like defeating monsters—”

Zelphy gave her an exasperated look. “Sorry, but I’m the party’s instructor. Meaning I’m the one showing your leader the way forward. If you don’t like

that, missy, you're free to leave. However, if you plan to live as an adventurer, I guarantee that these experiences won't be wasted."

Novem spoke before Sophia could work herself up to make yet another complaint.

"Rest easy, Lord Lyle. I'll go out and work this time; you should just relax in the Guild and pen letters in my place. Don't worry about me. I have quite a bit of physical strength."

Although Novem happily agreed to the drain cleaning and construction work that would usually be sent around to me, this was not something my ancestors could accept.

"L-Lyle!" the founder roared, immediately beginning to make a ruckus. "There's no way in hell you'd let Novem do that, right? A-And not Aria either! You couldn't possibly let Aria take on such taxing physical labor!"

"Fair is fair," said the second head, whose opinion seemed to differ only slightly from his father's. "If you're not letting Novem work outside, then you shouldn't let the other two either."

"He's right about that," the third head proclaimed. He cared little for Aria and Sophia, but Novem was a different story. "Well, they'll all just have to do their best working as scribes, then. If they're both former nobles, they should be able to read and write."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that," refuted the fourth head. "Sure, you could say that about a court noble like Aria. But a provincial noble and vassal like Sophia...? You realize those lords leave all their duties to their cabinet, don't you? I thought they must be illiterate half the time I was dealing with them."

The fifth head had to agree with him on that point. "It's surprisingly common. Additionally, there happen to be a number of idiots out there who say women don't need to know how to read."

"I'd say you should just listen to your instructor for now," the sixth head tacked on. "If Zelphy's saying it, it's probably a good idea."

The sixth head didn't have much of a fixation on Novem—well, to be honest, once you moved past the fourth generation, none of them did. They just

wanted me to treasure her after all she'd gone through for me. That being said...

"Dammit! She's going to make Lyle do grunt work again... This is why I hate adventurers!" the seventh head snarled, having come to his own conclusions. The seventh head detested adventurers and mercenaries. Just being an adventurer alone was enough to immediately reduce his opinion of a person.

"Novem...I'm assigning you to work as a scribe."

"But, Lord Lyle, why?" Novem asked. She seemed shocked. "I c-can work hard out there too."

It honestly terrified me that Novem really expected me to let her do physical labor in my place. If Novem was out there working while I was writing in a room...it would look like she was the only one working! My moniker would change from "womanizer" to "gigolo." To hell with that!

Zelphy clapped her hands together. "Hey, don't make a fuss. Your leader has come to a decision. Lyle will be on physical labor. Everyone else will pen letters, or do other such jobs. Go work hard and learn what it means to be an adventurer!"

It could have been my imagination, but Zelphy's eyes seemed to flit frequently to Aria's troubled face.

Of course, she's concerned, I thought. Aria's practically a little sister to her.

The noonday sun was high and bright as I watched Aria and Sophia sweat up a storm. The two of them were hard at work shoveling up all the muck I'd removed from the gutter onto a cart.

As I wiped away my own sweat with a towel, I heard the founder mutter, "My poor Aria..." He sounded like he was on the verge of tears.

"Looks like Sophia's just as hopeless as Aria. How should I put it...?" the second head mused. "I guess you could say they're both awkward in their own ways."

As he sighed inside my head, I called out to Aria. "It's already break time, so,

umm, how about you rest some? We can get rid of the muck later. Actually, are you all right? We could do another request if you'd like..."

"I'm fine!" Aria called back. Though she was covered in sweat, she seemed relatively cheery. "The stench is a bit much, but beyond that, I'd have to say I'm made for this sort of work!"

For some reason, the work clothes seemed to suit her perfectly. They suited her so well, in fact, that I was already beginning to feel like she was a reliable addition to our party. In contrast, Sophia was remarkably gloomy.

"How about you, Sophia? Why don't you take a break? You don't have to worry that much about it."

"No," she replied firmly. "I've failed so much, I have to do something to prove my worth..."

The two girls had been faced with constant failures over the past five days. I had been working out at a construction site, while Aria and Sophia had been acting as scribes and doing other domestic tasks under Zelphy's supervision.

Both girls had failed their tasks miserably. Somehow, out of all the possible marks they could have achieved, they'd managed to get themselves Grade E rankings. The ranks adventurers were given for the jobs they completed were split into five marks, with A being the highest and E being the lowest. The girls had gotten themselves scored with the lowest mark—the one where you had to pay a fine to the Guild instead of getting paid.

As a result, they'd teamed up with me today when I headed out to clean the gutters. As luck would have it, it appeared they were both more suited to jobs like this. They had more physical prowess than the average man.

"It's amazing," the third head said, chuckling. "Just look at the two of them! You've got Sophia, who lectured the person she was supposed to transcribe letters for, and Aria, who broke a whole pile of plates and punched a customer! I'm surprised she managed to make it in the service industry for this long."

Both Sophia and Aria had caused various problems at the places they had taken requests. To be fair, there were cases to be made for the both of them. None of the complaints that had been made about them appeared to be

entirely their fault. After paying a handful of fines, however, we had to conclude they were not up to the sort of tasks they'd been given.

Honestly, even I might have had a better start than these two.

I pulled off my gloves and reached for a nearby canteen. The girls took swigs from their bottles as they wiped the sweat from their faces. It was important to stay hydrated, but given our location, food would have to wait until after the job was over.

The cleaning would probably be done in another few hours. Once the job was finished, we'd have the client check it over and pay us accordingly.

Aria wiped her mouth off with her towel. "So, Zelphy's not going to check on us?"

It wasn't like Zelphy was watching over us around the clock. She was actually quite busy with another matter at the moment.

"I'm sure she's busy cleaning up the mess they made," the fourth head said with a slight laugh. "Well, I'm glad she's doing her job right. If she's supposed to be watching over you guys, it's her job to take responsibility for you when you mess up."

The girls had both messed up a considerable amount the past five days, it was true. On Sophia's first day on the job, she'd given a lecture to an adventurer who had asked her to transcribe a letter. A love letter, in fact. She'd begrudgingly sat there and transcribed whole pages of sugary sweet nothings, red from ear to ear. All the while, the guy had watched her with a wide grin splitting his face. When the guy had finally ended it off with, "I'd like to address it to you," she'd flown into a rage.

Anyone would have been angered by such harassment, I'm sure, but a failed quest is still a failed quest.

As for Aria, she'd taken a job in the service industry, so she'd figured she'd be just fine. She'd gone to work at a dining hall that was short-staffed, but her job was cut short when she'd raised her hands against a drunk middle-aged man who'd groped her behind. She'd sent him flying, and he'd broken several plates when he crashed back to earth. From what I'd heard, even the table had been

destroyed.

They'd sent her to help out in the back after that, but when she broke several plates while trying to wash them, the restaurant had finally issued a complaint to the Guild.

It was only after several more similar failures had occurred that the girls were sent around to help me.

Zelphy was currently going around and apologizing to the mission overseers the girls had frustrated, so she couldn't come to observe us today. I don't think even she had thought Aria would do so poorly, given her prior experience as a waitress.

Ciel, the shop Aria had previously worked at, was the sort of hideaway where men would sneak away to enjoy some sweets. Thinking back on it now, the type of men who'd be interested in sneaking out for some secret sweets probably didn't have a very high crossover with the drunken type.

The manager had probably asked Aria to serve customers because she'd been too clumsy for the other jobs at the restaurant. Given the cute uniform, appearance might have also been an important factor.

"Should I be relieved that she's within eyeshot, or should I feel depressed over how happy she looks doing backbreaking labor?" the founder rumbled, his voice troubled. "I don't know! Goddammit! What am I supposed to do?!"

"As it happens," the third head replied instantly, "you can't do a thing! So could you do us all a favor and just pipe down?"

"Dagnabbit!"

The more the founder screamed, the more I could feel my meager mana slipping away. And, since no one else could hear him, my mana was being wasted for absolutely nothing.

When the founder looked at Aria, he couldn't help but see her ancestor whom he had loved. She'd been a real, well-to-do noblewoman, but there was no telling what kind of person she had been. Despite what the founder thought about her, he had never actually spoken to her before. I couldn't help but wonder if she had been similar to Aria.

“I could have contributed so much more if we were out fighting monsters,” Sophia sighed.

“You don’t have to be so bothered about repaying me, seriously,” I told her. “I didn’t go there planning to regain your heirloom; I just happened to do it along the way.”

“Th-That’s right!” Aria cried, barging into the conversation. “You really should just forget about it. I mean, you’ve hardly been useful so far in the first place.”

Sophia gave Aria a nasty glare. “I don’t want to hear that from you.”

“P-Please,” I pleaded with them. “Don’t glare at each other like that.”

As an unspeakable air formed around the two girls, I started to hear the unwelcome whispers of passersby.

A group of three housewives paused to watch us, amused.

“Oh my, it’s a spat! A spat, I say!” cried the first.

“Are they getting fooled by his pretty face?” asked the second.

“It must be nice, being so young,” commented the third.

After a moment, the three of them headed off on their way. Someone approached us, then. Someone with a familiar, tired face.

“You look like you’re having fun.”

“There’s nothing fun about this!” I refuted.

Zelphy shrugged. “Sorry, but there’s been a change of plans. The fines are racking up, and this work just isn’t gonna cut it. Take tomorrow off. You’re hunting monsters the day after that. I considered footing the bill, but this is as good a chance as any to teach them the reality of things.”

Sophia’s eyes went wide. “Finally! Now I can actually start making up for my losses!”

“I c-can do it too!” Aria cried, trying to upstage Sophia. “They taught me how to use a spear back home.”

Both Aria and Sophia were surprisingly well-versed in combat techniques. I wanted to tell them that there were quite a few other things they should have

learned as well, but I decided to keep that thought to myself.

It seemed the third head had noticed my restraint, since he said, “Lyle...try and speak your mind a bit more. See what happens.”

“You shouldn’t be rude about it, of course, but communication is important, Lyle,” said the fourth head. He always had a lot to say on the topics of women and money.

I’d stayed silent because I’d thought saying what I’d been thinking out loud would make them angry. Was that not what I was supposed to do?

Seeing that the two girls seemed to be at odds with one another, Zelphy scratched her head, her eyes troubled. “Yeah, maybe I should have started with this.”

Right, Zelphy had mentioned teaching them “the reality of things.” But what exactly did she mean by that?

The day after Aria and Sophia’s fight, Novem took Sophia out shopping. Fighting monsters outside the city was not as simple as it sounded. There were many tools they’d need to take with them. Since Aria had gone to the shops with Zelphy, it was up to Novem to take Sophia.

There were countless shops that could supply an adventurer with the necessities. Each shop had its own characteristics, however.

This seemed to bother Sophia. She turned to Novem and asked, “Why are similar items going for such a huge range of different prices? Is there something different about the quality?”

Novem nodded. “In a way. The equipment going for cheap prices tends to break easily, so if you’re planning on using an item for a long period of time, you should go with one of the more expensive ones. You should choose some equipment that’s of decently high quality. It ends up being more economic that way.”

Sophia still looked troubled. “The expenses seem to be quite high. I thought the initial investment would be much lower.”

“I can pay for your tools, Miss Sophia,” Novem offered. “Do you have enough money for your lodging? I’m fine with paying that too.”

Sophia vehemently shook her head. “Oh, I couldn’t possibly let you do that! I can’t take that much from you! I came here to repay my debts, so I shouldn’t be causing you anymore trouble.”

“You’ll only hold Lord Lyle back if you lack the proper equipment or you don’t monitor your health properly,” Novem stated plainly. “This is a necessary expense. Not to mention, you could always repay him at a later date. Please rely on me for now.”

Sophia had been naive—she’d never thought about what it meant to be an adventurer. Banseim Kingdom’s nobility tended to despise the adventuring trade. When a house fell to ruin, or if a second or third son wanted to be independent, they might become an adventurer. Otherwise, no self-respecting noble would ever choose such a path.

Sophia was no different. She’d never even dreamed of becoming an adventurer. She’d thought her future was to marry into another house. But then her house had failed to protect the land their lord had left to them. Her family had died, and their status as vassals had been stripped away.

“I’m sorry... I’ll take a loan for now.”

Novem smiled. “All right. You’ll be able to return it someday. Now, let’s choose some equipment for you. I’d like to move on to the next set of shops soon.”

“W-We’re going to even more?” Sophia stammered.

And so the two girls continued for a short while longer, until their shopping was done...

Zelphy laughed so hard she had to clutch her stomach for support as I used a towel to wipe pea-green liquid from my face. A day had passed since the girls had gone on their shopping trip, and we’d traveled a few hours from Darion on foot so they could hunt some monsters.

Novem was wetting towels with her magic to give to Aria and Sophia, but she took a moment to scold the older woman. “Miss Zelphy!”

Zelphy cleared her throat. “I said I’m sorry. You don’t have to be so mad. But do you two understand now?”

Aria and Sophia hung their heads.

Slimes were jiggly monsters consisting of pea-green liquid trapped within a mucous membrane. They came in various sizes but were generally smaller than humans. They were relatively easy monsters to defeat, though we’d ended up drenched in slime juice despite that.

In my case, it was thanks to a reckless swing from Sophia’s battle-axe. She’d sent the stuff splattering right onto my face. Aria had ended up remarkably sullied as well after she’d stabbed the slime with her spear. Now everyone but Novem and Zelphy were covered in slime juice.

The situation had been summarized by a single, brief declaration from the second head: “How absolutely dreadful...”

I wasn’t going to argue with him.

Zelphy slipped on a pair of gloves and began collecting any slime parts that could be sold. I could see that the transparent skin sack that enveloped the liquid was in tatters. “They’re in horrible condition. You won’t even get half market value with this. The core’s beaten up too. It’s unsellable. And where did the demonic stone fly off to...? I can’t even find it!”

Aria seemed to have something to say, but she must have decided to keep the peace, since she just glared instead.

“Now listen here. It’s not just about defeating the damn thing. An adventurer needs to keep the materials in good condition or they don’t get a return on their investment. Aria!”

“Y-Yes!” Aria replied stiffly.

Zelphy’s tone seemed to have immediately put Aria on edge; she wasn’t accustomed to dealing with Zelphy when the older woman was in work mode.

“I already told you that you don’t have to stab with all your might! Just give it

a small puncture and the insides will spill out. Then all you've got to do is wait and collect it! Why can't you do that?!"

Sophia glanced sideways at Aria as the other girl fell into a slump. It didn't seem like she was feeling very triumphant, though.

"Same goes for you, Sophia. What did I tell you? That's not an easy weapon to master."

"B-But I don't have any other weapons..." Sophia said, frantically trying to string excuses together. Her filthy battle-axe was stuck in the ground.

"Don't swing around a weapon you don't know how to use!"

Sophia had enough strength to swing around her large battle-axe, but that didn't mean she was particularly accurate. Most of her swings would pass through empty air, and when she finally resorted to a horizontal swipe, she'd ended up scattering slime juice everywhere.

"Your weapon is your life. You can choose any weapon you want to, but it's just plain dangerous to use a weapon you're not sufficiently practiced in. Sophia...say you had an ally nearby. Would you be able to swing that axe around?"

Sophia clenched her fist. "I doubt it."

In this, we were agreed. I doubted I could stand anywhere near Sophia while she swung that axe around. In the worst-case scenario, I'd end up taking an axe to the face.

"You don't have to be so harsh about it," the founder grumbled. "Aria's doing her best."

His attitude toward her was completely different from how he was with me! He'd been a bit nicer to me lately, but before that he'd always been riling me up, disparaging me, or degrading me. What was with this total about-face he did for the girls—or more specifically, Aria?!

You know, I'm not so sure what I should feel about that...

Zelphy's gaze turned to me. I drew my saber and left my bags with Novem, who was keeping watch over all our things.

First, I plucked a hefty stick off the ground and threw it at the slime. It recoiled at the impact and then began bouncing its way toward me.

I held up my saber in my right hand, slightly shifting my position so the slime passed through the place where I'd been standing. The saber's blade lightly grazed its surface as it bounced past. Bodily fluids spilled out over the ground and soon the slime could no longer move. Once the fluid was gone, it left behind two red objects—the slime's round core and a small demonic stone.

I put on my material-handling gloves and took a small barrel and leather bag out from where they had been stored among my belongings. Then I picked up the loot and put it away.

"Good. *That* is how an adventurer fights. Do you two understand now?"

We hadn't discussed this beforehand, but Zelphy was apparently treating my slime-killing technique as a textbook example... It seemed it'd gotten a passing grade.

The two girls seemed even more depressed now.

"Defeating them isn't enough to get you any money," Zelphy told them. "You two aren't knights or soldiers. Take them down cleanly, and collect the materials and demonic stones. Otherwise, an adventurer can't put food on the table. You'll be on odd jobs forever."

I was watching the two of them when Novem approached me.

"Lord Lyle, you might want to follow up with them later."

"Huh?" I gave her a questioning look.

"W-Well," she stuttered, a troubled look crossing her face. "I just meant that you should call out to them and encourage them, and...you know."

Not so long ago, Zelphy had told me that an amateur like me didn't have any right to offer their help to others. She'd told me I should shut my mouth until I became a first-rate adventurer.

"Are you sure...? Won't that just make it worse? I mean, I'm still an amateur. Shouldn't I be first-rate before I..."

Novem appeared to be completely dumbfounded by my response. But then

she drew imposingly close to me, seeming to have recalled something. "Talk to them. You *have* to. It's not like you have to give them advice or anything. Just tell them to do their best! Promise me that! That'll be enough."

"O-Okay," I said. I found myself nodding, having lost to her intensity.

"Hey," the founder said. It sounded like it had taken him a while to muster up his voice. "Is it just me, or is Lyle kinda strange?"

It seemed Novem hadn't been the only one astounded by my behavior.

"Yeah, I've been thinking that for a while now," the second head agreed.

"I think this goes beyond a lack of socialization," the third head continued.

The fourth head sounded a little angry. "This situation with Aria and Sophia is a huge problem. Big stuff! Why is he bringing up him being an amateur at a time like this...?"

"They're your party members, for crying out loud," the fifth head said, continuing in a similar vein. "You need to help each other out. Why are you treating this the same as if you're saving a stranger?"

"Hmm, could it be...?" the sixth head wondered. "Yes, I believe that up to this point, Novem's perceptiveness has helped to cover it up. But there are a lot of dubious points about the boy I might have overlooked."

The seventh head tried to stick up for me, but he soon gave up. "Lyle...those two aren't strangers to you anymore. We've just talked a short while ago about how you have some responsibility for them, didn't we?"

They did appear to be making sound points, but I had also been told that I was ten years too young to even think about helping people... What was the difference between Zelphy's advice and theirs?

"You just don't get it!" the founder howled. "Okay, I've got it now! You, come to the Jewel tonight! You better mark my words!"

Aria and Sophia stood in one direction, being lectured by Zelphy. Novem stood in another, looking at me anxiously. Then there were my ancestors, who seemed astounded by me. And lastly, there was me, who apparently had no grasp of my own situation.

What's going on here?

It felt like I was right back to where I'd started. Like I'd made no progress at all from the time when I'd been unable to do anything, and everyone had just gotten mad at me.

Chapter 18: Growth

The item now known as the Walt family Jewel had originally been the Walt family *Gem*.

Gems were tools that could be utilized to record the Arts of those who used them. Once an Art had been recorded within a Gem, it would remain there for all perpetuity. In order for an Art to be recorded by a Gem, however, the user would have to become proficient in all three stages of the Art. As long as the one inheriting the Gem knew the names of the Arts within and how to use them, they could use their predecessor's Arts all the way from the first stage to the third stage. Without the proper knowledge, the one inheriting the Gem would only be able to use the first stage of the Arts recorded within.

The Walt family Jewel had one trait that greatly separated it from its original form as a Gem. When it had evolved into a Jewel, it had reproduced the personalities and forms of its previous owners in the prime of their lives. This meant that not only was I able to converse with my ancestors, but each of them could now personally teach me how to use their Arts, which was knowledge that had previously been lost to time.

I'd discovered not too long ago that I could even send my consciousness into the Jewel to where my ancestors resided—a large circular room with a round table at its center. Within this room, I could meet my newly revived ancestors face-to-face. None of this could have been possible if the Jewel had remained a Gem. As for why this evolution had occurred, not even my ancestors seemed to know.

The room within the Jewel had a large blue orb embedded in the ceiling, with a scattering of smaller orbs decorating the ceiling around it. There were twenty-two of the small orbs in total; six of them were aglow. Another large blue orb was embedded in the center of the large round table, around which each of my ancestors had their own chair.

Behind each of these chairs stood a door. These doors varied in design based

on the characteristics of the ancestor whom they had a connection with. Within these doors were scenes pulled from my ancestors' memories; I could witness them myself if I stepped through one of the doorways. I had a chair as well, though there was no door behind it—no room containing my memories.

The rooms themselves were a mystery. No one seemed to know why or how they'd come into existence. It seemed that, in the end, the Jewel was an item destined to be plagued with such mysteries.

The fourth head cleared his throat as he adjusted his glasses. My ancestors and I were in the round-table room, and the fourth head was serving as something of a mediator, as he often did.

"Well then," he proclaimed, quickly seizing control of the discussion. "Let us begin this meeting. Our topic of discussion shall be: why is Lyle so strange?"

The fact they were discussing me didn't really bother me, but the topic of today's discussion was a whole other story. I managed to keep my feelings to myself, though.

The second head spoke first. "His behavior was more than just a bit strange, I'd say. Treating your comrades like they're strangers isn't normal. It's kinda a big deal, isn't it?"

I was just doing what I was told, I thought, my body folding in on itself. The second head's insight felt a bit harsh.

The third head stared at me, digging his elbow into the table. "Until recently, his only close relationships were with Novem and his instructor. That's why it didn't stand out. Everyone around him was capable, and they were helping him, not the other way around."

"His interpersonal relationship skills are completely lacking," muttered the fifth head.

"Who cares about that!" the founder howled, smacking his fist onto the table. "Listen here, Lyle! Those kids are like your family now! Do I have to spell it out for you?! It's your duty to protect them! What are you hoping to accomplish, acting like they've got nothing to do with you?!"

"If you'll let me say my piece," I said, "I don't really think of them as my family

yet... And it's not like we're lovers or anything. How exactly do you expect me to act?"

The founder pulled at his hair. "Just look at how my dear Aria's acts toward you! She's head over heels for you! Just make her happy, already! I'm begging you, for my sake! Just do it, you bastard!"

Are you asking me, or ordering me...?

"Lyle, let's start with that Sophia girl," the sixth head said in a tone filled with reproach. "Her house fell to ruin, and she's decided to become an adventurer to repay you. She might not be the most useful addition to your group right now, but she's a kid with nowhere to go. At the very least, how about you look after her until she can stand on her own two feet? I mean, you've got an inkling of her personality, right? Throw her out, and she's definitely going to be duped by some scoundrel."

Unlike Aria, who had Zelphy, Sophia had no one left other than herself. On top of this, she was incredibly earnest. She'd had no idea what she'd been getting into when she'd decided to become an adventurer.

Though I can't say I was any better...

"I...guess you have a point," I conceded.

The seventh head looked me up and down, an anxious look on his face. "Once upon a time, you were a bit more...well, tactful, weren't you, Lyle? You were bright and cheerful, capable of anything and everything... What happened?"

"Ah," the third head said, lifting his gaze. "That was bothering me too. Hey, Lyle... You were alienated from House Walt, right? How were you treated, exactly?"

The third head seemed to be a bit interested in my upbringing, but the others didn't seem to care too much. Well, it hadn't been anything special. All I had to say was the word "isolation" and I was pretty sure they'd get it.

"You've all probably got a good idea of what it was like already, I'm sure. It started, well, I believe I was around ten years old. Yes, it was right after I received my saber for my birthday."

I continued on, telling my ancestors about my treatment while I'd lived in House Walt. For some reason, their faces turned paler the further I went on.

Ever since I'd been shunned by my family, my whole life had been limited to my room and the corner of the yard I'd used for training. My meals had always been brought to my room. The plates and utensils I'd used had been taken away by the servant who brought me my next meal.

My tutors had simply handed me books. They'd never taught me anything—at least not that I remembered. I would take the books to my room and read and study on my own.

I never spoke to anyone. I never even held a conversation with my family. If I'd tried to speak with them, I'd have been ignored. If something major had happened, someone would come and inform me of it in a dispassionate tone. Thinking back on it now, the only one who'd ever reached out to me was Novem, who had occasionally dropped by to see me.

Well, that's not exactly true, I thought wryly. *I remember some of the younger vassals coming around to bully me.*

Now that I was thinking about it, I could remember a time when I was living in House Walt that I'd pushed my body too hard and fell terribly ill. Yet the world had continued to turn as per usual. Nothing had changed. No doctor had ever come to see me, nor had I received any medicine.

I...could barely remember anything else before that point. The only memories I had before I turned ten were vague recollections of gentle parents. I remembered receiving the saber, and playing with my family... That much I could remember, but everything else seemed completely blank.

As I sat there, holding my head in my hands, I could tell something wasn't quite right with my mind. I had...no memories.

"Huh...? Isn't that a bit strange?"

I could hardly remember anything about myself.

As my head spun in confusion, the sixth head screamed, "Yeah, you think?!" He grabbed the seventh head by the lapels. "Brod, are you sure you didn't screw up Meisel's education?! This is just crazy! We're talking about honest-to-

god, complete and total isolation here!”



Meisel was my father's name. Although he was technically the sixth head's grandson, I'd heard their relationship wasn't the best.

"I d-don't think so!" the seventh head stammered. "I could n-never have imagined that he would isolate Lyle in such a way! I had no idea that he was being treated so badly!"

Back when the seventh head had been alive, I'd been a golden child, adored by my family and their vassals alike. Apparently. But whenever the seventh head brought that up, it felt like he was talking about somebody else. Somebody I'd never known.

"They were treating their *heir* like that?" the second head muttered, a cold sweat breaking out across his brow. "Even if he wasn't the heir, that's not how you should be treating any child. Even secondborn and thirdborn sons who keep mooching off their houses have it better off than that! Not that I know much about other houses."

"This is worse than I thought. I don't really know what to say. It's quite odd that even the vassals picked on him," the fourth head said, slightly flustered.

The fifth head stayed silent; but after sending me a most curious look, he covered his face with a hand.

"Really? Umm... So, if I'm getting this right, I had it pretty bad?"

"Yep." The third head let out a dry laugh. "The only good thing is that you weren't kicked out. Everything else is horrible. It's so much worse than we imagined that we can't even get mad at you right now."

"Lyle," the founder said, leveling his eyes on me. He had a serious look on his face, and his arms were folded across his chest. "Did they ever starve you?"

"Th-They didn't. Food was the one thing I always received."

"I see," he whispered. "We should count our blessings."

The fourth head clapped his hands, signaling the end of this portion of the discussion. The sixth head released the seventh head's lapels, and everyone returned to their seats.

"All right. Now that we've cleared up the reason he's so terribly hopeless, let's

try being constructive. It would be good if we could learn something from this. Let's use this opportunity to the fullest."

"In regards to Lyle's obliviousness, we've gone from *inexplicable* to *inevitable*," the fifth head said with a slight shrug. "If he was treated like that during an impressionable period of his life, I'd say he came out better than he could have."

The seventh head stared at me, a pitying look on his face. Perhaps I should have felt comforted by this sudden attitude change from my ancestors, but, on the contrary, I found it terrifying.

Had my family really treated me that badly?

I had never known anything different, so to me, what they'd done was normal.

I suddenly felt a vague impulse to escape. Thankfully, the fourth head decided to change the topic.

"Let's move on to talking about our plans for the future. We should have a discussion about Lyle's fighting style and such."

It seemed they would be critiquing my saber technique next.

The third head snapped his fingers. "That's right! I reckon Lyle's probably a more technical sort of fighter. The level of dexterity he displayed when he was fighting that bandit chief was pretty impressive."

I had to cock my head to the side at that. "When did I display any dexterity...?"

"Oh, come on, why are you acting like you don't know what we're talking about?" the second head demanded, sighing. "You know, how you dual-wielded a dagger and saber. Even we have to admit that was pretty deft of you. The only one here who could do that is probably..." He looked at the fourth head, who straightened a bit in his chair.

"Me," the fourth head admitted. "But I just use two daggers. Adding a saber to that is a bit beyond me."

"Everyone has two hands," I said. "I think anyone could pull it off if they

tried.”

“You’re already veering into crazy talk,” the sixth head grumbled. He rubbed at the corners of his eyes. “Using both hands isn’t that easy; most people usually have one hand that’s dominant over the other. Given his low available mana, Lyle’s clearly the sort that goes through incredibly skewed Growth.”

The second head nodded a few times and folded his arms. “It’s not a bad thing to have specialized Growth; in fact, I’d say it’s better than having a half-baked spread. It just means he’ll have a smaller pool of mana overall. It’ll make it easier for him to decide his own style without feeling the need to hesitate. It’s helpful to have it abundantly clear what you are and aren’t capable of.”

As I listened to their conversation, something seemed a bit off to me. I ran out of mana pretty often, I could admit. But before I’d picked up the Jewel and had to deal with my ancestors draining me all the time, I’d thought I’d had more than average. It was the Jewel—the cursed item that was sucking up all my mana—that was causing my fainting predicament, not a low mana pool.

That aside, they kept using the word “growth” in a way that felt foreign to me. I silently raised my hand until the fourth head called on me.

“Go ahead, Lyle.”

All eyes were on me now.

“Umm... What’s this ‘growth’ you’re all talking about?” I asked.

Everyone froze.

What did I say this time?!

Apparently, I was even more oblivious than I’d realized.

The second head ruffled his hands through his hair, practically in a frenzy. “This can’t be happening! Even if he wasn’t trying to improve his skill at all, Lyle would have gone through at least one Growth at his age!”

“Tell me, Lyle,” the founder began, “have any of these things ever happened to you? You’re going through life, and suddenly you get this *kaboom* sort of feeling. You start feeling ill, and then after you lie in bed a while, this feeling comes over you...”

“Huh? It was more of a *huzzah* feeling for me,” the third head mulled, covering half his face with a hand. “That aside, Lyle was essentially living under house arrest, so maybe he didn’t have enough experience. You need quite a bit of life experience for a Growth to occur, you know.”

Growth was apparently a phenomenon that occurred when advancing to a new stage of strength. It started off with a spell of intense lethargy, like the onset of a terrible disease. Then after that, your health would suddenly improve to the point that you felt better than you ever had before. After one of these periods of Growth, it was common to find that you could do things that had been impossible for you previously.

If I was going to take my ancestors’ words for it, then I should have gone through at least one period of Growth by my age. According to them, a normal person would go through two or three periods of Growth over the course of their life. Soldiers, knights, and adventurers, meanwhile, were known to average between five and six. People had apparently used this information to theorize that fighting monsters sped up the rate at which you would experience Growth.

I’ll have to take my ancestors’ word for it, I guessed, since I’ve never heard a thing about any of this before.

The seventh head fell deeply into thought for a moment, before he finally said, “When it comes to things like this, the family normally keeps quiet while it happens, and watches over the aftermath with a smile. But in Lyle’s case, he was raised in such a dreadful environment...”

It seemed it was common to make all sorts of lapses in judgment during the heightened energy following a Growth. It had become a custom for families to watch with glee as their children went through this period of partial insanity.

What a terrible custom...

“Wait,” the second head said, suddenly turning to me. “If he doesn’t know what Growth is, and has never felt the *kachow* before, then you’re telling me he’s this strong without any Growth or experience? How is he using magic like that?!”

Your magical ability largely had to do with your bloodline. This was the main

reason why magicians and nobles were seen as one and the same—the ability to use magic had essentially established the ruling class. Nowadays, most of those who we would consider to be true magicians came from houses of baron peerage and higher. The baronets and knights beneath them could only pull off a few spells at best.

With that said, there were many outside the nobility with some manner of magicians' blood. This was why people outside of the nobility were able to use magic as well. Magic was sort of a touchy subject in general. The nobles considered any magician who wasn't a noble to be a mere imitation of the true thing. As far as anyone else was concerned, anyone who could use magic was a magician.

Wait, why are we talking about magic in the first place?

"I had more than enough time to spare for training when I was growing up," I told them, "so I did a good deal of magic training too."

"That's not what we're talking about," the sixth head stressed. "Lyle, you're using magic before your first Growth. That's more impressive than you know."

Evidently, you needed talent in order to use high-level magic before your first period of Growth. Which meant that I had talent. It wasn't all sunshine and rainbows, though, as the fifth head soon pointed out.

"He must be one of *those* ones. You see them from time to time. The type whose Growth periods come incredibly slowly. When one finally does happen, the recoil is terrible, but their abilities go up by leaps and bounds."

That didn't sound too bad to me, but my ancestors all had their heads in their hands.

"Yeah, I knew a few in my day," the second head said thoughtfully. "Since they get a lot stronger all at once, they get all full of themselves even after the Growth subsides. They're the sort that dies early."

On second thought, that sounds pretty terrible...

Basically, it seemed that the people who had distant periods of Growth but who achieved massive increases in their abilities when it did occur were also the type to make a lot of mistakes after the heightened energy of their Growth

period died down. This wasn't just because they got full of themselves about their new power, but also because they were often driven by the desire to see how much they could really do. Since they were suddenly able to do so many things they had once thought impossible, they would often misjudge their own strength, fail, and end up dying.

"Well, you know..." the founder weighed in, "you just need to trigger your first Growth, and then you'll be able to find out! Get out there and beat up some monsters, why don't you? If we had a dungeon nearby, this'd go by a lot faster."

"That's right!" the second head exclaimed, his face jerking up. "Lyle, go tackle your first dungeon! That should settle things. A dungeon's pretty much a Growth training ground."

"Really? I always thought dungeons were a bit scarier—I mean, more trouble—than they were worth."

Dungeons were naturally occurring distortions in space. It was also widely believed that dungeons were in some way *alive*. Dungeons would keep a valuable treasure in their innermost chamber in order to lure humans in. Typically, these treasures would be some sort of mana-emitting metal. Mana-emitting metals were referred to as rarium, and were considered prized materials for use in the crafting of Demonic Tools. Even lesser metals like copper were considered valuable if they'd turned into rarium.

Dungeons also contained particularly troublesome boss monsters that lorded over each floor, as well as other more typical monsters. The type of monsters which appeared on each floor were dependent on the sort of dungeon you were in.

The monsters would try to kill any humans that approached. Human corpses would be absorbed into the dungeon's walls, since humans were the food the dungeon used as sustenance. More powerful dungeons possessed more treasure at a higher quality than less powerful ones. And although dungeons were very dangerous places, humans still went into them in order to risk their lives for money and power.

A dungeon would wither once its treasure was taken from its depths. If a

dungeon withered, it would die. And since dungeons were practically living beings, taking the treasure at a dungeon's center was essentially the same as hunting it down and killing it.

The worst thing about dungeons was that if one went a long enough time without any visitors, it would begin to overflow with monsters. Once it hit critical mass, it would expel the monsters all at once, causing wanton death and destruction to the world outside.

Knowing how tricky dungeons were to handle, it felt like my ancestors were treating them a bit lightly.

"A dungeon, eh? I like the sound of that!"

"They're quite useful. You could make a nice Demonic Tool for yourself with the treasure, and you could sell it for good money too."

"Money and training, that's the best of both worlds."

"If you spot one, you've got to make sure you're the first to get in!"

"Yeah, we don't really have the know-how on how to manage a dungeon long-term, but we have more than enough knowledge on how to clear one. It'll be easy pickings."

It seemed all the heads from the third to the seventh valued dungeons for similarly twisted reasons.

Generally, it was the duty of the local lord to subdue any dungeon that manifested in their territory. Some dungeons could be entrusted to the area's Guild, but I'd heard that in those cases there'd still been quite a bit of collateral damage.

"Well, you see..." I tentatively told the heads, "I heard dungeons were a lot of trouble, and I don't think I'll be able to participate in a subjugation while I'm in Darion."

Not long ago, a second dungeon had appeared in Darion's territory. The Guild was gathering a team for the hunt even now. Some dungeons could fall as quickly as in a few weeks, while others could take months. When the second one had appeared, Hawkins advised me not to participate. Novem had been my

only party member back then, since Zephy was, strictly speaking, only our instructor.

Each and every one of my ancestors plunged their heads into their hands. All of them sounded far too disappointed for my taste.

“Dammit, it was such a good idea too.”

“The dungeon’s the place to show your stuff. What’s the point of holding yourself back?”

“Otherwise, we only have plain and boring methods...”

“It would have been a good moneymaker. What a shame.”

“Just when you’ve got Aria and Sophia on the team... Though that’s still a bit too few people for a dungeon.”

“That’s true. His party size is what’s holding us back here.”

“In the old days, we scraped together as many people as we could get. Lyle lacks the manpower at the moment—to a devastating degree.”

It seemed that they’d given up on the dungeon-crawling idea, but I still couldn’t understand why they were so disappointed. I just couldn’t quite grasp where they’d got such odd sets of values.

“Back in my day,” the founder reminisced, “it was all undeveloped land as far as the eye could see. There was this dungeon nearby with a forest in it, and I...”

For a moment there, I really did think the founder was drowning in the nostalgia of his own memories. But then he continued, “You could knock down as many trees as you wanted and they’d grow right back. And you should have seen the size of them! We kept chopping them down to build up our settlement, and we even had enough materials that we could sell some on the side! We were swimming in lumber!”

What exactly do these people think dungeons are for?!

“Then you got ahead of yourself and cleared the bloody thing, losing us a valuable resource! You fool! Give it back! You ruined all my plans!” the second head grumbled.

It seemed someone finally had something negative to say about dungeons, but it wasn't quite what I'd been expecting...

"Calling your Dad a fool, eh?! Let's take this outside, you damn brat!"

Once again, the founder and his son let their fists fly. Since the conversation was becoming quite derailed, the fourth head struck his hands together once more and declared the meeting adjourned.

"Let's leave it at that for today. Lyle, starting tomorrow, let's all work hard and do our best. You should focus on your relationships with the others...the women in particular." The lenses of his glasses caught the light and cast an ominous glare over his deadly serious face.

The fourth head's pretty mysterious, I thought. I wonder what it is about money and women that always gets him going...

The same day I'd had the conversation with my ancestors, Sophia, Zelphy, Aria, and I had returned from a journey outside of town. Now it was the day after, and I'd drawn my mind from the depths of the Jewel.

We had today off, since we'd returned from an excursion yesterday. I was actually the only one who had business at the Guild, so I was alone when I dropped by in the early morning. My business wasn't on either the first or second floor today, however.

The Guild had a reference room that was free for adventurers to use. Most of the documents there pertained to dungeons and monsters, and there were some records left by the Guild as well. If you looked at them, it was possible to find out what monsters appeared where, and what incidents they had caused. Most of the books could be obtained from pretty much anywhere, save for the Guild's personal records.

The second head had been the one who'd suggested that I look through the records. The third head—who happened to be an avid book lover—agreed, and I didn't have any complaints.

When I entered the room, I was immediately struck by the bouquet of scents that so commonly hung around books. The place smelled of paper, ink,

and...dust. They did clean the place, I was sure, but it didn't appear to see much use.

After picking out a few volumes, I took a seat and cracked the first one open. I flipped quickly through the first few pages, which made the second head cry out in anger.

"You're going too fast, Lyle! Why are you flipping through the pages so quickly?! Are you even able to read anything at that pace?"

It was clear I was going too fast for him to keep up, so I began to read slower. My ancestors were only able to see the outside world through my eyes, after all.

Nevertheless, I read on until the third head asked me in a slightly confused tone, "Lyle, when are these records from?"

Judging from the cover of the book I was reading...they had to be around a hundred years old. The books I was reading weren't the only old books they had, but they *were* quite tattered.

I looked around, making sure no one was in earshot before responding, "They should be around a hundred years old."

"And you can read them, Lyle?"

"It's a bit difficult, admittedly."

There were some places where I stumbled over the phrasing and the idioms used, but I could still read them, more or less.

"I see," the second head said thoughtfully. He seemed to have caught on to what the third head was getting at. "The Jewel must adjust the way we speak in order for Lyle to understand us. I did think it was a bit odd that we didn't have any problems communicating."

What's so odd about that? I wondered, but he didn't say anything more. He just encouraged me to continue reading.

Shortly after, I found a slightly strange entry among the records of monsters that could be found around Darion.

"I've never heard of this one before. It looks like it's some kind of orc variant

with purple skin. It even spits poison.”

I hadn’t known such a monster existed.

Orcs were known to appear just about anywhere. They were monsters who had pig’s heads with two large tusks protruding from their lower jaws. Their legs were short and thick, and their arms were long enough to reach the ground. As far as their skin was concerned, it was typically brown. They were able to use weapons, and I’d heard some of them even wore helmets as well. Orcs were humanoid, meaning that they were smarter than most other monsters. And they were typically known to be aggressive toward humans.

“That’s not a variant,” the second head explained. “There are monsters who undergo Growth as well.”

“And those monsters can have Arts of their own,” the third head said, taking over. “Did you know that, Lyle? It’s interesting since it’s said that Growth is one of the divine graces the Seven Goddesses who made this world granted the weak, feeble humans. They’re said to have granted us magic and Arts as well.”

The second head scoffed. “As if. Sure, saying it might make the priests angry, but humans and monsters all experience Growth equally. Both races have Arts as well. There are plenty of monsters out there who handle magic just fine.”

Although it was pretty apparent that the goddesses blessed humans and monsters equally, it was typically preached that the Seven Goddesses were on the side of humanity. It was difficult for some humans to believe that monsters could receive the same benevolence they did from the goddesses they so revered.

“Everyone wants to believe they’re something special,” the third head said, chuckling. “They can believe whatever they want, but I wish they wouldn’t force their beliefs on others. Those beliefs are why they had to write that orc off as a variant. Countryside lords like us have to deal with those types of monsters whether we like it or not. The least they could do is give us the correct information.”

House Walt’s Vice Domain was once considered to be in the middle of nowhere, or as the third head had more politically referred to it—in the countryside. Now it was one of the most developed places in Banseim. From

what I'd heard, the first, second, and third heads had lived pretty rough lives there; even though they'd been lords, they'd had to go out and till the fields just like everyone else.

"So, are you saying you think there's a problem with our religion?" I asked the third head.

"Huh? Why would you think that?" he replied.

The third head's response seemed quite questionable to me. He'd been incredibly critical of Banseim's religion just moments before.

"Lyle, we worship the goddesses as well," the second head said with a sigh. "Hmm... As far as I recall, all of the Seven Goddesses are revered equally here in Banseim."

"They are, though some regions value some of them over the others," the third head confirmed. "The other countries mostly focus on the seventh goddess, I believe. The benevolent one who gave her blessings to mankind. I think we're fine without any such hierarchy here, to be honest with you."

"Wait, but didn't you just say you couldn't say certain things or the priests would get angry...?"

The third head laughed. "Don't be silly, Lyle. The religion itself isn't at fault for how people react. There are some incredibly virtuous priests out there. It's just that there are bad priests too, and there are folks out there who like to complain about what you put in books. That's a truth that isn't restricted to those among the priesthood either."

I got the feeling that the second head was nodding along with his son's words.

"There are good guys and bad guys wherever you look. Sometimes, the bad ones just stick out more."

"Are you the sort of guy who can't let go of stuff like that, Lyle?" the third head teased. "If you stay that straitlaced, you'll have a terribly wearisome time treading through society."

"I'd venture to say you shouldn't end up as carefree as *him*, though," the second head amended.

“Hold on a second here. You’re seriously going to offer him that as your advice? You were pretty straitlaced too, as I recall. And you had quite the rough retirement, if I’m remembering correctly...”

“That’s because you kept altering my plans on a whim!”

Since the two of them were beginning to make quite a lot of noise, I returned to flipping through the records.

Now that I had left my house and was out in the world, I felt like the only thing I truly understood was how oblivious I was. Sure, I had my ancestors around to teach me about society, but...

Their knowledge is pretty far removed from my current reality, isn’t it?

Every once in a while, this question would pop to the surface of my mind, haunting me.

Chapter 19: The Man Who Slayed the Dragon

Illumination leaked from the light which hung from the ceiling of the Guild's first floor, its glow playing across a space writhing with activity. Adventurers were bringing the piles of materials they'd obtained from the monsters they hunted to merchants who energetically tried to negotiate down the prices for their sale. Sometimes, civilians would come as well, looking to buy materials from merchants or adventurers.

Under Zelphy's watchful eyes, our party—Novem, Aria, Sophia, and I—were to sell our wares to a merchant.

"Umm, I'd like to make a deal."

Even though I was the one speaking, the merchant took a look at Zelphy before he smiled at me.

"A lot of these materials are in pretty bad condition. You have a decent amount, but I can't pay much. Not to mention the prices have been going down these days. I'd say what you've got is just barely worth two silver coins."

Have the prices really gone down that much? I wondered. *Even though we had fewer materials last time, we ended up selling them for just over two silver coins...*

"Very well, then—"

"Oi," Zelphy said, stopping me in my tracks.

The merchant chuckled. "Come on, man, it's nice to have a sucker out there who'll believe everything I say, but you should at least try and haggle a little bit. You're making me feel sorry for you here."

"Lyle," the fourth head said, his harsh tone leaking from the Jewel, "there are plenty of other merchants around. Just say you'll find someone else to sell to. I'd be able to get at least three silver coins for what you've got there, trust me!"

Well, I'm not you, fourth, I thought, *So I think you're asking a bit much of me.*

“What does it matter?” the third head said with a laugh. “Failure’s as important an experience as any. How about you step back and let him learn a bit.”

Then the founder broke into the conversation and proclaimed, “If you want more money, why don’t you just defeat more monsters?”

As always, it seemed the brute force option was the only one for him.

“They defeated thirty slimes,” said Zelphy. “Purchasing that many in one batch—that’s not so bad a deal for you, is it?”

“I can’t contradict you on that one,” the merchant replied, chuckling. “Then how does two silver coins and twenty large copper coins sound?”

“Thirty!”

“Twenty-five!”

The two of them continued to negotiate until Zelphy finally secured a price of two silver coins and twenty-five large copper coins. After we took the coins from the merchant, we made straight for the Guild counter to sell our Demonic Stones.

On the way there, Zelphy looked around and said, “That guy was one of the reasonable ones. We’ll try one of the worse blokes next time. Sure, every place might be different, but haggling is universal. Also, remember to never trust a merchant at their word. You got it?”

I nodded and joined the line of adventurers. Once we were safely in line, Zelphy turned to the rest of the party.

“And you three, you can’t just rely on Lyle for everything. You all need to be able to do this someday. Take notes.” Her eyes returned to me. “This is a good chance for you to eavesdrop and learn a little something. Listen to the guy in front of us.”

Ahead of us, an adventurer was haggling with one of the Guild staff members who were manning the Demonic Stone counter.

“I’m begging you here. If it’s already forty large copper coins, why not round up to a silver coin, eh?”

“I’m telling you, I can’t do that. The price is set!”

“One thing you should know, Lyle,” Zelphy whispered to me, “is that there’s a tax taken out whenever Demonic Stones are exchanged. That’s how Darion does things. Also, the Guild staff aren’t merchants. You can’t negotiate the price with them.”

The adventurers in line were growing increasingly irritated as they watched the male adventurer’s botched attempt at negotiation. As Zelphy had just told me, it seemed that the merchants who bought materials from adventurers had a different standing from the Guild staff that dealt with Demonic Stones.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I told her, and waited my turn.

Novem, Sophia, Aria, and Zelphy headed from the Guild’s first floor to the nearby bathhouse. The four of them were in pretty terrible shape, since their skin was drenched in sweat and their equipment and materials were covered in slime fluids. And that didn’t even count the fact that the sticky fluid was splashed over yet another layer of dirt and grime.

It was typical for adventurers to head to the bathhouse to clean up after selling their materials and Demonic Stones. Novem, Aria, and Sophia had followed Zelphy’s lead, and at the moment they were all soaking together in a nice warm bath.

“I live for moments like this. And the fun’s not over yet! Going to the bar right after you’ve bathed is simply divine. Do you three drink?”

Novem shook her head. Aria didn’t have the best image of alcohol, as her father had lived a good portion of his life in a drunken stupor. She closed her eyes and didn’t answer. Sophia, however, didn’t think much of Zelphy’s question. In fact...

“I’ve used alcohol in cooking before,” she said, completely serious.

Zelphy put her head in her hands. “So, I’m guessing you three aren’t drinking, then.”

The four of them were surrounded by other female adventurers as they sat

there in the bath. The other women were cleaning off the day's grime in a similar fashion. The bathhouse was filled with the sight of sun-tanned skin and damaged hair. Many of the women had noteworthy scars on their bodies, and Zelphy was no exception.

By contrast, Novem, Aria, and Sophia all had skin that remained pale and pristine. This alone was enough for everyone present to know they were new to the adventuring profession. No one tried to pick a fight with them, though, since Zelphy was with them.

"Hey, sis," one of the female adventurers said, approaching Zelphy as she spoke. "I heard you got into babysitting. Looks like the rumor was true."

It was pretty obvious the other woman knew Zelphy somehow. She wrapped a towel around her head, but made no attempts to hide the tight, slender build of her body. Most of the female adventurers around them had a similar lack of interest in preserving their modesty.

"That's right," Zelphy replied. "Pick on them and you'll be in for it."

"There ain't no one in Darion ready to butt heads with you, sis. Anyways, I wanted to ask you something."

"What is it?"

The woman glanced over at the other girls. "The boy you're looking after...he's that womanizer guy, right?"

She seemed to be talking about Lyle, and Novem perked up her ears. Aria seemed curious as well. Both girls wanted to know what those around them thought about Lyle. Sophia, on the other hand, just wanted to repay her debt and showed no interest in Lyle's unfortunate moniker or his relationships with women.

"That's right."

"Oh, I knew it! I was wondering about him. Is he as good in the sack as they say he is? You know, he looked like a pretty meek kid, but they say that's how he gets you! So...how is he really?"

This was enough to make Sophia's cheeks burn, even as disinterested as she

was with the conversation. Aria—whose face happened to be bright red as well—turned to Novem, only to find that the other girl was simply shaking her head with a composed smile on her face.

Now that the conversation had turned to something salacious, the other female adventurers began to listen in.

Zelphy sighed. “You’re really gonna just ask me that straight out? That’s mighty bold of you.”

“Well, what does it matter? Not like I’m losing out on anything. His antics have been the talk of my party, you know. It’s nice to come home with a story or two.”

Most female adventurers eventually grew to be quite masculine, as they often had to work out in the field and take jobs where they had to go long stretches of time without bathing. After they’d been adventuring for a while, few female adventurers showed any interest in looking after either their hair or their skin. As a result, it was rare for male adventurers to catch romantic feelings for any of their female counterparts.

On top of this, there were extended jobs where men and women weren’t able to work separately. On these jobs, the women had no choice but to expose their bare skin to their comrades at times. This chipped away at any of the feminine mystique or modesty they had left. Although the young male adventurers tended to get a little...excited at first, eventually they got to the point where they saw their female party members not as women, but as comrades. Once this last boundary was crossed, there was nothing to stop the women from gossiping as raucously as the men.

With the odds so thoroughly stacked against them, many male adventurers simply could not bring themselves to see female adventurers as members of the opposite sex.

“This is why men run from you.”

“You’re terrible, sis! What, you think you’re all that because you managed to nab some civilian guy who didn’t know the first thing about you?!”

Zelphy stood, pointed her finger at the woman, and shouted, “Well, what’s

wrong with that?! I gave up on the losers around me and looked elsewhere! How about you take a page out of my book!”

She rose with a great splash, spraying Sophia’s face with water. Sophia wiped the droplets away, her movements tense with irritation.

“I hate how you wimped out!” the female adventurer said, shooting to her feet as well. “It’s not like marriage between adventurers never happens!”

The adventurers around them shared a good chuckle as the two women argued. There wasn’t a shred of shame to be found among them.

Sophia looked around and muttered, “Good grief. They should learn some modesty.”

“R-Right?!” Aria cried. She couldn’t help but agree with Sophia on that one. “I can’t understand how you can end up like that.”

Novem, however, had a different take on the matter. She thought to herself, *I can’t help but imagine the two of you reaching that point before long...*

I stood by the entrance to the public bathhouse, my bags in hand. I was waiting for the girls, killing time by watching the people who strode down Darion’s nighttime streets.

“They’re really taking their sweet time,” I muttered.

I’d taken a quick dip into the bath to wash off the day’s grime, but had left nearly as soon as I’d been done. I hadn’t liked the feeling of other people seeing me naked.

“Women do tend to take more time, Lyle,” the fourth head told me. “Make sure your irritation doesn’t show on your face. Girls can be very sharp. If they find out you’re the least bit dissatisfied, they’ll snap at you, no questions asked.”

“Yeah, you would say that, Mr. Henpecked Husband,” the fifth head said, scoffing.

It appeared the atmosphere in the Jewel had grown tense once again. I sighed, turning my attention back to the town.

The bathhouse was frequented by all sorts of people. I watched as

adventurers came out of the doors, reuniting with the comrades who'd been waiting for them outside. A few of them seemed detached, as if their minds were elsewhere, but mostly you could tell who had made enough money that day and who hadn't—the former looked triumphant, while the latter looked down on their luck. There were also some adventurers, I saw, that didn't head to the Guild building to sell their materials until after they'd bathed. There were even a few who only came to the bathhouse to wash their tools upon returning to the city.

As for my comrades, they appeared to fall on the unhappy side of the spectrum. As I watched them come through the bathhouse's doors, I noticed they were dressed lighter than they had been when they went in. They also appeared to be carrying bags along with them. As Zelphy led the group closer, a faint, pleasant scent carried over to me on the breeze.

I can admit it—my heart skipped a beat.

My level of excitement, however, was nothing compared to the seven men within the Jewel.

I wish they wouldn't talk about stuff like this so often, I thought, but it's not like there are any women stuck in the Jewel with them...

"There's something about baths that really brings out the best in people, don't you think? *Especiallly* in the chest area."

"You know, adventurers aren't half bad. It's got to be that nice slender waist."

"Really? I'd say it's got something to do with their backsides. And as far as that's concerned, Novem's has got to be number one."

"You just don't get it! Breasts, buttocks, they're all just ornamentation in the end. A slender figure's the best!"

"Isn't balance the most important thing?"

"No, it's breasts! *Breasts!* That would put Novem and Sophia at the top."

"It's got to be the nape of the neck, for me... Sophia usually keeps hers hidden under her robe, but it truly is a sight to behold..."

Why me? I wondered. *Why must I be forced to listen to my ancestors'*

aesthetic preferences?

This was certainly something I couldn't let any of the women hear.

Sophia was wearing her typical black robe, which hardly showed any skin. Her hair had been bundled up for the bath, though, and the sight of her nape did send a little jolt of excitement through me. Aria, meanwhile, was dressed much less modestly than Sophia. Quite a bit of her fair skin was on display, and I wasn't quite sure where I was allowed to look.

"What is it?"

"Is something wrong, Lyle?"

It seemed Sophia and Aria had picked up on my line of sight. Meanwhile, my ancestors were still fighting about women's chest areas.

"Bloody fools, the lot of you!" the founder cried. "Aria's chest still has a future! A chance to grow! Hopes and dreams!"

"It's important to know when to give up, founder," the sixth head snarled. "Even if they started growing now, she's too old. They'd never manage to surpass Novem's or Sophia's."

Can I wipe this conversation out of existence? Please?

I'd have to go into this one blind, it seemed. My ancestors were too embroiled in their heated debate to spare any time helping little old me.

"No, it's n-nothing. Nothing at all."

Zelphy spoke up then, slinging her bags over her shoulder. "Let's go ahead and go our separate ways for the rest of the day. You have tomorrow off, but don't be late the day after. I'm headed to the Guild."

Zelphy left without delay; apparently she had her own reports that she needed to file. Once she was gone, Novem drifted closer to me. Her body was enveloped with the smell of something sweet.

"Lord Lyle, would you like to find a nice place to eat after we store our things?"

We typically ate at the inn where we were staying, which had a dining hall. It

seemed Novem wanted to go out to eat tonight, though. Wait, but wouldn't a meal at the inn's dining hall still count as "eating out" in a sense? Not that it mattered.

I nodded my agreement. "At a restaurant, you mean? Sure, if that's what you want."

"Well, we *have* formed a party, after all. I thought we might use the opportunity to get to know one another better."

We typically went our separate ways once we were done with adventurer business, it was true. Aria was staying at an inn Zelphy had recommended to her, and Sophia was staying at another inn different from the three of ours.

It wasn't unheard of for a party of adventurers to all book rooms in the same inn; it was certainly the most cost-effective method of finding lodging. Quite a few adventurers wanted to keep parts of their lives private, though, and kept their living spaces separate. Plus, there were plenty of adventurer parties whose members only associated with each other for work.

If I had to say which type of party ours was...I'd have to say it's pretty close to that kind. I mean, we don't really see each other outside of work...

Can you really blame me for thinking that? We'd gained new members out of nowhere. I didn't know how to maintain the right amount of emotional distance between us; I didn't even know how to interact with them.

"You...have a point," I told Novem. "It might be kinda good for us to go out and spend time with each other, now and again."

Aria fiddled with her hair, her cheeks tinged a bit pink.

Maybe she's still flushed from the heat of the bath?

"Let's decide on a time and meeting point, then," Sophia stated, her tone flat and indifferent.

Something about Sophia's tepid response seemed to trouble Novem. Regardless, the two of them discussed our dining options and came to a decision.

After our meal at the restaurant, which had been crowded and lively, we all went our separate ways. It wasn't like we split up right outside the restaurant's doors, though. Novem and I had walked Sophia and Aria to their respective inns, and now we were headed back to our own lodgings.

I was on guard, for whatever that was worth, and my saber hung from one of the belts at my waist. Darion was pretty good at maintaining the public order, but you couldn't be too careful. As we made our way back to our inn, I chose the paths with the biggest crowds and the highest level of visibility.

"The food was quite good today," Novem commented. "It's nice to change things up sometimes."

"Right."

"But we didn't really have much of a conversation. That was a little disappointing."

"It was our first get-together, though," I told her. "Isn't that pretty normal?"

She gave me a troubled smile. "Personally, I'd like us all to get along a bit better."

I felt condemned by the look on her face. Maybe I should have made a bit more of an effort to carry the conversation...

The fourth head sighed. "Come on, Lyle..." he grumbled from within the Jewel. "Try pushing the conversation to new topics every once in a while. Instead of waiting for someone to ask you a question, why don't you just ask one yourself?"

Our founder cut him off. "That meal was pretty luxurious, wasn't it? No matter where you go, they've got bigger servings and better tasting food than back in my day. The price was still pretty low, though... Is that just how it is in your time, boy?"

"Well, new things are coming to Banseim every day," answered the sixth head. "Agriculture has completely changed from how it was when we were alive. I mean, the amount of food being harvested each year has increased substantially. It hasn't been that long since we added potatoes to the harvest, and I've already heard Banseim can support twice the population it could

before.”

In recent history, Banseim had experienced an agricultural revolution; foreign crops had been imported that could grow in the wastelands, and huge breakthroughs had been made in the development of the Demonic Tools used in farming. I’d read that as a result, Banseim’s food supplies had vastly improved.

“It happened back in my day,” the fifth head reminisced, “or the fourth head’s day, rather—I was just living in it. In any case, a certain someone developed our local specialties and broke his back raking in cash. That pretty much solved our financial woes.”

“As the quantity of food increased, the value dropped,” the fourth head explained proudly. “I had to work hard in other fields.”

It appeared House Walt’s fourth head, who was known for being highly competent in handling domestic affairs, was actually just a miser who was always sticking his nose in other people’s business. To be honest with you, that was perhaps the source of his many successes in his field.

“I see,” the founder muttered. He seemed a little happier than he’d been before. “So now, you can eat your fill if you want to.”

“It really was pretty hard, back in our day,” the second head mumbled, but he sounded conflicted. “Let’s just be glad our grandson didn’t have to go through the same.”

“All that meant was that new problems started to come up,” the fourth head replied in an exhausted tone.

“Well, that’s still better than starving to death,” the founder said, having piped up once again. “Lyle, come see me in the Jewel tonight.”

I had been summoned.

Once I was inside the Jewel, the founder and I had gone through the door behind his chair in the round-table room. Now we were inside the room that contained his memories, in a tiny village that barely made a mark on the

sprawling scenery that surrounded it. Quaint and tranquil were perfect words to describe the place, enveloped as it was by the great expanse of wilderness.

The founder was walking ahead of me. He looked over the scenery and whispered, just loud enough for me to hear, “We’re about ten years into my time in the Vice Domain. I’d already gotten the local barbarians under my command by then. Look, that’s them over there, learning how to farm.” He gestured to a group of people who were dressed differently than the other villagers. They looked awkward as they stood there, hoes in their hands, being lectured about farming.

Is it just my imagination, or does the founder look even more like a barbarian than they do...?

“They were hunters—good ones, at that. But they’d come to me every time winter rolled around, complaining about food. I told them they’d better learn how to tend a field, then, and gave ’em a good walloping.”

“This place is shaping up to be a decently sized settlement,” I noted.

The founder scratched at his head. “Well, we first came here with around a hundred people, so the number of settlers certainly went up. We got a few brats along the way, and adding on the barbarians... I’d say we had around three to four hundred people living in the village around this time. Most of them couldn’t farm, though. They were the best kinda guys to have around when monsters or bandits came a-chargin’, but they could hardly do anything else.”

It sounded like they must have had their fair share of trouble, starting up a new settlement with a group like that. As I looked out over the barbarians learning to tend fields, I saw a group of people that had never been under Banseim rule struggling to learn a new way of life.

“I mostly went independent so I could have a chance with my first love, Alice. But there was one more reason.”

“There was?”

“Yeah. I was the third son of a court noble. The heir’s spare’s spare, you could call me. You get what that means?”

I cast my eyes down, embarrassed that I couldn't understand what he was trying to say. But contrary to my expectations, he met my confusion with a laugh.

"Hey, don't worry about it! You only had a little sister, after all. How should I put it? Basically, I wasn't treated the best. Can't say I had it worse than you, but..."

When the founder was a child, he'd been raised with a lot less care than his two older brothers. It had gotten so bad that he'd often struggled to find food and faced starvation.

"When I was little, me and a group of the neighborhood brats would go out, beat up monsters, and bring their Demonic Stones to the Guild. We tried to fill our stomachs, even if it was only a little. When my parents found out, they smacked me. Said I was smearing dirt on the family name. In Banseim, it's a disgrace when a noble goes out playing adventurer. *Especially* back then."

Back in the founder's day, House Walt had the lowest rank of all the noble houses; they hadn't even been granted a position within the executive branch of the government. Their income must have been paltry, despite the fact that they'd been nobles. Those of noble rank did receive an annuity from the palace, but houses like House Walt, who didn't have an executive post, didn't receive much. Even noble houses, who were run by families with hereditary titles, struggled to survive without a position in government.

"For just once in my life, I wanted to feel what it was like to have a full stomach. When I decided I'd be a lord, I thought I'd have loads of fields and I'd be able to eat my fill."

But the reality of being a lord hadn't been so kind. The founder had been able to bring the barbarians under his control with nothing but his own two hands, but they'd struggled to raise any produce.

"The moment we had any surplus, my folks would write me demanding money and food supplies. The barbarians that joined us insisted on hunting instead of gardening. No one wanted to listen to a damn thing I said."

"Really?" I asked, the question popping into my mind as I took in the world around me. "It looks like everything's going well."

“It was, at this point. I’m about to show you how I got us here.”

The scenery around us faded to shades of gray. All of a sudden, we were standing in a desolated village. The fields were being crushed beneath the massive forelimbs of a fearsome beast. The creature had gray, craggy skin, four legs, and a massive hammer-shaped head that it held high over the ground. The lower half of its body appeared slender and weak compared to its robust upper half, so much so that if the beast was split through the middle, you’d think the torso and pelvis came from different monsters entirely.

This roaring monstrosity was a flightless type of dragon called an earth dragon. It was said that earth dragons were relatively easy to defeat—among dragons, at least.

After our surroundings had filled with color once more, the earth dragon charged forward, clearly hoping to wreak death and destruction upon the village and its inhabitants.

“It’s a lot bigger than earth dragons were described in the books I’ve read,” I commented to the founder. “I also read that they were supposed to be brown... Wait, is that a variant?!”

“How the hell am I supposed to know?!” the founder demanded, voice firm. “All I thought back then was—”

The founder was cut off by the sound of screams, sobs, and wails. As we’d spoken, the earth dragon had been flinging villagers and armed barbarians around like they were playthings. Their suffering echoed through the village.

That was when *he* appeared—Basil, the founder of House Walt. He stepped forward, wielding a massive single-edged sword that was closer to being a lump of metal than a weapon.

The earth dragon variant looked to be over thirty meters from head to tail. Standing before such a gargantuan foe, Basil began to laugh.

And as he laughed, he declared, “This dragon is my prey. No one else lay a hand on it!”

He took a stance, his greatsword in both hands. The massive weapon looked like it was almost as large as he was. It was nearly as long as an adult human,

and its breadth easily surpassed sixty centimeters. It looked like it was thick enough to have a hearty heft to it, to boot.

What sort of crazy thoughts could have led someone to make such a weapon...? I wondered.

Though actually, one reason did come to mind.

“Is that a horse-slaying sword? I’ve read about them before.”

A horse-slaying sword was a weapon knights would use to slice up the horses of mounted warriors. There weren’t many people who used them, since the weight made them a hassle to carry around.

The founder grinned. “It was dirt cheap, so I bought it.”

Basil swung, the lump of iron in his hand.

I seriously wish, I thought, incredulous, that I could interrogate whatever craftsman made that insane weapon.

By some miracle, Basil managed to stop the earth dragon’s charge. Though he was minuscule compared to the beast, he had intercepted its attack head-on.

“Uh... According to the books, you’re supposed to circle around and defeat it from behind.”

The founder just stared pensively at his past self, mumbling complaints. “Put your back into it,” he muttered. “Aim for the joints more!”

Finally, he responded to my statement. “Hmm? They’re saying you have to go for it from behind? But...it’s a dragon. If you call yourself a man, you gotta fight it face-to-face!”

My head ached as he let out a merry laugh. The younger version of himself, who was fighting the earth dragon in the once-tranquil village, laughed as well.

After a while, Basil’s body let off a pale blue light. I realized that he must be using Limit Burst, one of the Arts that the founder had taught me. Basil swung the greatsword, his new power overwhelming the earth dragon. Limit Burst had made it possible for him to chip away at the dragon’s hide, but none of his attacks cut deep enough into the monster’s flesh to reach the bone.

Had he just circled around and attacked the earth dragon from behind, the fight would have been over in no time. But it wasn't to be; Basil fought the monster head-on.

The earth dragon slammed its boulder-like head into the ground, sending Basil flying backwards. The monster glared at him, its eyes fierce. The gashes in the ground around them spoke to the intensity of their struggle.

Basil directed the tip of his massive blade at the beast. He was out of breath; he'd worked up a sweat. But still, he laughed.

"Have it your way, ya damn lizard! I'll show you somethin' special!"

Somewhat concerningly, Basil had never once referred to his opponent as a dragon.

There's no way that he hasn't realized what it is... R-Right? Surely he's not that oblivious.

The symbols covering Basil's skin shattered as a blue light coiled around his body like a blazing inferno.

"Is that the third stage of your Art?" I asked. "Will it really make that much of a difference against a dragon?"

Blue Jewels recorded support-type Arts. Support-type Arts usually didn't involve direct combat, but they could provide some convenient abilities.

"It doesn't matter what type of Art you have. If you master it—if you reach the third stage, it becomes a real game changer. There's a bit of a problem with mine, though..."

He didn't say what the issue was. He simply watched his past self leap into action.

Basil jumped upward, sword over his shoulder; the force of his jump was so great it spread cracks through the ground. Moments later, one of the earth dragon's talons flew through the air. Basil had sliced it off the monster's left foot.

The founder tilted his head backward to look up at the sky. I frantically followed his line of sight, only to see that Basil was airborne.

“I’ll hang your head on my mantle!”



Basil brandished his greatsword, using the speed of his fall to hammer it straight through the earth dragon's neck. The sword slammed into the earth below, leaving an even larger mark than the one the dragon had left when it'd slammed its head into the ground.

As Basil propped his sword against his shoulder, the flaming blue light faded from his body. The earth dragon's severed head fell, its blood gushing over Basil's form.

Basil wiped his face with his free hand before hopping on top of the severed head. He raised the greatsword high, prompting the surrounding villagers and barbarians to break into cheers.

"Do you get it now? Pretty simple, right? All I had to do was demonstrate my strength, and then everyone decided to follow my lead."

"Y-Yes, I can see that. Is that, umm...what you wanted to show me? Are you telling me I should go kill a dragon?"

I wasn't strong enough to face a dragon head-on just yet, so it would be quite the hassle if the founder wanted me to follow his example.

"You idiot," the founder said, sighing. "That isn't what I meant. Though if you're a man, there ain't nothin' wrong with slayin' a dragon or two."

So, I guess the founder's definition of what it means to be a man revolves around being a warrior, I thought to myself.

I saw a young boy emerge from among the crowd of cheering villagers. I could tell from the resemblance that the boy was the second head—Crassel.

"You're amazing, Dad! I want to grow up to be just like you!"

"Y-You do?" Basil stammered awkwardly as he watched his son jump up and down in excitement.

All at once, our surroundings faded back to gray, time slowing to a stop. It seemed that was the end of the scene.

"That was the moment," the founder said. He folded his arms and looked up at the sky. "That's when I thought, instead of just me eating my fill...I wanted him to eat his fill too. Up to that point, I was recklessly rampaging around with a

broken heart. I'm not sure why, but that was the moment I realized what I was fighting for."

"Lyle," the founder continued, "You ate your fill, didn't you?"

"Hmm? Oh... Yes, I always had enough to eat."

"I see. That's good. That's...really good."

Considering the founder's reaction, that must have been a blessing. I'd never noticed, it seemed, but I really was blessed in some ways.

"In that case," the founder continued, "why don't you work hard, so the people around you can eat their fill too?"

He was probably referring to Aria when he said "people around you." I understood what he was trying to get across to me, but I had to respond honestly, with my true feelings.

"To tell you the truth, I don't know if I have it in me to accept Aria into my life. I already knew it would be difficult finding a way to provide for Novem, and now there's suddenly a second girl I've got to provide for? Plus, I'm stuck with Sophia now too."

"You're not wrong, boy; that was a shocker even to me. You're supposed to be my descendant, so why are you so popular with the ladies, eh?!" the founder asked, chuckling. But then his tone suddenly turned a bit serious. "Can I count on you to look after Aria?"

"She told me she wanted to be an adventurer, so I'll work with her until she becomes first-rate. I'll do the same for Sophia. But when it comes to my own goals for the future, I'm just not sure if I'm willing to include Aria in them."

If I looked back on my decision to become an adventurer, at the details that had led me to that particular resolution...it was clear I hadn't done anything praiseworthy. I'd simply come to the realization that adventuring was the quickest way for me to make some money. That was it.

"You, fool!" the founder roared, patting me on the shoulder. "Who cares about whether you involve her or not! Just look at me—I joined the expedition because I wanted to fill my belly and make my first love notice me. If you're a

man, what matters most is what you decide to do next.”

“But...what am I going to do next?”

What exactly *could* I do, after losing to my little sister, Ceres, and being driven from my own house?

What do I even want to do?

The founder patted my shoulders a few more times for good measure. “That’s right, go on out there and find something you want to do! And then, after you accomplish your goals...make Aria happy, would you? I can’t do it from here.”

In the end, my ancestors were just memories. If they wanted to influence the outside world, they had to do it through me.

“I’ll do what I can,” I told him.

The founder didn’t seem like he was completely satisfied with my answer, but he still smiled at me. “I understand. That’ll have to be enough for now.”

Chapter 20: The Request

The same day Lyle went into the Jewel to visit the founder, Bentler Lobernia, the Lord of Darion, was in his office, slicing through the seal of a letter he didn't want to read. He hadn't found the time to sort through his letters until night had already fallen, and this letter's sender wasn't one who boded well.

The sender's name was Dale Pagan; he was a young man, aged somewhere in his early twenties. Lord Bentler didn't bear the man any type of personal grudge—the emotion stemmed entirely from his official capacity as a feudal lord.

The young man came from House Pagan, one of Lord Bentler's vassal houses. The family were knights, and lorded over a small settlement. Lord Bentler hadn't had any contact with them since the head of their house had changed, and he would have been more than happy to cut off all association with them. Unfortunately, there was one thing holding him back.

The previous head of House Pagan, as well as his eldest son, had died in battle while mobilizing troops at the behest of House Lobernia. With his father and brother dead, Dale had been left behind to pick up the pieces. After that, House Pagan had made its blatant loathing of outside intervention quite clear.

Lord Bentler could certainly admit that he held some measure of responsibility for the war that had taken the lives of Dale Pagan's family. The conflict had been caused by a disagreement between two of Banseim's lords. In the end, they had petitioned for the king to mediate, even though such intervention came at a hefty monetary cost. Regardless, the war had concluded with both sides suffering considerable damage.

It had been nearly three years since then, and in that time House Pagan had ceased all contact with House Lobernia. And now, out of the blue, Dale had sent him a letter. Lord Bentler couldn't help but think there was something ominous about the whole thing.

As he read the letter, a crease formed on Lord Bentler's brow, his deceptively gentle face clouding over.

“What happened, milord?” asked a nearby vassal.

“Good grief,” Lord Bentler said, placing the letter on the table and covering his mouth. “After all that time with so little contact, *this* is what they decide to ask of me...?”

In Banseim, houses had to reach the rank of baron or higher in order to take on vassals. Vassal houses were obliged to obey the orders of their benefactors; these benefactors were typically the lords who governed the greater region where a vassal house resided. In addition, there were also houses that served their benefactors as vassal knights—knights whose loyalty was to their feudal lord instead of the king.

Since Lord Bentler was House Pagan’s benefactor, it was his duty to support them. Thus, the lord found himself unable to ignore Dale’s letter.

Lord Bentler sighed. “A dispute has broken out between House Pagan and the neighboring territory. There have been casualties already. They’ve found themselves outmatched, even though they’re only up against the retainers of a vassal knight. Now, they’re asking me for reinforcements.”

“My word...” Lord Bentler’s vassal replied, giving him a conflicted look.

It should be said that in Banseim, noble rank was not the only source of a lord’s power. The hierarchy of power between lords was influenced by multiple factors; it was possible that two houses could fall under Banseim’s rule and possess the same rank within the peerage, and yet still be distant enough in power that one ended up the vassal of the other. This was because, in addition to factors like noble rank, a lord’s power was influenced by the size of the territory under their rule. As a result, there were many houses made up of vassal knights who held more power than nobles. This didn’t stop the nobles from thinking such houses were beneath them, however.

In House Pagan’s case, their territory bordered a stretch of land governed by House Maini. House Pagan was superior to them in rank, but the sheer scope of House Maini’s territory meant that they held considerably more power than House Pagan. Which meant that House Pagan had picked a fight they couldn’t win.

Territorial disputes are nothing but trouble, Lord Bentler thought frankly. The

dispute House Pagan was asking him to handle wasn't just an argument among Bentler's vassals—it was a dispute between one of his vassal houses and that of another lord.

“It's possible we might instigate further conflict if we send soldiers to aid House Pagan. I can't stand back if they're out to kill each other, though. I'm House Pagan's benefactor—it's my duty to support them. It's quite a troublesome issue Dale Pagan's brought to me. My word...”

Lord Bentler didn't have any issues with Dale on a personal level. They hardly knew one another; they'd never even interacted face-to-face. In fact, Lord Bentler had maintained a healthy relationship with House Pagan before Dale had taken it over. The lord had been friendly with Dale's father, who'd been the house's previous head, and his eldest son, who'd been the house's heir.

In addition, it would cause quite a difficult situation for Lord Bentler if the news spread that he'd abandoned one of the houses who had sworn fealty to him. It would breed uncertainty among his other vassals.

Lord Bentler rubbed his flabby chin and thought for a while. Then, as if struck by a flash of inspiration, he spread open the letter and read through it again.

“Yes, that might just resolve the issue...”

His vassal stared at him curiously. “Did you think of something? I can't think of anything myself.”

Lord Bentler took out paper and a pen.

“Sometimes it's best to leave children's squabbles among children; it's always a pain when the adults have to step in. I'm sure House Pagan understands that just as well as I. Before I get myself involved, why don't we try to resolve this another way?”

Lord Bentler began penning a letter to the lord House Maini's knights served. The letter detailed the name of the individual he planned on dispatching to solve the issue between their vassals.

Lord Bentler's vassal stared at the name curiously, his head cocked to this side. “Are you sure about this, milord?”

“Yes, this should make my intentions quite clear,” Lord Bentler replied. “Call Zelphy for me, and send a request to the Guild first thing in the morning. Don’t worry, I’m sure the lord House Maini serves will understand what I’m about.”

Lord Bentler had seen the neighboring lord several times at parties and the like; he was convinced that the mere name of the individual he was dispatching would send the man a clear message.

Who was the individual Lord Bentler’s letter called for, you ask? Why, none other than Lyle Walt.

The five of us were riding in the back of a wagon, sitting where the goods would typically be stored. A cloth roof hung over our heads, shielding us from the sun. Without the heat to worry about, other problems quickly found their way to the forefront of my mind. As we pressed on through the peaceful rolling hills of Darion’s countryside, one of the questions churning inside me finally broke free.

I directed my question at Zelphy, who was currently driving the wagon. “Miss Zelphy, this request was completely unscheduled, right?”

Zelphy’s shoulders hitched upward. “It was, b-but... I mean, I think you’re better off taking this request than not.”

“I know, right?” Aria said, lips turning up slightly. “These sorts of requests just scream adventure!”

It was clear that she was delighted to finally take on the sort of job she’d been imagining.

Meanwhile, the founder and his son spouted polar opposite thoughts from within the Jewel.

“She sure is cute when she’s in high spirits,” the founder said adoringly.

“I wish she’d be a bit more apprehensive,” the second head muttered in disapproval. “Her party’s getting involved in a territorial dispute. She could very well wind up dead from this.”

You see, when we had gathered at the Guild earlier this morning, Zelphy had

already had a request waiting for us for some reason. We were now headed to the site specified in the request. As far as our mission was concerned, it seemed we were being dispatched as reinforcements to a location where some sort of territorial dispute had broken out. I'd have preferred Lord Bentler go the usual route, and use Darion's soldiers instead.

The fifth, sixth, and seventh heads had quite a cold outlook on the matter.

"So one of Bentler's vassals caused a problem with another territory, and we're cleaning up his mess, huh? What a bother."

"I agree. Shouldn't he have done something about this before his vassal had to come crying to him?"

"If one vassal's benefactor gets involved, so will the other. What does Bentler hope to accomplish by getting even more people involved in this mess?"

It seemed the three of them had a very negative attitude when it came to the request Lord Bentler's vassal had made.

The viewpoints of the founder, second head, and third head were quite different, however.

"Quit yer yappin'! It's the benefactor's job to help out if there's an issue! Vassal houses do their share of work for the territory!"

"That's right! Who the hell needs an unreliable benefactor!"

"Come on, let's just help each other out."

Their opinions didn't align at all, as per usual, but this time the fourth head had found himself in quite a precarious position.

"I can...somewhat understand both sides, so I don't know what to say," he said.

Novem checked over the wagon's supplies. We weren't only carrying food; the wagon had been stuffed with all sorts of tools. It seemed, though, that despite the fact we were headed to what was essentially a battlefield, we weren't carrying any weapons apart from our own.

"I see we don't have any weapons," I said. "What exactly are we going to House Pagan to do, if we're not providing them with more arms?"

“I happen to be acquainted with the head of House Maini, the one they’re feuding with,” Sophia said, looking conflicted. “He’s sent our house gifts before, so I really don’t want to be involved. I can’t imagine him causing problems with other lords, in the first place...”

“We can’t be having that!” Zelphy roared at her. “You four are a party. You’re all in the same boat. And I don’t think I can do much on my own...”

Her true feelings seemed to leak out into the latter half of her reprimand. Her voice had gone soft and a tad subdued. It was obvious that Zelphy’s employer had something to do with our sudden request.

Novem stared fixedly at the cloth ceiling of the wagon, as if she was doing math in her head. “Lord Bentler must have some sort of reason to send Lord Lyle on this request. I can roughly guess what it is... I do believe you should be able to gain some valuable experience on this quest, Lord Lyle.”

This prompted the third head to speak up. “Oh, I see. This neighboring territory must have been involved in the bandit subjugation. Or maybe their benefactor was involved...? So, Bentler’s true goal was to get Lyle here. Zelphy’s presence is just a happy accident.”

He’s plotting something, I thought. He has to be.

“Oh, that’s a good one,” the sixth head said, a pleased tone in his voice. “That’s a good one, indeed. You should be able to hold this over Bentler’s head; at least enough for you to get yourself a bonus.”

I found my ancestors kinda terrifying, to be honest with you.

The fourth head jumped in next; it was only natural, since we were talking about money now. “A bonus! I like the sound of that. I can see what you’re getting at now—Lord Bentler’s sending him to handle the dispute since our opponents are indebted to Lyle. Basically, he’s trying to send the other lords a message. Lord Bentler wants them to know he doesn’t mean any harm, and he wants those involved in the dispute to resolve the matter on their own.”

All of a sudden I understood. The other territory must be indebted to me since I had apprehended the group of bandits who’d been concealing their presence among the people of Darion. The bandits had laid waste to some of

the territories surrounding Darion, so when I'd handed them over, I'd manage to solve some complex political issues.

But, wait... I thought. Won't this entire thing be pointless if the opposing side can't discern Lord Bentler's intentions?

As I pondered that thought, Aria called out to me.

"A-Are you okay, Lyle?" she asked, sounding quite concerned.

"Yes, I'm fine. But, Zelphy...what exactly did Lord Bentler tell you about this request?"

For a while she was silent, her lips shut tight. But finally, she sighed and explained, "The problem started a few weeks ago. The retainers of a vassal knight from House Maini were all suited up, patrolling their territory for monsters. Unfortunately, one of their retainers went missing. They looked around for a while, but they couldn't find him, so the rest of the group ended up calling it quits and heading home. The thing is, that retainer House Maini was looking for ended up being found in the forest across the border. Dead, with all his equipment stolen."

This isn't going to end peacefully, is it? I thought, feeling resigned. *Not if House Pagan has blood on their hands.*

The third head whistled, then spoke in a serious tone, "That's a pretty rough deal. Our little neighbor won't back off, then. One of their retainers died. If they drop the matter, it'll send a bad message to their other retainers. And if he died in House Pagan's territory... Yeah, I don't want to get involved in this one."

"This is the important part," Zelphy continued, unaware of the commentary going on in my head. "House Maini suspects House Pagan is responsible for their retainer's death. It makes sense that they've come to that conclusion; of course you'd suspect someone if one of your men died in their territory. Plus, the retainer in question was well-trusted among the people of House Maini."

"What happened to the body after it was found?" the second head asked. "Check with her, Lyle."

He seemed adamant that I ask Zelphy, so I complied. "Umm, who found the body? I'm assuming it was someone from House Pagan."

“That’s right,” said Zelphy. “Thing is, House Maini showed up not so long after. It looks pretty suspicious, since they found out about it so fast. House Pagan seems to think the whole thing was a set up.”

“Jeez, what a pain,” the seventh head grumbled. “Hopefully House Maini won’t be too much of a problem, though, as long as Lyle’s around. At the moment, we shouldn’t have to worry about their benefactor getting involved. If they do, you should send a proper warning to Bentler. I’m sure he’s already working on that side of things.”

Lord Bentler Lobernia looked like a kind old man, but once I’d gotten to know him a little, I’d learned he was a lot more ruthless than he appeared. Despite that, he had a pretty good reputation as Lord of Darion. I wanted to believe he had already made some sort of arrangement to help us out just in case things went sour.

Zelphy’s shoulders drooped. I could tell she didn’t want to take the request either. Who could blame her, when it was only the five of us on the case? The only ones in any way motivated were Aria and...Novem, perhaps?

“You think I wanted to accept this pain-in-the-ass request?” Zelphy grumbled. “A lot of territory problems are deeply rooted; they’re nothing but a pile of trouble. Ugh, this sucks... Let’s just go back home.”

“She’s right; truly, she is,” the second head chimed in to say. “Quarrels with neighboring territories are practically inevitable. You end up in a dispute even if all your people do is go across the border and pick a few herbs. Seriously, the issues just keep piling up, and you’re at odds with the neighboring territory before you even know it. It’s awful.”

I’m surprised they all managed to get along so well with House Fuchs, in that case.

“Wait, you guys feuded?” the founder asked. He appeared deeply perplexed for some reason. “I never had to deal with anything like that in my day.”

For a moment, I wondered if no one had bothered to report territorial issues to him. But someone had to be keeping him in the loop; he was still the lord, after all.

“Yes, well, there was no one out there who wanted to pick a fight with a guy who single-handedly killed a dragon and tamed the barbarian tribes,” the third head said in a snarky tone. “Our refined little neighbors were shaking in their boots. You know, our benefactor was terrified of you too.”

“Huh? Really?” the second head asked. It sounded like he was only just realizing that had been the case. “In my day, everyone seemed so cold and distant to us.”

The third head sighed. “Yeah, that one was your fault. It’s because you didn’t make enough of an effort to form relationships with our neighbors. You don’t know how much trouble I went through, getting on good terms with our benefactor.”

I was surprised the third head had ever struggled with anything. From what I’d learned of him so far, I’d imagined he’d been a schemer who used his wits to sidestep most of the issues that popped up in his way. And if there was something he couldn’t avoid, I’d imagined he’d simply thought of a way to overcome it.

“I used two hands, by the way,” the founder proclaimed confidently. He seemed to be responding to what the third head had said earlier, about how he’d defeated the dragon single-handedly.

“Please,” the second head said, his voice cold as ice, “don’t say anything else. If you’re making a joke, it’s just embarrassing. If you don’t understand what we’re talking about, that’s even *more* embarrassing. No matter how you look at it, you should be humiliated, so please just keep your mouth shut.”

I could practically feel the founder sulking at the way his son had absolutely lambasted him.

I sighed and hung my head. “What are we supposed to do to resolve House Pagan’s and House Maini’s issues, exactly?”

“Hell if I know!” Zelphy cried. She seemed confused about that, herself. “He just told me to go check out what was going on!”

Perhaps Lord Bentler had told us so little about the mission because he was sending us a message in a rather roundabout manner. Maybe we shouldn’t dig

too deeply into the matter between the houses.

Regardless, I couldn't shake the feeling that the responsibility he'd placed on my shoulders was a bit too heavy for me to carry.

By the time we'd reached the territory of House Pagan, several days had passed. Once we'd arrived, Zelphy had arranged for us to speak with one of the house's representatives. The party that had gathered to meet us were young—one girl in her teens and two young men who appeared to be in their twenties. They'd come out of their houses to welcome us, but the other residents didn't follow. They simply watched us from within their homes.

"Looks like we're not welcome here," I whispered, and Novem nodded.

"It's understandable," she said. "It's scary when an armed group sets up camp by your home."

"Especially when the group's a set of ruffians," the seventh head said, his voice leaking from the Jewel. "Lyle, this is how normal people see adventurers. You should remember their reaction."

"You're definitely being influenced by your prejudice against adventurers," the third head teased him. "They act the same way toward non-adventurers too. It's quite scary when the army comes, after all. Still, even if it's understandable that we aren't welcome...I can't seem to figure out which one of them is House Pagan's representative. I'm assuming it's the kid with the navy hair."

The tall young man the third head had indicated stood at the center of the welcoming party. He had a friendly look about him that reminded me of Rondo. His navy hair brushed his shoulders, and his slender body clearly saw a lot of exercise.

A second man stood to one side of him; he had short black hair and was of a similar height. A girl stood on his other side, her brown hair bundled back into a braid. She had a concerned look on her freckled face.

Zelphy looked a bit troubled herself. I assumed it was because the party before us was giving no hints as to their identities; all of them seemed to be

dressed in clothes of similar quality. Plus, nothing about the navy-haired man appeared particularly lord-like; he didn't even have a sword at his hip.

"Ahem," Zelphy finally said, clearing her throat. "We're the adventurer party that was sent out at the request of Darion's lord." She looked at the young man with the navy hair. "I take it you're the boss around these parts?"

"Yes, I am Dale Pagan. The lord of this town, though I might not look it."

Was that last bit of cynicism really necessary?

Aria's expression had clouded over at the lord's words. "No need to put it like that," she muttered.

"This is strange," the second head said. He seemed a bit suspicious of Lord Dale. "At a time like this, the head of a house should at least attempt to make himself presentable. Why, he looks like he's just finished working in the fields!"

Maybe he doesn't just look like he's been working the fields—maybe he actually has been. I mean, there are dirt stains on his clothes...

Sophia closed her eyes, saying, "It's clear he doesn't hold us in any respect. Otherwise, he would dress appropriately when welcoming a guest." She agreed with the second head in this matter, it appeared.

"Hey, don't judge a book by its cover!" the founder protested. "It's about what's on the inside—the inside, I say!"

I desperately wished he'd tone down his voice a little; it wasn't like Sophia could hear him. All he was managing to do was put a further drain on my mana.

"I guess we should be thankful our founder is a savage both inside and out," the fifth head muttered.

"Well, appearances are pretty important..." the third head said, chuckling.

Zelphy handed an envelope over to Lord Dale. "This is a letter from the baron. The five of us wish to be added to the town's defensive forces. Do we have your permission?"

"These brats are all the baron's got to offer?" the black-haired man demanded, glaring at us. "He's taking us for fools!"

“Quit it, Zappa!” the girl cried, stepping in to prevent him from speaking further. “My apologies. I am Paula Callus, by the way. I mediate some of the settlement’s problems. You could consider me a representative of our more prominent houses.”

Once the girl had introduced herself, Zelphy turned to the black-haired man, who was apparently named Zappa. “I understand how you feel. But it stings a bit when you say it to my face. Let’s both be a bit more tactful next time, eh?”

She clearly didn’t want to have anything to do with him.

Once Lord Dale finished going through the letter, he looked back over to us. “He wrote that he could not dispatch troops, so he dispatched you instead. That is unfortunate. Perhaps the baron considers this small village to be of little significance to him.”

“I understand where you’re coming from,” Zelphy said, scratching at her head. “But the baron hasn’t abandoned you. He paid an exorbitant fee to send us here, you know.”

Lord Dale hung his head. “Three years ago, our settlement sent our best men to fight his war. My father, my brother, and Paula’s father died in battle. To treat us like this after we’ve incurred such losses in his name... It’s completely unacceptable.”

If that’s true, I thought, then Lord Bentler really has handled this matter quite badly.

“I’m sure they got paid a sizable amount in consolation. Besides, their relatives joined the battle of their own will, right? Vassals are such a pain. I mean, what exactly was that Pagan boy expecting?” the fifth head asked. He sounded exhausted.

“Did he really want the baron to send soldiers to fight a war or something?” the sixth head asked. “He’s not looking at things in the long-term.”

“Lyle came all the way out here to see him! What’s with the attitude?!” the seventh head howled.

The first three generations of my house raised their voices in rejection of the other’s words.

“That’s not a problem money can solve!” one of them cried. “His family is dead!”

“That’s right,” cried another. “Just think how damaging such a loss would be to a settlement this small!”

“This is why the upper echelons of the nobility are no good!” cried the last of them. “You’re all coldhearted. And you have the nerve to call yourselves human?!”

It appeared all three of them were quite sympathetic to Lord Pagan.

The fourth head chose to stay silent—understanding both sides—while the other six continued to quarrel.

“You have my condolences,” Zelphy said, putting a hand on her hip, “but we’re just here to do our job. We’re adventurers, and we’re going to complete our request. Lyle here took care of a group of bandits before. He’s got real combat experience, and I’m no slouch myself. It’s not a bad deal for you, Lord Pagan.”

“I’m sorry,” Lord Dale said, apologizing with a surprising amount of sincerity. “I got a bit ahead of myself. We have a hut you can use for lodging. Please rest for today. We can discuss our arrangements tomorrow.”

“W-Wait, Dale!” Paula protested. “You can’t! We need to explain the situation immediately!”

“They’ve only just arrived,” the lord said in return. “We should let them get some rest.”

The second head offered me some advice from his place within the Jewel: “Lyle, you should contact the lady after we resolve things here. We should hear her out.”

He seemed motivated, though the fifth, sixth, and seventh heads clearly did not share in his enthusiasm. Despite the fact that every single one of them came from House Walt, their opinions remained vastly different from one another.

How typical.

In any case, I decided right then and there that I should go meet with Paula later.

The House Pagan estate was little better off than the other buildings in the settlement, despite its lordly name. It was far from what you would expect from the manor of a feudal lord. This was only a matter of course, though, since House Pagan's territory was of such insignificant size. They did not possess the resources needed to maintain a larger property.

The same day Lyle and his party had arrived in House Pagan's territory, Zappa had waited until night fell over the estate, then paid Lord Dale a visit. Now, the two men sat across from each other in the lord's living room.

"Zappa, don't be too angry with the adventurers," Lord Dale told him. "They have weapons."

"If you want weapons, then Pini's getting them! He should be back soon. I mean, is this how a lord is supposed to act?! All he did was send those unmotivated brats! Does he really think so little of us? After all the trouble we've gone through for him..."

Zappa was something of an older brother to Lord Dale. Growing up, he'd known he wouldn't inherit the house, so the lord had worked in the fields from a young age. He'd met Zappa there, along with the other village kids around his age—Paula and Pini. They'd all grown close, and somehow the lord had found himself becoming the face of the younger generation of House Pagan.

Then, three years ago, House Pagan had joined the war at House Lobernia's request. Lord Dale had lost his father and brother to the war, and Paula had lost her father, who'd carried a lot of influence within the house. Zappa had fought in the war as well, along with Pini, who was a rather portly man that wasn't the most reliable of sorts. Unlike Lord Dale's family, however, the two young men had managed to survive.

"Calm down, Zappa," Lord Dale said calmly. "For now, we have five more hands on deck. It's better than nothing."

Lord Dale didn't know if the group Lord Bentler had sent could contribute

much to the war front, but they were still adventurers. They had come fully equipped, and it was better to have them than not.

“Honestly, I wanted to settle this whole thing with a discussion.”

“You idiot!” Zappa snapped at him. “You’re a lord! Why’re you acting all weak at the knees?! Listen to me, Dale. We’re up against a vassal knight and his retainers—these people are beneath you.”

“Zappa, our foe’s village has a population of five hundred. They outnumber us fivefold. Fighting them is simply unreasonable.”

House Pagan had a more lofty position within the nobility than their opponent, but House Maini sorely outranked them when it came to battle experience and numbers. Still, Zappa continued his attempts to persuade his lord.

“Ever since you took charge, people have underestimated you. You saw the baron’s attitude, right? Under any other circumstance, he would have sent soldiers, but instead, he gave us those *children*. House Maini is no different—they think you’re too young to know better, so they’re picking a fight with you over something stupid!”

Lord Dale sent him a troubled look. It was all true—the baron’s response did seem lackluster, and it did seem nonsensical to him that House Maini would involve his house in their vassal’s death, simply because he’d been found in their part of the forest. Usually, something like this would be House Maini’s problem to deal with. Yet for some reason, Lord Dale was being made out to be the one at fault.

First, one of House Maini’s retainers had invaded House Pagan’s territory and ended up dead. Then House Maini had blamed *his* house for the incident. And now Lord Bentler had refused to answer his call for help. With these matters running through his head, Lord Dale could offer Zappa no rebuttal.

“Zappa. When the body was found...was it *really* in our territory?”

“Of course, it was!” Zappa shouted back. “Are you doubting me?!”

Zappa and Pini had been the ones who found the body. When asked why they had gone into the woods, they’d claimed they had been defeating monsters for

their Demonic Stones. It could possibly be a profitable venture; selling Demonic Stones to peddlers meant a lower sales price, but it saved them the trouble of traveling to the Guild.

“Come on, Dale. I’ve got my hopes pinned on you. Let’s use this incident to get back at the whole lot of them. They’re the ones to blame for all this—both Lord Bentler *and* that vassal knight from House Maini.”

“But...I don’t have the means to do something like that. The moment they get serious, that’ll be the end of us.”

Zappa stood and wrapped a hand around Lord Dale’s shoulder. “Just trust me, stupid. I’ll blow away those folks from House Maini. You should just focus on how we can expand the settlement. Your old man and brother never bothered to keep anything saved up. They wasted all our tax money trying to maintain relationships with the surrounding lords. That’s why we’re stuck like this, so insignificant compared to everyone else.”

Lord Dale was in full agreement with Zappa’s opinion as far as the money was concerned. The lord’s mindset was closer to that of the common man’s, since he’d spent most of his life as a second son whose existence revolved around farm work. Even when his father and brother were still alive, Lord Dale had been aware of their wasteful spending.

“Fine. Once we resolve this matter, we will get to work on expanding the fields. I’ll run the idea past Paula for you.”

At the mention of Paula’s name, Lord Dale felt a bit of melancholy slip over him. Paula was the closest woman to him—in age and in friendship. There were other young women in the village, but she had been and still was his first love.

“You got it! Thank you, Dale! Paula never gives me a proper answer. But now, I should be able to marry into her house. I’ll be able to support you with some real authority.”

Lord Dale covered his face with a hand. “Yeah, I guess so, Zappa...”

His first love would marry his sworn brother. Lord Dale was the one who was facilitating the matter, and yet he found himself in quite a conflicted state of mind.

Chapter 21: House Pagan and House Maini

I invited Paula for a talk the same day we arrived at the settlement in House Pagan's territory. It didn't take much prompting for her to come to our hut.

"Err, so you're saying that Zappa and Pini found the body in the forest? And since the body had been stripped of its equipment, they suspected it was a case of robbery turned murder?"

Paula nodded. "Yes, but they didn't know whose body it was. And then, an envoy from House Maini showed up..."

Based on her story, House Maini's behavior seemed suspicious. How would they have been able to send an envoy so soon after the body was found? And on top of that...

"The lord of their village suspected us of killing the man. According to him, the victim wasn't the sort of person who would cross our border for any nefarious reasons. They suspected us from the very start, and wouldn't listen to anything we said. I know we should have requested mediation, but we'd have had to pay a fee to our benefactor if we wanted him to come intervene in the situation..."

House Maini's suspicions were a surprise as well. Had they even bothered to conduct an investigation before accusing House Pagan?

"Th-That's crazy talk!" Aria said, launching to her feet. "The timing is too convenient, and their only reason for suspecting you is the victim had a good reputation. They're *definitely* up to something!"

This opinion was contested by none other than a member of our own party—Sophia. "I can't ignore that allegation. Lord Maini is a splendid individual; he has no reason to plot anything against House Pagan. Isn't there a chance that the people of this settlement were involved?"

Paula silently cast down her eyes as Aria and Sophia exchanged glares. Within the Jewel, the founder and second head were at each other's throats as well.

"You calling our little Aria a fool? Looks like you're tryna get on my bad side."

“It’s not good to just listen to one side and believe everything they say. Aria’s one of those people who’re always causing problems. The nosy sort—the kind that makes a mess out of everything.”

As always, our founder was supportive of Aria. The second head’s harsh view of her probably came mostly from the hatred he held toward his father, since he had a habit of always arguing against whatever side the founder took.

Novem soothed Paula, then urged her to continue. “Did you notice anything else?”

“Honestly, the mood around the settlement isn’t great,” she told us. “My father used to be the one who rallied everyone together, but he’s dead now, and Dale’s father isn’t the lord any longer... At first, everyone was delighted that Dale had taken over the house. It may be imprudent for me to say this, but they thought their opinions would be heard once Dale became lord. But...I get the feeling that lately, things are getting worse than they ever were before. Now people are saying Dale is unreliable, and that’s why this incident with House Maini has happened...”

The third head yawned. “That’s a bit of a stretch. Is everything that goes wrong in a territory the fault of the feudal lord? Anyways, having such high hopes probably made the people living in the settlement feel that much more disappointed when things didn’t go their way.”

Hey, hadn’t these guys been feudal lords as well...?

I ran my fingers over the Jewel, and the third head grumbled, “What? You want to resolve this? You really want to stick your head into someone else’s problem that has absolutely nothing to do with you? It’ll be more trouble than it’s worth, let me tell you. When territories like this have been neighbors for so long, there’s all sorts of piled-up pettiness and bad blood.”

Just as I started to think my ancestors were completely useless, the third head added, “And Lyle...you have no guarantee that these kids are telling the truth.”

The next day, we ventured to the lord’s manor to be briefed on the situation with House Maini. The manor was...

I know I shouldn't compare it to my own home, but...

Anyways, the manor wasn't the issue. The devil was in the details.

The more Zelphy spoke with Lord Dale and Zappa—who represented the village watch—the stiffer her face became.

“So, if I’m getting this right... You reached out to Lord Bentler, and didn’t give a single thought as to what you would do after that?”

“No, we did,” Lord Dale said, trying to explain himself. “We thought that if we had more soldiers, House Maini might stop pressuring us and would hopefully be more open to negotiation.”

Military reinforcements *would* make it easier to defend the settlement; House Maini wouldn’t recklessly invade House Pagan with soldiers hanging around. That seemed to be what Lord Dale had had in mind.

“You’ve gotta be screwing with me!” the founder roared. It seemed Lord Dale’s plan had irritated him. “Seriously, what kinda wimp can’t even protect his own territory?! Show a bit of spine, would you?!”

The second head seemed to be equally enraged, but not toward Lord Dale—toward the founder. “You fool! How would House Pagan be able to fight House Maini with those numbers?! Scrape all their able men together, and they’ve only got ten fighters. Twenty tops! What are you expecting them to do with that? Requesting reinforcements was the right decision!”

The third head burst out laughing. “What are you guys even competing for? You two are way too hot-blooded. Now, stop me if I’m saying something crazy here, but...if they sent for soldiers from House Lobernia, House Maini wouldn’t have just sat around twiddling their thumbs, would they?”

Zelphy turned to us and shrugged. She had a troubled look on her face.

“How did you plan on letting your opponent know about those reinforcements?” she asked. “You have any way of contacting them?”

“No, I thought they’d realize on their next visit,” Lord Dale replied. It appeared he hadn’t really thought that far into it.

“Huh? And what were you gonna do if that turned into a skirmish?!”

Zappa looked our party up and down. He was supposed to be the head of the village watch, but honestly, he didn't look that strong to me. "Isn't fighting your job?" he asked haughtily, arms folded across his chest.

"We'll contact House Maini ourselves," Zelphy said, ruffling her hands through her hair. "Don't want them thinking we're preparing for battle... Is that all right with you, Lord Pagan?"

Lord Dale conferred with Zappa before he agreed. After Zappa nodded, the lord nodded as well. The exchange got a loud tut from one of my ancestors. I couldn't tell who it was, but the fifth head spoke for all of them when he said in disgust, "What a useless lord..."

"Lyle," Zelphy said, speaking directly to me. "We're heading to the next village over. You tag along with me—Sophia too. If we've got an acquaintance of theirs with us, House Maini won't attack us without asking questions first."

She had a point. If we took Sophia, perhaps her presence would create a good opportunity for us to start a negotiation.

Aria and Novem had remained with House Pagan when Zelphy, Lyle, and Sophia had left for House Maini's territory. The two girls headed to a clearing a short way away from House Pagan's settlement, and there Novem instructed Aria in the basics of using magic.

The wagon they'd journeyed in was parked nearby, its horses tethered to trees as they munched on the grass under their feet. It was a tranquil scene all-around.

Aria held out her hand, unleashing a spell on the target Novem had placed over a tree stump.

"Stone Bullet!"

A stone erupted from the ground, arcing through the air. It flew past the tree stump and fell to the ground behind it. Aria's attack didn't just lack firepower—it lacked accuracy as well.

Aria's shoulders drooped. "Magic's not for me; it just isn't my strong suit.

Even my bullet spells end up like this...”

Novem smiled. To tell the truth, Aria was terrible at magic.

Bullet spells consisted of a straight shot of elemental magic, with no fine manipulation required whatsoever. Despite this, Aria could only pull off one type of bullet spell with any competence—the type which used the element of fire. She insisted she was no good at magic, but even so, she still managed to invoke each spell successfully when she tried...

Perhaps, Novem thought, it's not a lack of talent that's the issue. A change of mindset may be all she needs.

“Don’t worry, Aria. Your spells are activating, so you should improve as long as you practice diligently. Luckily, your bloodline shouldn’t be an issue. The rest is up to you.”

Novem brought up Aria’s bloodline because a person’s inherited power tended to be more important than effort and talent when it came to magic. In the distant past, those who could use magic had proclaimed themselves lords over the rest of the population. A noble’s blood was the same as a magician’s blood, and without being a part of that ancestry of power, it was impossible to even attempt magic.

“That’s true. My family may have fallen into disgrace, but we *were* a barony. I’d have to say, though, that I’m much better with my spear than with magic.”

Novem glanced at Aria’s spear, which was stabbed into the ground nearby. “Yes, but magic might come in handy sometime... You’re an adventurer, you know. It’s important to have a wide range of options.”

Aria just looked at her.

Demonic Tools like Novem’s silver staff, which had several Arts carved into its surface and could reproduce their effects, were incredibly expensive. This was because every human could only manifest a single Art over their entire lifetime—they could reach a second and third stage of that Art, but these stages were only expansions upon the original.

“You’re a magician, Novem,” Aria said, her eyes flitting down to the red Gem which dangled from around her neck. “It’s easy for you to say things like that,

but I'm clearly meant to be a frontliner."

Red Gems like the one Aria wore recorded frontline-type Arts, which generally involved powerful close-combat skills. Blue Gems—or *Jewels* in Lyle's case—recorded support-type Arts, which were skills that weren't directly related to combat. And lastly, yellow Gems recorded rearguard-type Arts, which were unique abilities that related to magic.

Gems and Demonic Tools had a poor affinity for one another, and it was impossible to use both at the same time.

"That may be true," Novem agreed, "but there are no downsides to learning how to use magic. How about we give it another go? It would be quite convenient if you could light fires or produce water on the move, you know."

Aria stared angrily back at Novem. "Doesn't that just mean you want me to pick up odd jobs?"

Novem chuckled and denied the accusation. Seconds later, her gaze shot to a nearby thicket.

"What's wrong?" Aria asked her.

"Nothing, just a rat," Novem answered. She fixed a smile back on her face and continued on with Aria's lesson.

The territories of House Pagan and House Maini were separated from each other by a stretch of forest and a river which ran through its middle. From what we were told, it seemed it would take us several days to go around the forest and reach House Maini's village. Armed with this information, I'd decided to take the helm of our party and use my ancestors' Arts to guide us straight through the center and out the other side.

I'd ended up using the fifth head's Art, Map, to get the lay of the land, and the sixth head's Art, Search, to scan the area for enemies. On top of that, I'd used the fourth head's Art, Speed, to help us travel faster. I hadn't been worried about using Speed, since I was already accustomed to it, but Sophia and Zelphy hadn't been anywhere near as confident in their abilities. They'd hesitated to use the Art even though we'd practiced a bit before we entered the tree line.

All in all, we'd managed to clear the woods far faster than we'd anticipated, though all three of us had ended up covered in mud.

As we drew closer to the village, Zelphy looked at me and said tiredly, "Good grief. I thought you were an idiot when you said we were going through the forest, but that was certainly faster than our other options. It would have taken us over a day if we'd gone the other way..." It seemed she'd noticed that I'd used multiple different Arts during the journey, since she added, "But that Art of yours certainly takes some getting used to."

The fourth head chose this moment to speak up and say, "I'd consider my Art one of the more reasonable ones, mind you."

"My senses are a bit...off... Yeah, it was fast, but..." Sophia muttered as she stumbled along.

She was in the worst state of all of us. Branches kept catching on her robe, and the battle-axe on her back whacked into trees as she struggled past. Several times, she'd tripped and almost fallen. It appeared that once Sophia set foot into a forest, her typical diligent and levelheaded appearance was overcome by a wave of wretchedness. Her face was stained bright red, so it was clear she was aware of the shift as well.

"Are you all right, Sophia?" I asked, reaching out to her.

"I'm perfectly fine," she replied, picking a twig out of her hair. Her expression firmed, though the redness in her cheeks remained. "This is nothing to a daughter of House Laurie."

"I... I see."

When it came to appearances, I didn't think I was much better than Sophia. Wading my way through the unfamiliar stretch of forest had left me quite haggard. Every once in a while, I'd catch my foot on a protruding root, or stumble onto a muddy patch that was just waiting to trip me up.

"I knew you weren't used to traveling through the forest," muttered the second head, who had insisted we take this route to the village, "but the fact that you're having this much trouble is concerning. Lyle, you should take the forest route on the return trip as well. Consider all of this a part of your

training.”

The second head had taught me how to walk in the forest, so he’d saved me from completely embarrassing myself.

I never thought that the woods would be so hard to get around in, I thought. We might end up in trouble if we get caught in a fight while we’re in a place like this.

Finally, we cleared the forest’s edge, and Zelphy pointed a finger at a village a short distance away.

“That’s got to be the place we’re looking for—House Maini’s village. Sophia, you’re our way in, so get your appearance in order. First, let’s get all those leaves out of your hair.”

Sophia combed her hands through her hair in a panic. It was pretty funny watching her flail around with her face all flushed; she was acting so different from her usual self.

As Zelphy went to help her, I muttered to myself, “My ancestors’ Arts sure are convenient...”

I ticked them off one by one in my head: there was the founder’s Art, which boosted all of my abilities to a higher level; the second head’s Art, which gave me the lackluster ability to let others use my Arts, but had the bonus effect of allowing me to sense the position of everyone around me; the third head’s Art, which had some sort of effect on people’s minds; the fourth head’s Art, which gave me the ability to maintain a higher rate of speed over a long period of time; the fifth head’s Art, which allowed me to grasp the layout of the surrounding terrain; the sixth head’s Art, which gave me the ability to search the area for enemies as well as allies; and the seventh head’s Art, which I’d heard had something to do with space.

The Jewel really did hold quite a grab bag of varied, powerful Arts.

It was difficult to use any of them in my current state, of course. Most of them I could only use thanks to the founder’s Art, Full Over. Plus, due to my lack of mana, I could only use my ancestors’ Arts intermittently, which was a sign that I wasn’t quite ready to handle the rest of the Arts the Jewel contained. I

still couldn't use the Arts of the third or seventh head at all.

But even my limited abilities had still been enough to take us swiftly to our destination.

"This is where support-type Arts shine," the fourth head explained with pride. "They're not very flashy, but once implemented, they perform at extraordinary levels. Especially the fifth and sixth heads' Arts—I'd say they're downright dirty."

"Dirty? I'll take that as a compliment," the fifth head proclaimed.

"As you should," the fourth head said, chuckling. "It *is* a compliment."

So they consider dirty a compliment...? I thought, baffled. *These ancestors of mine make no sense.*

That said, having the ability to know the layout of the surrounding terrain inside and out, plus being able to tell the locations of all your enemies and allies, was a hugely effective skill in a fight. It was probably fair to call Arts like that dirty.

"The Jewel would be an incredible item, if only they weren't so noisy," I complained under my breath.

"You got that right. These guys need to learn to shut up," said the founder.

The second head couldn't help snorting at that. "Says you."

After checking that we were all prepared, Zelphy, Sophia, and I began walking toward the village. I could still hear my ancestors bickering in the back of my mind. Thanks to them, my mana was dropping, and I probably wouldn't be able to use Arts for the rest of the day.

With the power of Sophia's name behind us, we were able to gain entry to House Maini's estate.

Their village was around five times the size of House Pagan's settlement; almost like they'd cobbled several settlements together to make the whole. Their estate was similarly impressive.

House Pagan's rules had seemed to be a bit on the lax side, but it was clear House Maini was run with a firmer hand. From the fearful way the villagers acted, I might even venture to say a harsh one. The moment the villagers heard we were guests of their lord, they cleared the way for us and bowed their heads—as if they were terrified of paying us even the slightest amount of disrespect. This level of propriety didn't seem as if it was out of the ordinary for them; it seemed like this was just the way they were expected to live their lives.

The estate prepared water for us to wash off the grime of our travels, and once we'd cleaned up, we were let in to meet with the house's head, Medard Maini.

Everything about Lord Medard seemed to be the complete opposite of Lord Dale. At a glance, he looked like a bad guy from a fairy tale. The lord appeared to be in his thirties; he had gray hair which curled away from his face, and a mustache which rested atop his upper lip. He was of average height, and a bit plump, but the suit he wore was perfectly tailored to his build. And his eyes...there was something quite dastardly about the look in them. If he'd been acting the part of a two-bit villain in a play, I would have clapped in appreciation.

Sophia greeted the lord with a smile. "It has been a while, Lord Medard."

"I'm glad to see you're doing well, Sophia," the lord replied. He seemed to be aware of what had befallen her family, since a sorrowful look had come over his face. "As a fellow vassal knight, I don't know how I could even begin to express..."

Sophia dipped her head slightly, looking at the floor. "Please, don't worry yourself over it. The reality is, we were unable to protect the land given to us. House Laurie still has my uncle, so it's not as if our lineage has died out entirely."

Sophia's uncle served the lord who was House Maini's benefactor. This meant she wasn't entirely without living relatives, but her uncle's house was merely a branch of the central House Laurie, which had been her home. The head of her house had been killed by the bandits that had run rampant in the region, leaving devastated villages in their wake. Typically, Sophia or her husband

would have inherited the title of head of House Laurie once her family had been killed, but their land had been revoked since they had been unable to do their duty and protect their territory.

Sophia's lived quite a harsh life.

"That is certainly true," the lord told Sophia. He then turned to me, his back straightening and his expression turning serious. He seemed to be struggling with something. "Now, as for why you're here today... I've received a letter from your lord. He told me I should show you some consideration, Lyle. He also listed the names of several other nobles whom you have apparently placed in your debt. There seems to be quite a number."

"Looks like returning all those items free of charge had quite the effect," the third head said, sounding like he was having the time of his life. "Man, it sure is nice to do a good deed."

When we'd defeated the bandits, the rights to all their treasure had gone to me, and I'd returned all the stolen goods to their owners for free. That was the reason Sophia had eventually come to Darion, wanting to join my party to pay back the debt she felt she owed me. It seemed my generosity was now securing my safety as well.

"Bentler, you old fox, you laid the groundwork already," the seventh head said in a satisfied tone. "Though, if he hadn't..."

I was curious what he was going to say after that, but decided I didn't want to hear it. My ancestors had all been feudal lords at one time or another, and this meant they often made some rather radical statements when it came to anything that involved their past occupation.

I gave the lord an awkward smile. "I mean, all I did was drive some bandits out."

"That alone would not put you in my lord's favor," Lord Medard replied. It seemed he understood enough about the situation to know my statement wasn't to be believed. "As a vassal knight, I am obliged to obey the orders of my viscount. It seems your baron does not want to stir the pot."

So, a viscount governs this region...

Regardless, I was impressed at how everything seemed to be going just as my ancestors had predicted.

My lack of reaction seemed to sour Lord Medard's fun. "Were you already aware of all of this?" he asked.

"No," I replied. "I just made an educated guess."

Zelphy seemed impressed at my cunning. Sophia just cast her eyes back and forth between Lord Medard and me, not quite understanding what was going on.

"Ahem. To summarize," Medard began, "my lord is telling us to stand down. Which is not in our best interest."

As far as Lord Medard was concerned, one of his retainers had been killed, and he was being told to give up on pursuing House Pagan, who he suspected had committed the murder. He still wanted to avoid getting the benefactors of either of the two regions involved, however. Now, he was stuck with me—someone who he was indebted to—acting as a shield for House Pagan. He couldn't even lift a finger.

"Well, it seems all was resolved the moment Lord Bentler sent Lyle here," the third head said. "And they all lived happily ever after. The end."

It didn't seem like anything was resolved to me.

Then, Sophia asked Lord Medard, "Umm, sir... What exactly happened? House Pagan claims it has all been one-sided allegations."

"One-sided?! They're still insisting that?" The lord's face turned grim.

Lord Medard pulled a letter from his pocket and presented it to Zelphy. Though the writing wasn't the prettiest, the words were legible enough: *The remains of your retainer lie within House Pagan's territory.*

Zelphy looked at the letter, then at Lord Medard. "What is this...?"

"It's the letter that arrived at the village just when we were preparing to search for our missing retainer. I don't know who sent it, but we sent an envoy to House Pagan right away. As it turned out, our retainer's body really was in their territory."

Zelphy hummed as she scratched her cheek in contemplation. “According to House Pagan, your envoy came as soon as they found the body.”

The air around Lord Medard changed. “He was an earnest guy. A hard worker, and a brave warrior. I saw the remains—he had suffered a terrible wound. Perhaps he was killed by a monster. But would a monster steal a human’s equipment?”

“Not usually,” Zelphy answered.

“Umm,” I cut in, “is it possible the equipment was taken postmortem? And the body was found after that...?”

“Those woods aren’t an optimal hideout for bandits,” Lord Medard replied. “Nor are the surrounding areas. Your baron regularly sends soldiers to exterminate any monsters or crooks hiding in the area. House Pagan might not think anything of it, but the baron has his own soldiers sent all the way out to their territory out of concern for the young lord.”

The second head’s impression of House Pagan appeared to be on a downward trend. “What? He’s *always* looked after that kid?! That changes the story a bit...”

“Now that you mention it, I do remember him dispatching soldiers to these parts,” said Zelphy.

Lord Medard nodded. “The baron’s soldiers came to me in order to explain the situation. Lord Bentler had told them to stay away from House Pagan’s settlement so they wouldn’t be a burden on their resources. With all that your lord has done for House Pagan, are you really still going to suggest that there are bandits in that forest?” The lord sighed. “I can’t deny the possibility that House Pagan just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. But they... House Pagan is not trustworthy. They could have spotted the body and carried it across the border and into their own settlement. I can’t imagine our man would have crossed the border himself.”

So, I thought. *Lord Medard doesn’t believe that his retainer died inside House Pagan’s territory.*

“But why would they go out of their way to move the body into their own

territory...?” I wondered aloud.

Would there have been any point in that?

“Lyle, borders tend to complicate things,” the second head explained. “To a lord, each speck of their land is an asset that belongs to them and them alone. That includes monster materials and Demonic Stones. In normal circumstances, if the body of one of House Maini’s retainers was found inside someone else’s territory, then House Maini would be judged to be the aggressor. Since their retainer would have unlawfully invaded the land of another house, it would be thought that he brought his death upon himself.”

“Too complicated,” the founder grumbled. “Just choose some representatives to slug it out. That’ll set the record straight.”

That wouldn’t resolve anything...

“Why do you consider House Pagan to be untrustworthy?” Sophia asked Lord Medard.

“Two generations ago, the lords of Pagan and Maini often fought, though it never escalated to a skirmish,” he told us. Just recalling the matter seemed to irritate him. “They argued over rights to the forest and the river’s water. There were too many disputes to count. But that wasn’t the issue. The real problems came the generation after that.”

According to Lord Medard, Pagan’s previous head had approached his house to attempt to form a more favorable relationship. This hadn’t seemed out of the ordinary, as House Pagan’s lord had been attempting to forge connections with the other nearby lords as well. He’d proposed a plan to Lord Medard—a plan to install a highway through the forest between their two houses.

“The forest between our houses served as a sort of dividing wall. It prevented conflict, but it was also a place that housed monsters. It was a source of a great amount of damage to both of our houses, and we would have a lot more usable land if we cut part of it down. *But...*”

Since it would have been difficult for the two houses to maintain the roads and clear the forest land all by themselves, the previous Lord Pagan had asked Lord Medard to help collect funding for the venture. Both houses had gone to

their benefactors and petitioned their neighbors for assistance...

“One look at the forest should tell you everything you need to know. The plan never went anywhere. House Pagan was only after the funding—nothing more, nothing less. All the favors we called in, all the soliciting we did... It ruined my reputation.”

The fourth head sighed. “Wow, that older Lord Pagan really screwed up, didn’t he?”

“Well, umm... The head of House Pagan has changed, and I don’t think Lord Dale carries after his father as far as money’s concerned...” Zelphy insisted in an apologetic tone.

“I know all that! But the kid who took over didn’t say a word to me! He hasn’t said a word to anyone! And even beyond that, I haven’t even begun to describe how awful the previous lord was... What was he thinking, taking his eldest son and the heads of his most influential houses off to war?! It has to be some sort of sick joke!”

The previous Lord Pagan had taken the entire core of his settlement to war—a group which had been chock full of talents irreplaceable to his house. As a result, many prominent figures within the house had lost their lives, including the lord himself and his eldest son.

What was he thinking...?

There had been an important plan laid out for the development of both their houses, but it would be no exaggeration to say House Pagan had brought it to a standstill.

“In a sense, you could say they self-destructed,” the third head said. He seemed suspicious of House Pagan’s actions. “Seeing how that little girl was serving as a representative, it seems they didn’t have any other heirs around to take over.”

“It definitely doesn’t seem like it,” the sixth head said, sighing. “I can understand why the head of House Maini thinks they’re mocking him. They sabotaged their own house; I can’t see it any other way.”

“Lord Medard, come to think of it, I remember you traveling around to

various houses three years ago...”

“I had to apologize to all the lords who agreed to work with me on the road project. I got everything arranged so that kid could come with me, since I thought he’d have a hard time taking over House Pagan. But, that *brat*...”

Apparently, Lord Dale had refused to join Lord Medard when he’d gone to offer his apologies to the other lords. This was a surprise to me—Lord Dale had seemed like he was an earnest man.

“I knew it,” Sophia said, her eyes cast downward. “This is all House Pagan’s fault.”

Zelphy gave her a sympathetic look. “I get how you feel, Sophia, but you’ve gotta reel it in once we’re back over there.”

“Yes, that would be for the best,” Lord Medard replied. “Of course, we’re not going to back down so easily.”

The third head burst out laughing. “Ha ha ha! What a mess.”

What’s so funny about any of this?

“Uh-oh, Lyle’s making that face he does when he doesn’t understand something.”

They were right—I didn’t quite understand what was going on at this point. The circumstances surrounding the issue between House Pagan and House Maini had grown too complicated for me.

The second head sighed. “Don’t worry about it, Lyle. This is difficult stuff. For now, just make sure you grasp the main points. Also, drop by the Jewel when you can. I’ll explain what’s going on so you can understand it.”

I thought I was just supposed to be a shield...

That was when I decided I’d have to ask my ancestors to help me figure out what I was supposed to do, now that I was stuck in the midst of such a tangled web of issues.

After speaking with Lord Medard, we wound up staying the night at the Maini estate. I laid down in the bed of one of the guest rooms and sent my mind into the Jewel to where my ancestors awaited me, ready to explain what was going

on with this territorial dispute.

“It seems like this whole thing is more complicated than it has to be, to be honest,” I told them.

The second head nodded. “That’s exactly right. For now, we should just make sure we’ve got the main points in order.”

Starting from the top...

The houses had already been on bad terms due to their shared border. Then a retainer of House Maini was killed and stripped of their equipment. The body had been found in House Pagan’s territory by two of their residents. Around the same time, a letter had been delivered to House Maini. When they’d followed up on the information within the letter, they’d found their deceased comrade. Now House Maini suspected House Pagan of the murder, while House Pagan denied any wrongdoing.

And so, the strained relationship between the two houses continued.

That much, I understand. But there are a bunch of other things I don’t quite get...

“So, you’re saying the fact he was stripped of his equipment isn’t that much of a problem.”

“That’s considered more of a personal problem than house business,” the third head explained, fiddling with his bangs. “The important part is which territory he died in. Medard said he was an earnest vassal who wouldn’t cross any borders, but there’s no telling what he was doing behind the scenes. The spectacular timing of that letter is quite suspicious as well. Who could have sent it?”

“Since the envoy arrived right after the body was found...” The founder cradled his head in his hands. “Someone musta sent it out a while before that, right? Who the hell coulda done that?!”

“If we knew that, we wouldn’t be getting so worked up over it,” said the second head. “I’m sure whoever wrote that letter to House Maini just left it somewhere conspicuous in the village.”

I thought this information over for a moment. Then the third head chimed in and explained some of the parts of the dispute I still didn't get.

"Lyle, everything contained within a feudal lord's territory is considered the lord's personal property. That includes the monsters; the lord even has a right to their Demonic Stones and materials. Feudal lords tend to get pretty angry if you go off and start defeating monsters in their territory and dragging them away without their permission."

"Err, so how does that work when it comes to me? Since I'm adventuring in Darion territory...?"

"Our dear Bentler would have sent the Guild his permission for you to adventure in the area. You end up paying a tax on the Demonic Stones, anyways, since you have to sell them to the Guild. That's how it works in Darion. But that's just limited to his territory; it may be different elsewhere, so you shouldn't get too comfortable."

A sudden realization hit me. "Then, if we defeat monsters while we're journeying outside of Darion territory, do we have a duty to report it...?"

"Lyle..." the second head trailed off, then shook his head. "Don't worry about that. If a monster attacks you, you've got no choice but to fight it. If you beat it, just sell the materials at your destination. It just gets annoying when you report every little thing. It causes more trouble than it's worth. Just keep quiet about any monsters we come across during our travels. That sort of thing is totally different than if you'd set out monster hunting specifically to make a profit."

I reassessed the dispute in light of this new information. Basically, in a case like this, Lord Medard would typically be considered the guilty party, since House Maini's retainer had died while trespassing in another house's territory. That didn't quite make sense in this case, though, since Lord Medard swore his retainer would not have done such a thing. It was also doubtful that a passing bandit would have transported the body into House Pagan's territory. It would be understandable if a bandit had stripped the body of its armor, but they would have no need to move it.

"Yes, that's what makes it suspicious," one of my ancestors replied. "The culprit wouldn't be just any ordinary bandit. But we can't deny the possibility

that this retainer of House Maini's really *did* cross the border."

"Lyle, don't involve yourself in this any more than you have to," the fifth head said in a listless voice. "You've pretty much finished your job already. No need to do more."

Lord Bentler had only dispatched me here in order to send a message to the two warring houses. He'd wanted them to know he wished them to solve their dispute without the involvement of their benefactors. If I'd managed to get that message through to them, our job was as good as done.

"But is it really okay for me to just leave things like this? And if my job's already mostly complete, how long should I stay here...?"

"Well, you'll have to mediate a conversation between the two houses," the second head said thoughtfully, a hand to his chin. "Nothing will come of it, so I'm sure the benefactors will still have to mediate in the end."

The third head nodded in agreement. "Yeah, we don't have any solutions that will leave both sides satisfied. Eventually, one side will offer a compromise to the other and that'll be the end of the issue."

It all seemed like tedious busywork to me.

"The hell?" the founder cried. He appeared to be the only one who disagreed on this matter. "Maini's standing down after one of their best men was killed? And those Pagans—what *cowards*. If they're being treated unfairly, they should pick up their weapons and fight it out. I wouldn't have shown my foe a lick of mercy."

Looking at the founder, arms crossed defiantly over his chest, you really did get the sense that he'd charge straight into enemy lines.

"I get the feeling you've done nothing but fight with everyone around you," I said.

But the second head lifted a shoulder in contradiction. "Actually, no. There wasn't any fighting during his time."

"Huh?!"

It was shocking to know that a man as short-tempered as the founder hadn't

gotten into any fights. I looked over at the third head, only to see that he was nodding as well.

“As I’m sure you know, Lyle,” the third head explained, “our founder is a dragon slayer. He fought the thing single-handedly, no less. He’s a man with true valor—one who managed to gain the allegiance of every single one of the barbarian tribes through his might alone. Who was going to pick a fight with him, after he did all that? Whenever there was an issue, the other side backed down. Our benefactor was terrified of him. I’m not lying, I swear.”

Apparently, apart from House Fuchs, every other house in the general vicinity had been terrified of our founder. This seemed like news to him, though...

“Huh? *Really?* You gotta be kidding.”

He’s the one they were scared of! How could he not know?!

“The second head was a bit better than the founder, but he still went around the territory defeating monsters and bandits using his bow. It was quite unbecoming of a noble, but he said it was for efficiency’s sake. You can’t imagine how shocked everyone was when I took over and actually went around to introduce myself to our neighbors and our benefactor. I had it hard, you know. You should have seen how much they were quivering. It was clear as day how scared they were of me.”

The full force of my ancestors’ scrutiny—as well as my own—fell on the second head, and he looked away.

“W-Well, you see, I only took such an assertive role in the hunts at the behest of our benefactor. I didn’t do anything to... And I did go around giving my greetings! I did!”

“Hmph. Well, until I became head, we only kept contact with the other lords to the bare minimum,” the third head said with a sad smile. “We would have been completely isolated had it not been for House Fuchs. You generally got our benefactor’s requests through the Fuchs, didn’t you?”

House Walt owed more debts to House Fuchs than we could ever count. It felt idiotic to even try. I got the feeling every single one of my ancestors had depended on their aid.

I was a bit surprised to hear how feared House Walt had been, but come to think of it... If you took one look at the founder, it was easy to understand why. It would have been harder to *not* be fearful of him.

The fourth head cleared his throat. "To shift the conversation a bit, could you three give us your opinion on how we should move forward with the matter of the territorial dispute?"

The founder, second head, and third head happily obliged.

"It's obvious," the founder declared. "Let their leaders slug it out and resolve it between themselves!"

"Well, there's no use in us getting involved," the second head said firmly. "This dispute is based on a grudge that has built up over quite a number of years. It's not like fixing this problem alone will resolve their underlying issues. We should just forget about it."

"Sounds good to me!" the third head said cheerfully. "We can just stick around for a week and then leave! That's a job well done, *and* we can pester young Bentler for a bonus!"

They were doing quite a splendid job of forsaking the house I'd been sent to mediate for.

I guess as long as I've completed my mission, they don't care about the rest.

"I agree," the fourth head said. He sounded relieved. "There's no point in Lyle getting involved. But we shouldn't waste the time we spend here. There's a nearby forest, so why don't you go and get some experience, Lyle?"

The sixth head crossed his arms and nodded. "No objections from me."

"Disputes between vassals are such a pain. Back when I was in charge, they plagued me to no end," the fifth head said with a sigh.

The seventh head sounded most displeased. "How dare you put Lyle up to this... Just you wait, Bentler..."

And, just like that, it was decided I would leave the houses to their own devices. But was that really for the best...?

Chapter 22: Confession

The night Lyle, Sophia, and Zelphy headed off to House Maini's territory, Novem and Aria heated up some water in their hut and used it to wipe down their bodies. They washed their clothes as well, then ate and tended to the horses. Once they were done, they were left with plenty of time to spare before they needed to go to sleep.

"Do you think those three will be all right?" Aria asked, her worried face illuminated under the light of their lantern.

"They'll be just fine," Novem replied. She was sitting on the floor, polishing her staff. "Miss Sophia is acquainted with the lord, and they have Miss Zelphy with them."

When Novem said Sophia's name, Aria wrapped her arms around her knees and hung her head.

"Sophia, huh...? I guess Lyle likes girls like *her*."

Internally, Aria compared herself to Sophia. Sophia's hair was long and beautiful, all silky and black. Unlike Aria, she had a calm and composed air about her. Plus, Sophia was a lot more womanly than her...

"Milord does not hate you by any means," Novem said, breaking into her thoughts.

But Aria was already aware of the reality of her situation. "The whole thing is a bit upsetting to me. I know Lyle wasn't involved in the decision to buy me, and I'm happy that he helped me out... It just feels like I'm depending on him without offering anything in return. It's kinda...heavy, I guess."

Novem gave Aria a troubled look, then slowly began to tell her about Lyle's past.

"Lord Lyle was driven from his home, an earldom called House Walt. He fought with his sister, Lady Ceres, and lost quite terribly."

Aria found this information a bit odd. She'd heard the story before, but Lyle certainly hadn't seemed weak when he defeated the bandit chief. In truth, even in the short time they'd spent together, Aria had noticed that Lyle's fighting style was far more refined than the rest of their party's. The reminder only put her in a worse mood. She fell into a deeper slump. She knew she wasn't of any use to Lyle.

"That's a bit strange, don't you think?" Aria asked Novem. "I can't imagine Lyle losing...and he doesn't certainly doesn't look bad enough for anyone to decide to kick him out of their house. I mean, I've noticed he gets confused about the strangest stuff, but..."

"He doesn't know how the world works," Novem stated plainly. "But I can't blame him. Lord Lyle was treated horribly even within his own home. He can't see any value in himself."

"He can't see his own value...? B-But Lyle can use magic! I mean, yeah, he collapses right away, but his sword skills are on a whole other level."

Novem shook her head. "Even so, he cannot accept himself. He's lost too many times and been isolated too long; he's lost all confidence in his abilities. That's why he's so self-abasing. He's oblivious to the ways of the world and terrible with people because he was confined within the manor for so long."

"I... I see. So, he's had it rough. I guess I should count my blessings," Aria said, voice thoughtful as she mulled over Lyle's circumstances.

So, he was confined, made oblivious to the outside world, and then ended up losing to his sister and being driven from his house. It doesn't seem quite right to me, but Zelphy told me the same thing. It must be true. But in that case...

"Am I at all useful to him?" Aria muttered.

Novem smiled. "Yes, even now you're being plenty useful."

"How so?"

"Lord Lyle is learning so much just by talking to you and everyone else. He might seem cold at times, but the truth is he does not fully understand how to interact with others. He really doesn't know. That's why I want people like you by his side. Just being there is useful enough."

That was when Aria decided to finally address something that had been plaguing her thoughts. “I’ve always found it weird, you know.”

“What do you mean?”

“Why do you go so far for Lyle? If you’re his former fiancée, if you love him, then you wouldn’t want me or Sophia around, right? I mean...”

The lantern flame guttered out as Novem lifted a hand to her mouth and giggled.

“Thank you for your concern, but I’m fine. This is the life milord wishes for, and so all I do is for milord’s sake.”

The moonlight from the window revealed that Novem was...smiling. For a moment, Aria hadn’t been able to see her expression.

It seems like she really is telling the truth...

“Are you saying his wish is...to be surrounded by women?”

“Yes. It might sound hopeless,” said Novem, “and to be honest I don’t think he really understands what that means, but...also...”

“Also?”

“Lord Lyle needs people. People who will support him—apart from me.”

Novem fell quiet, a somewhat sorrowful expression drifting over her face.

At noon the next morning, Novem and Aria were practicing magic in the clearing just as they had the day before, when Lord Dale and Zappa decided to pay them a visit. The two girls put their training on hold to find out what the men had come to speak to them about.

“Excuse me, but do you need something?” Novem asked them. “We’ve already received permission to use this area.”

Lord Dale grew nervous at Novem’s words. “N-No! It’s...not about that. You see...”

He’s being quite wishy-washy, Aria thought.

She decided to speak up next. She cocked her head to the side and said, “If you’re looking for the others, they should be back by the end of the day. You can talk to Lyle then—”

“Ugh, this is getting nowhere!” Zappa burst out. It seemed he was unable to bear Lord Dale’s awkwardness any longer. “Now, look here, we’ve got a bit of a question. You two can use magic, right?”

“Yes,” Novem affirmed. “If you need assistance, we can cooperate to an—”

Novem was abruptly cut off when Zappa shoved Dale from behind and sent him stumbling toward Aria. Aria had just started to move away when Zappa cried, “Hey, you—do you wanna marry Dale?!”

This sudden offer left Aria dumbfounded. “Huh...?”

Lord Dale quickly jumped in to stop Zappa from saying anything further. “Zappa, I’m having second thoughts. Let’s not.”

“Why are you goin’ all weak at the knees?! This is your chance! If she can use magic, that means she’s a noble. What happens to this place if you don’t marry and leave us an heir?! And she’s cute, ain’t she?! You don’t dislike her or anything, right? *Right?!?*”

Everything was happening *way* too suddenly. Zappa’s disrespectful attitude did nothing to defuse the situation—it only caused more confusion. But something about Zappa’s suggestion seemed to bring a memory to the surface of Novem’s mind.

“So, *you* were the peeping tom from yesterday. That isn’t exactly commendable behavior.”

Zappa glared back at her. “Y-You’re in our settlement right now,” he snarled. “So what’s your problem?! Anyways, just hear me out. Something must have happened if you ended up working as an adventurer, right? Take his offer, and you’ll legally be the lady of House Pagan. You’ll have far more future prospects than you would as a wandering adventurer.”

Aria shook her head. “I... I’m not interested. I’m not even in a position to be married, seeing as I was sold and all.”

Lord Dale had been silent this whole time, but that line made him look at Aria and ask, “What do you mean by that?”

Aria glanced at Novem, who replied, “Due to certain circumstances, Miss Aria is technically the property of Lord Lyle. She also serves as a member of our adventurer party. These factors prevent her from being able to answer your request.”

Zappa backed off—but Lord Dale pushed him aside. “That’s just wrong!” he declared emphatically. “I don’t know the circumstances, but being treated as property... Miss Novem, was it? What are you to Lyle—?”

“I am his ex-fiancée. Currently, I serve by his side.”

The lord was clearly enraged. “He had someone like you, and yet he bought another woman...? Madam Aria, I could save you if you wanted.”

Being “saved” now would bring Aria nothing but trouble. She hadn’t told him about the bandits, or their subsequent subjugation, or how her own father had assisted the bandits, or how Lyle had saved her in the end. Perhaps Lord Dale was under the assumption that Lyle had used some vile means to claim her.

“No,” Aria began, “I’m perfectly fine as I am—”

But before she could finish, Paula rushed up to them.

“Dale, Zappa! The other three are back. It looks like we can avoid a battle!”

A delighted smile was on Paula’s face. She must have been relieved at the news. She’d probably raced around, searching for her friends so she could tell them as soon as possible.

But Lord Dale’s serious face took her aback.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

Zappa shrugged, but the lord’s shoulders were quivering with rage.

“I’m going to see Lyle,” Lord Dale said.

The four watched him as he stalked off, each of them harboring a different set of emotions.

“Cut the crap, you damn brat!” the founder screamed.

We were in a clearing a short distance from the settlement. Marks marred the earth; they seemed to be the remnants of some sort of magic practice. A fair number of locals had gathered in the clearing as well. They’d formed into a peanut gallery, their eyes riveted on the sight of two girls as they glared at one another.

Yes, you got that right—two girls were facing off within the clearing.

“I’ll never forgive you!” cried the first of them, spear clenched in her hand.

“That’s my line!” cried the second, battle-axe held at the ready.

The two girls...were Aria and Sophia.

How did it come to this...?

Turning to Novem, I asked, “What happened?”

She seemed frazzled.

Zelphy looked at Novem as well, waiting for an answer. “I’d like to know too,” she said. She seemed just as confused as I was. “The lord was screaming at Lyle as soon as we got back, and now Aria and Sophia are dueling for some reason.”

Once we’d returned, we’d told Paula that the negotiations had succeeded and asked her to get Dale. Paula had been overjoyed at the time. But a short while later, Lord Dale had returned. He’d been in a terrible rage for some reason, and he’d had a laundry list of complaints to dump on me. That much I could remember and understand.

But then, Sophia had stepped in.

“Enough out of you!” she’d shouted. “You’re going to act like this, after we went through so much trouble for you...? And Lyle, you’re no better! Get a grip! What are you hoping to accomplish, acting so spineless? You need to grow yourself a backbone.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I’d managed to reply.

It appeared my indecisiveness—or perhaps the fact that I’d just stood there and taken Lord Dale’s verbal barrage—had angered her.

Well, I thought, that's definitely on me.

I was working on fixing that part of myself, but being yelled at out of the blue still made me freeze up. I'd ended up just standing there as Lord Dale berated me, trying to figure out what exactly I'd done wrong.

Just as Sophia had finished yelling at me, Novem and Aria had come racing into the clearing, shoving themselves into the space between Sophia and I.

The conflict between Aria and Sophia had started not long after that. Sophia had been angry at me, and Aria had been angry at Sophia. Then Sophia had directed her anger back at Aria, and the two of them had egged each other on until they both burned with rage. In the end, it had resulted in...*this*.



“To tell you the truth, it all started when Lord Dale proposed to Aria,” Novem said. It appeared she’d decided to go over all the details from the very beginning. “Well, uh, he didn’t profess his love or anything. It was just about marriage.”

“We already know about that,” Zelphy said with a nod. “What I want to know is how we got here. And why our lassie is glaring at Sophia like that.”

We’d heard about Lord Dale’s sudden proposal on the way to the clearing. We’d also found out the reason that Zappa and his lord were glaring daggers at me. Apparently, they’d heard that I’d purchased Aria as a prostitute, and felt they couldn’t let such an action stand. Their lack of context was quite evident, so the whole thing was most likely a misunderstanding.

This didn’t stop the founder from descending into a shouting fit once he’d learned their reasoning, however.

“That greenhorn brat is gonna save her?! You’ve gotta be joking! Lyle, smack him! You’ve got my permission! He’s your enemy! Go on, send him flying!!!”

You know, I’d really rather not. That would just make things more complicated.

“I told Aria more about you last night, Lord Lyle. About your past. Now that she knows, I don’t think she can stand watching Sophia treat you that way.”

My eyes darted back out to where the two girls stood.

“What a kind girl my Aria is...” the founder moaned. He sounded like he was crying.

The seventh head wasn’t so supportive of her, however. He took Sophia’s side. “Lyle has to shoulder some of the blame, since he was practically ready to run the opposite direction when faced with anger he’d done nothing to deserve. Lyle, you mustn’t be moved no matter what that boy says to you. Sophia does have a point.”

Perhaps I really should have been more confrontational when Lord Dale had started berating me. I couldn’t deny the fact that all the yelling had made me nervous.

“You’re just being led astray by her nape!” the founder yelled at the seventh head. “Just look how concerned poor Aria is for Lyle!”

“What’s wrong with napes, goddammit?! And have you already forgotten Novem’s devotion?”

The inside of the Jewel was devolving into an uncivilized brawl, so I pushed my ancestors to the back of my mind. In the real world, the two warring women clutched at their weapons as they trash-talked one another.

“How about you treat Lyle a little better?! Aren’t you here to repay your debt to him or something?”

“Indeed I am. And it is precisely because I am indebted to him that I ought to point out the places where I find him lacking!”

Finally, they both strode toward each other, and the battle began. Sophia swung her heavy battle-axe in a horizontal arc, but Aria easily avoided her.

“Sure, start with that, then. Make that your first *repayment* when you haven’t even done anything else!”

Aria unleashed a volley of consecutive thrusts on Sophia, only for each of her blows to be caught on the body of the other woman’s battle-axe, which she held out in front of her like a shield. Sparks flew as metal clashed with metal.

“You’re in the same boat, aren’t you?! I know I’m dragging him down, but you’re no better!”

Sophia dove forward recklessly, swinging her battle-axe with all her might. But Aria deftly diverted the blow, sending Sophia tumbling.

“I know that! B-But...can’t you put it any other way?!”

“Aria’s doing all this for Lyle’s sake, eh?” the fifth head murmured from within the Jewel. “Well, I guess she *is* a good girl...”

“Isn’t she?!” the founder cried. He appeared overjoyed to have a new supporter. “Aria’s the best!”

“If she’s such a good girl,” the second head muttered, not nearly as pleased with her as the other two, “then I wish she wouldn’t cause problems. Sophia has a point. We already have Novem—we don’t need any more people spoiling

him. We need a harsh voice of reason.”

“Well, he’s already got a group of seven nitpickers in here,” the sixth head said jokingly.

They were harsh indeed. *Very* harsh. First, they’d criticize me with no care for my well-being, and then they’d quarrel so violently it caused me to keel over.

I wish they’d just give me a break...

Back on the battlefield, Sophia rose to her feet and lifted her battle-axe high. The weapon was a mass of pure metal—an incredibly heavy one, at that. She turned to Aria and said, “If what you’re doing is for his sake, then you shouldn’t waver. But I don’t need you to tell me what to do—I *will* repay the debt I owe him someday.”

Aria stood there, covered in mud, too overwhelmed to speak. It didn’t seem like she intended to put her weapon away, though...

As I watched them, I couldn’t help but mutter, “Umm, what exactly am I supposed to do?”

This question wasn’t just directed toward my ancestors; I was asking for Novem’s and Zelphy’s opinions as well.

My ancestors responded to me one after the other:

“Cheer for Aria!”

“It’ll be awkward if you support either of them...”

“All right, I got it now! Give them both a hug and leave it at that.”

“You seem like you’re having the time of your life, third head... Lyle, you should all just talk it out.”

“Handle your bombs carefully until they explode. And when they end up exploding, get the hell out of the way.”

“Oh, I know! Cheer for both of them!”

“Why don’t you just keep an eye out for a good chance to step in?”

Maybe I can step in before the fight gets too dangerous...

I looked down at my saber, ensuring I'd be able to jump into the fray the moment I saw an opening.

"Let 'em have at it," Zelphy said, placing a hand on my shoulder. "Looks like our little lady is a bit irritated with Sophia. It's important to give them the chance to let out their frustrations."

"Is that how it works?" Novem asked. "Isn't that a bit dangerous?"

Sparks were quite literally flying as the two girls swung their weapons at each other. Aria held out her left hand and cried, "Fire Bullet!"

A small orb of flame shot out, but Sophia simply smacked it aside with her axe.

"Not even close!"

In the time it took her to deal with the orb, Aria stepped in. The shaft of her spear met the shaft of Aria's axe, and then the two were glaring at each other face-to-face.

"Even I...know I'm not useful!" Sophia snarled. "So I need to do every little thing I can!"

Something happened then, at that moment. The atmosphere around Sophia suddenly changed.

The founder seemed to realize something. All of a sudden, he got interested in Sophia. "Oh, that girl's not half bad."

"Yeah, you're right," the second head agreed. "Lyle, keep your eyes peeled. You don't get to see this every day... An Art is about to manifest."

Seconds later, the battle-axe Sophia had been moving around so awkwardly seemed to grow weightless in her hands. She lifted it effortlessly with one hand as Aria—who'd been knocked backward—stared at her in shock.

Sophia seemed just as surprised as her opponent. As Aria regained her spear-fighting stance, Sophia gave the axe in her right hand an astonished look. Before, she'd hardly been able to swing the weapon with both hands, but now it seemed so light she could maneuver it easily with just one.

Zelphy whistled. "Is that the match? I never thought she'd awaken her Art."

She sounded like she was having a grand old time. “Is she strengthening herself? That’d make her a much more useful addition to the party.”

“No,” Novem immediately replied, “that doesn’t look like a strengthening Art to me.”

Novem’s right, I thought. It doesn’t look like her muscles are being reinforced.

“I agree with Novem,” the third said. “If I had to say...it looks like the axe got lighter. That’s an interesting Art.”

Just as the third head had said, it seemed it was the battle-axe that had changed, not Sophia herself.

Sophia tested the battle-axe in her hand, assessing its new weight. Then she shifted into a fighting stance and charged at Aria. Something about her was different than before. The lightness of the axe had made her movements sharper and faster.

Aria was on the defensive now. She could only dodge Sophia’s attacks as she struggled to find a way to break through her guard.

“In that case...”

“It’s over,” Zelphy said with a shrug. “Lyle, how about you stop them?”

I nodded. I was about to force my way into the battle when Novem pinched my sleeve. Her eyes were trained on Aria.

“Not yet.”

Then the founder started to scream in excitement. “Oh! It’s here, it’s here! This is it!”

His exuberant voice made me turn to Aria, wondering what exactly had happened. The red Gem on her neck was glowing...and her body was as well. A faint red light enveloped them both.

“Now we can’t tell who’s gonna win,” the sixth head groaned. “Plus, we’ve got to deal with the problem of how to stop them...”

Aria kicked off the ground, then seemed to completely vanish. But...that couldn’t be what had actually happened. She’d simply moved faster than she

ever had before.

A mere moment after Sophia raised her battle-axe to guard, Aria appeared in front of her. Aria's weapon sparked against Sophia's as she cried, "I won't let you beat me!"

Her Art must let her move quickly, I thought. That has to be it.

This Art wasn't one of the ones stored within her Gem, though. This was an Art for Aria alone.

Sparks filled the air as the girls' battle grew even more intense than before. Aria moved freely on nimble feet, attacking Sophia from all angles, while Sophia effortlessly blocked Aria's attacks with her battle-axe.

The battle stretched on for a while longer, until the third head finally heaved a sigh. "Yeah, that's enough. How about you stop them, Lyle? Once there's some distance between those two, you should use one of our Arts on them. Why don't you use the second head's Art, so you can apply Full Over to the both of them."

Wouldn't that just make them even stronger and more difficult to handle?

That's what I thought, at least, but the second head was on board with the third head's plan. Plus, none of my other ancestors seemed to disagree. I recalled, then, what had happened when I'd tried using the fourth head's Art on Zelphy and Sophia before.

"Oh, I didn't think of that option."

The founder was the only one who didn't seem to understand. "Hey, what're you saying's gonna happen?"

I ignored him and tried to find a good moment to use Full Over on the girls. Then, after a conspicuously large flurry of sparks burst from between their weapons, the two women finally pulled a decent distance apart. It was mostly Aria who had built up the space between them—she'd taken a great leap backwards, away from Sophia. Both girls were out of breath and drenched in sweat.

"Now's your chance, Lyle. Take a good look—this is what happens if you

suddenly use Arts on other people.”

I activated Full Over at a signal from the third head, using it to strengthen both of the girls.

And...

“I’ll end...this?!”

“That’s what you...think?!”

Both of the girls had kicked off the ground, then taken a nasty tumble only moments later. Aria fell forward, and Sophia fell backward. It was as if they’d arranged the whole thing beforehand. Moments later, dramatic sighs and jeers started coming from within the ranks of the peanut gallery. It seemed they weren’t fully satisfied that a fierce bout like that had ended with such a ridiculous conclusion.

“Ha ha ha,” the third head chuckled. “Pretty entertaining, huh? Their senses couldn’t keep up, so they were destined to tumble over themselves and fail at whatever they were doing. You’ll need to practice with your party a bit before you can go using your Arts on them, it seems.”

“You idiot, anyone would hesitate if they suddenly got stronger. Even more so if it was through a third party,” the second head said pointedly to the third head. “Anyways, do you understand how my Art works now, Lyle?”

I do, but aren’t the girls going to be angry with me once they realize what I did...?

But I could worry about that later. Right now, I needed to go and help the girls up off the ground.

“Miss Zelphy, let’s go lend them a hand. And Novem...can you boil some water and prepare to treat their wounds?”

“Certainly, milord,” Novem said with a smile.

“You did something, didn’t you, Lyle?” Zelphy mused. Apparently she wasn’t convinced that such a surreal conclusion could have taken place without some kind of outside interference.

I tried briefly to explain what I’d done, but quickly gave up and headed to help

our two downed comrades.

After the fight was over, my entire party had returned to the narrow hut where we were lodging. Novem had cast some healing magic on Aria and Sophia and readied hot water to help them wash off the grime they'd accumulated. I'd realized pretty quickly that there was no point in a man like me hovering around, so I'd gone outside and taken a seat on a wooden crate. Above me, a starry sky glittered; I didn't think I'd ever get sick of looking at it.

I was absentmindedly watching the sky when Zelphy came out of the hut.

"How are they doing?" I asked.

She told me that after they'd wiped off the dirt and had their wounds treated, they'd eaten and immediately fallen asleep. She said their bodies might still ache tomorrow; they might even experience Growth. If they did, she told me we'd have to lock them up.

"Lock them up?!"

Why would we have to treat them like that, just because they're entering a Growth period...?

Zelphy looked at me curiously. "Well, of course, we'd have to confine them. It'd be dangerous to let them prance around, high on their own power. We should do our best to keep them from leaving the hut. But well... Sometimes that just isn't possible."

What sort of Growth is bad enough to require all that? I had to wonder.

From what my ancestors had told me, Growth typically just filled you with energy and made you prone to mistakes you wouldn't usually make.

"It's different from person to person." Zelphy chuckled. "How was it with you?"

"W-Well, actually I—"

"No need to hide it. Did you do something you're too embarrassed to say?"

Paula walked up to the shed while we were in the midst of our conversation.

She looked rather apologetic. Zelphy folded her arms and greeted her with a stiff expression.

“U-Umm, you have my utmost apologies for what happened today!” Paula said, lowering her head apologetically.

“I don’t care who your comrade proposes to, but I’m not sure what to think about the fact that Lord Pagan made a pass at Aria even after he knew about the relationship she has with Lyle,” Zelphy complained. “There are some things we don’t want other people involved in. Could you give that boy a proper talking to?”

Paula looked at us with teary eyes. I mean, if you looked at it from her perspective, her lord had made the decision to propose to someone who’d come to their territory to secure the safety of their settlement. And he hadn’t proposed to just anyone—he’d proposed to Aria, whom I had supposedly purchased.

“I’m sorry,” Paula said miserably. “I’m really sorry!”

For a girl for age, she sure was having to go through a lot. Just as I was about to tell her that I forgave her, the second head spoke up, telling me to hold back.

“Lyle, you can’t just say you forgive them so easily. What are you even forgiving *her* for? Get that Pagan brat to come down and apologize himself. You were just doing your job, and that jerk...”

From the ancestors’ point of view, most people were kids and brats. They all looked just like they had in the prime of their lives, but even though they all looked pretty young, they were far older than they appeared. Except for the third head, perhaps—he’d been the only one of my ancestors to die in battle. He might have actually died around the age that he appeared.

“Hammer a fist into that brat’s face!” the founder raged. “Then, I’ll forgive him.”

But wouldn’t I be the one smacking him?

Honestly, I wasn’t so keen on that idea. At this point, I just wanted to finish my job and go home.

I looked at Paula and asked, “What did Lord Dale tell you?”

Her eyes filled with even more tears. “U-Umm... Please, don’t be angry when you hear this.”

Chapter 23: A Lovable Lord

I stood within the Jewel, surrounded by a group of thoroughly fed-up ancestors. Between the seven of them, they had plenty of lordly experience, and at this point they'd come to the conclusion that Lord Dale of House Pagan was completely hopeless.

Who's worse...? I wondered. Me or Lord Dale?

I decided not to ask. I didn't want to know if I was on the losing side of that comparison—it would wound me too deeply.

"I realized it the moment we met him," said the second head. "Lord Dale is the absolute worst."

Each of my ancestors seemed to have a horrible opinion of Lord Dale, though they all had their own reasons.

"I don't hate him as a person or as an individual," the third head added, "but as a lord, he's an utter disaster."

The message Paula had been sent to convey to me had been pretty outrageous. An individual had apparently posited that lords need not lower themselves by apologizing to mere adventurers—so Lord Dale had asked Paula to apologize to us in his stead. It didn't take much imagination to figure out who that individual might be.

"Well, I *am* an adventurer," I told them. "There's no denying that. Plus, shouldn't we take Lord Dale's willingness to listen to the opinions of his people into consideration? That would make him a good lord...wouldn't it?"

The fifth head shot me a sharp look, his lips curving into a frown. "Lyle, you don't understand a thing. Dale's not a bad sort—in fact, he's the kind of guy you'd want as a friend. But he's no lord."

"There's a difference between listening to the opinions of others and being a yes-man," the seventh head continued in an apathetic voice. "But that kid's problems go a lot deeper than that."

The sixth head nodded. “Everything from his clothes to the way he acts is a dead giveaway. He’s practically shouting, ‘I’m an ally of the people!’ The blatancy of it turns my stomach.”

The sixth head’s statement shocked me. He was usually so kind, and yet Lord Dale’s actions were enough to make him sick. Lord Dale seemed to be a pretty amicable young man if you asked me; he willingly worked alongside his people in the fields, and Paula had told us the residents of his settlement were overjoyed when he took his place as House Pagan’s lord.

“The brat’s clothes have nothing to do with it!” the founder roared, slamming his hands against the table. He was so fired up he smacked it a few more times. “Wants to save Aria, does he? Give her a better life than adventuring? Gimme a break! This settlement’s dirt-poor, no matter how you look at it! He has it even worse than I did!”

“Really?” I cocked my head to the side, thoughtful. “But even if his settlement’s pretty bad off, he couldn’t be poorer than me, could he? If Aria was willing...”

The founder just stared at me, dumbfounded. “How about you start tryin’ a bit harder then! Just the thought of Aria hooking up with that brat... It’s a nightmare!”

The fourth head adjusted his glasses. “It’s understandable, Lyle, that you struggle to see a feudal lord as poor. Their position allows them to collect taxes from those living within their lands, after all. The amount they can gather varies, though, depending on the size of their settlement. To be blunt, House Pagan is completely broke.”

“He’s right,” the third head said. He sounded quite knowledgeable in this particular field. “Though even small settlements can make a decent amount of money if they have other sources of income; say, for instance, local specialty products. But regardless, you should know that the expenses required to be a proper feudal lord are nothing to sneeze at. The lord’s got to have the money to pay for a whole variety of things, like hiring servants for the estate or providing the funds to entertain guests. Plus, they’ve got to find a way to pay for their own personal expenses as well. And on top of that, they’ve got to dress the part

—you may think it pointless, but it’s important you leave the right impression.”

It seemed I was in store for another of my ancestors’ lessons on the inner workings of society.

“It most certainly *isn’t* pointless,” the fourth head said firmly. “Clothing is a necessary expense. And that Lord Dale is a splendid boy! He lowered the taxes on his residents, dismissed his servants, and lives alone on his estate. He works his fields with his own hands and maintains close relationships with the citizens in his care. He’s a hard worker—one who takes initiative when there’s something that needs to be done. He’s even managed to cultivate a strong bond with the other residents around his age. He’d be the perfect addition to any settlement! But the fact remains that he isn’t a normal citizen—he’s the lord.”

And because he’s the lord...all that stuff is bad?

“Umm, judging by everyone’s tone, you guys think the fact that Lord Dale does all that stuff makes him a bad lord, right? But what’s so bad about the way he’s acting?”

“Everything,” the second head declared.

“*Everything*?! What do you mean? Wasn’t there even a little bit of good in there?”

The second head pressed an exasperated hand to his brow. “Listen up, Lyle. As long as a feudal lord receives taxes from their people, they are honor bound to carry out the duties of their position. Do you think those duties are something that can just be thrown out the window?”

“You see people like Dale now and then,” the fifth head added. “People that’ve found themselves in the wrong sort of place in life. He’d make for a reliable citizen, but as a lord, he’s nothing but trouble.”

The third head was smiling, but something about the look on his face terrified me. “Until recently, he was just a second son and his elder brother’s spare. But now that he’s a lord, his actions are going to cause this settlement to implode. That’s just the honest truth. I can sympathize with him over how House Pagan lost all the members that were holding it together in Bentler’s war, but...he’s

still got a settlement to run. That's how I feel, at least."

"If Dale had wanted to, he could have asked Bentler for help," the second head said. He looked at me over his folded arms. "The kid could have relied on the relationships he'd built with the nearby lords. I mean, you heard that Medard guy, didn't you? He knew that Dale would have trouble taking over House Pagan, so he went around apologizing to the other lords in his stead."

"Was it really necessary for Lord Medard to do all that work, though? Is it that important for Lord Dale to establish relationships with the other lords?"

"Well," the fourth head said thoughtfully, "such politicking should be done in moderation, I'll admit. You have to consider that there are some bad lords out there, the kind who bring suffering upon their own people. There are far too many of them, in fact. You wouldn't want to associate with that sort."

So, lords like that do exist. I knew it.

The third head leaned into a stretch as he said, "Sometimes those who are born into their positions don't quite get what being a lord is all about. This system doesn't just rely on lords and nobles—the populace is an important part as well."

"Really?" I asked.

The fifth head picked up where the third head had left off, his voice flat and bored. "The populace serves their lord by paying them taxes, and the lord is bound to serve them in return. Lords are expected to secure the safety of their people, and to use their status to act as a higher authority during times of trouble. For instance... Let's say Aria and Sophia were fighting again, and they couldn't come to any sort of resolution. Last time, you intervened because you didn't want them to fight anymore, right?"

"Y-Yeah, I guess."

"Do you think their reasons for fighting have vanished, just because you forced them to stop? They haven't. But if you ordered them to knock it off, they'd listen to you, because they respect your authority as party leader."

"Nah, they might hold back out of love," the sixth head teased.

“The reason they listen to you doesn’t matter!” the fifth head said, irritated. “My point is that someone in your group has to be the mediator—for moments like that in particular. As Sophia said, you need to grow yourself a spine. The lives of your comrades are in your hands.”

He has a point. Maybe it really is unforgivable that I’ve been acting like such a weakling...

The fifth head cleared his throat, then continued, “Lyle, there will be times when your comrades’ opinions are divided. When a time like that comes, you will be the one who has to make the hard decisions. Someone might be unhappy with the results, but for the party to survive and to make money, someone needs to make the calls.”

“Novem, Aria, and Sophia...” the seventh head said. “It would be difficult to make a choice that satisfied all of them, don’t you think? Right now you’ve only got to manage the feelings of three people, but what are you going to do if you pick up two or three more party members?”

“Someone’s going to be unhappy with the way you run things,” the sixth head declared. “They might even decide to go off and do their own thing.”

“Running a party is the same as acting as a feudal lord, Lyle,” the third head said. “Think of Novem, Aria, and Sophia as your citizens. They’ll follow you because they know you’re doing your best to keep the group alive. If all four of you held the same status within the group, then you wouldn’t be able to get anywhere when your opinions started to contradict one another. In that situation, it’d be hard to survive the day, let alone successfully make a profit.”

He was summarizing the fifth head’s point for me, I realized. I felt like I could grasp at least part of what they were saying. Just like a party leader, a feudal lord held a position of authority. And just like a group of party members trusted their leader, the populace trusted their lord to make the important decisions.

“Oh, but... Wait... Commoners can’t choose their birth, can they? They can’t elect a lord like our party elected a leader.”

The fourth head just shook his head. “We’re only speaking in hypotheticals. No one can choose their birth—and that includes the lord. Everyone must live with the hand they have been dealt.”

“In short,” the second head concluded, “the very nature of being a lord means that it’s impossible to satisfy all those you are responsible for. Even so, Dale must move to set that settlement in a better direction even if the change is small, and even if his people don’t agree with his reasoning. They don’t need a close friend—they need someone to protect and lead them. They’ve given that boy the authority to change their course, and thus alter their lives for the better. Though that fact can sometimes be easy to forget.”

How many lords out there were truly conscious of the responsibility they held? Was it not the lords, who’d been born into their power, who would fall more easily to corruption? I could envision that sort of lord in my mind’s eye—a man who tormented his people even as he wrung taxes from their hands, who never spared a moment to consider the needs of those he was obligated to care for. And Lord Dale...he was no different. Perhaps he was even worse, since he had seemingly abandoned any and all of his decision-making duties.

The third head smiled, raising an index finger. “Incidentally, the people’s ideal lord would be...”

“Someone strong!” the founder declared.

“Someone who doesn’t tax,” the second head said with a sneer.

The fourth head thought a bit and answered, “Someone who views the safety of their people as their top priority.”

“Someone who doesn’t bother getting involved in their daily lives,” said the fifth head.

The sixth head stroked his beard, then added, “But who lends his people aid in their times of need, free of charge.”

The seventh head folded his arms before finally saying, “Someone who doesn’t go to war.”

“And yet,” the third head said, spreading his arms wide, “a lord’s ideal citizen is practically the complete opposite. A lord is looking for someone who is willing to pay them piles of tax money, who doesn’t quarrel with others, who doesn’t raise arms against their lord, and who listens to everything they say. From the very beginning, the two sides are searching for something fundamentally

different than the other is willing to provide.”

A horrible discrepancy indeed.

Such ideal citizens and lords didn’t exist—that was probably the only point the two sides would ever be able to agree on. There was no such thing as a populace willing to pay taxes to a lord who did nothing beyond collecting their coin; nor was there a lord who didn’t tax his people.

The third head let out a slight laugh before growing serious. “Since neither side can get what they want, they have to find a compromise. Everyone thinks their own desires are the most important, but you can’t live a decent life like that. It’s a harsh truth, but someone needs to have the final say.”

I looked at the seven men gathered before me. “So...you’re basically saying that running a party or a house is the same as appeasing all seven of you at the same time.”

I could see clearly now just how difficult it was to get an entire group on the same page. I mean, all seven of these men came from the Walt family line, and yet they could never agree on anything.

“Precisely,” the fifth head said, scoffing. “You must be starting to grasp it now, if you’re sensible enough to snark about it. All lords hold the responsibility of leading their groups in the right direction, although they may go about the task differently. That responsibility is why they take taxes. Their people may despise them at times, but that’s a part of the job. From time to time, though, you’ll find someone who just does whatever they want, and people follow them regardless.”

The fourth head nodded. “Yes, that I understand. Those who naturally possess such high levels of charm and charisma are indeed out there somewhere... They’re the sort we can only be envious of—the type who gain followers just by existing.”

“Wow...” marveled our founder. “There are seriously people like that?”

“Unbelievable...” muttered the sixth head.

Hearing the shock in their voices, the second head, fifth head, and seventh head plunged their heads into their hands.

“Damn it,” the second head muttered. “Why does a guy like him...?”

“It’s the worst when they don’t realize it themselves,” the fifth head said in disgust.

The seventh head sighed. “If only they’d understand how hellish it is to take over from them...”

To my surprise, it appeared House Walt had its own charismatic leaders—the founder and the sixth head.

“I don’t know that I believe that,” I told them. “I just can’t imagine it.”

The third head nodded. “Well, I can’t blame you for that. Just know that people with that level of charm pop up now and again. People who everyone just seems to obey.”

Ceres’s face flashed across the surface of my mind.

A girl who can charm anyone, who has everyone at her beck and call...

But...I didn’t want to admit it to myself.

“Our darling little Dale, however,” the third head continued, face serious, “doesn’t have any special charisma. At most, his is above average. And the way things are going, his house is going to face some problems in the near future. I don’t know if he’ll be able to handle them when they come.”

“All right, that’s enough,” the fourth head said. “Let’s leave it at that. What we’re trying to say is...”

“Yes?”

“Don’t stick your head into other people’s problems. You have your own party to look after. Do you really think you have enough time to sort out a stranger’s issues when you already have so many of your own? Your job’s essentially done, so just let it go. That is to say... House Pagan’s issues are no easy thing to handle, and we gain nothing by involving ourselves in the troubles of a hopeless lord.”

It seems my ancestors are all in agreement in this matter. But I wonder...is this truly where my quest comes to an end?

I couldn't shake the feeling that the seven men before me had some sort of knowledge on how to resolve Lord Dale's problems. Regardless, it was evident that they had no intention of offering their help. The decision felt cold to me, but I knew I couldn't do anything all by myself. It was a simple reminder of an unavoidable truth—I didn't have what it took to play the role of storybook hero.

"I sure am being called into the Jewel a lot lately," I grumbled to myself.

It was the morning after Aria and Sophia's fight, and at the moment I was staring at the flimsy cloth which partitioned my room off from the rest of the hut. My other party members were located on the other side.

I got up and headed out the front door, only to see Aria, who'd apparently also woken early. She was hobbling around, using her spear like a cane. I could see her legs shaking; her body must have still ached from the day before.

"Are you okay?" I asked her.

"Huh?!" she cried in surprise. She tried to turn in my direction, but she cried out as pain overwhelmed her. "Ow! Goddesses, that smarts!" She collapsed into the dirt.

I rushed over and tried to lift her up by her shoulders, but she squeaked at the movement.

"Eep!"

"S-Sorry!"

Panic filled me, but then the second head's voice filtered into my head from the Jewel. "Lyle, she's not experiencing Growth. She just overused her Art right after it manifested. Why don't you have her rest for the day?"

Aria's eyes were teary when they caught mine. "I should be the sorry one, not you. My body hurts even more than it did before... I came out here because I wanted to see if I could grasp that sensation I felt yesterday again, but...my body's not letting me."

"That's understandable," the fourth head said. "Unlike me, she's got a combat-oriented Art—one that gifts her an explosive burst of speed. Give her a

day...scratch that, *two* days off and she should be fine.”

“Oh, what I’d give for an Art like that,” the third said with a longing sigh. “Frontline arts have that *oomph* to them. You’re stronger from the moment you fire them off. My Art is far too plain in comparison.”

“Don’t tell such falsehoods!” the fourth head broke in. “Of all of our Arts, yours is the nastiest.”

Ignoring the droning voices of my ancestors, I helped Aria to her feet.

“Go on,” I told her. “Use my shoulder.”

As I lent her my body to lean on, I tried not to strain her muscles any further. She still seemed to be in quite a bit of pain; at some point during her desperate struggle to endure, she’d broken out into a cold sweat. I tightly wrapped my arm around her waist, attempting to fix her joints into place. Aria’s complexion improved ever-so-slightly after the adjustment, her face going from a sickly pale to a healthier tinge of faint red.

“Thank you, Lyle.”

We had slowly started trudging forward, moving toward the hut, when someone came rushing in our direction. Two people, in fact—Lord Dale and Zappa.

“See, Dale? I told you!” Zappa cried. Apparently he’d been the one to bring Lord Dale here.

“You bastard!” Lord Dale roared. The lord clenched his fist, drew it back, and...

“Who do you think you’re pickin’ a fight with, kid?!”

The founder’s roar snapped me back to my senses, and I managed to divert his punch with the hand that wasn’t supporting Aria. The lord hadn’t held back—he’d punched me with all his might.

“Um, Lord Dale... What was that for?”

My body had jerked when I’d blocked Lord Dale’s attack, and the resulting movement had left Aria quivering, her eyes full of tears. Her body must have been aching something awful.

“You made her cry!” Zappa screeched, pointing at Aria. “I saw it myself!”

But alas, Aria was in no state to take him seriously. Apparently, she just wanted to lie down as quickly as possible.

“Oh, give me a break,” she mumbled, voice quavering. “Seriously. It hurts... It *really* hurts. So please, just...just stop, okay? Ugh, now you’ve got me sweating again...” Her voice was so faint I doubted Zappa or Lord Dale could hear her, and sweat was pouring from her skin even faster than before. I couldn’t leave her like this.

Zappa drew in close to me, his fist clenched and a grin on his face.

“How about I give this spoiled city brat a taste of reality!” he snarled. “You think you’re all high and mighty, huh, now that you’ve surrounded yourself with women?!”

Does he have some sort of grudge against me?

To be frank, it would be unbelievably annoying if he did.

“So says the small-town bully,” the third head said, laughing. Despite his mirth, his voice was throaty and low. “Lyle, why don’t you teach him a lesson. Show that boy how weak he really is.”

Zappa swung at me in a wide arc. He was faster than Lord Dale and had more force behind his blow, but he was still easy for me to avoid. I grabbed his arm and swept his leg out from under him, making him trip and fall to the ground.

“You little...! You think you’re better than me?!”

Zappa was...well...not the scariest of opponents. The vassals back home had harder fists. He didn’t seem nearly as strong as he made himself out to be.

Lord Dale rushed to Zappa’s side to help him back to his feet. Aria was grasping at my clothing now, her breath coming in heavy pants.

“Excuse me,” she managed, “I’m in quite a lot of pain right now, so we’ll listen to what you have to say later. We can fight after that, if you still feel the need.”

“Hold on!” Lord Dale cried, grabbing my shoulder. He shook me back and forth, jolting my body in multiple different directions. Aria shook with me, her condition worsening with each sharp movement. At this point, Lord Dale was

glaring at me. “What are you going to do with—?”

“Shut the hell up, you bloody half-wits!”

The gravelly, threatening tone of Aria’s voice caused all three of our gazes to lock onto her face. One of her eyebrows was twitching as she glared over at Lord Dale and Zappa, though I’d be hard-pressed to tell if she was amused or furious.

“You’ve got some nerve, showing up here so early in the morning! And I haven’t forgotten about how you acted toward Lyle yesterday! If you were gonna come here, you shoulda started by apologizing to all of us! You should be kneeling with your face in the dirt, begging for our forgiveness, you absolute cretin!”

Her gangster-esque tone had reduced all the ancestors to silence. Except the founder, that is.

“Aria, my dear,” he pleaded. “Please don’t talk like that. It’s...not good for girls to speak that way, I think.”

You think?! Be a bit more assertive about it, will you?!

It appeared that Aria had spoken with more than enough intensity to leave my ancestors stunned. Even I struggled to find any words. Zappa and Lord Dale stood in front of us, faces blank, their mouths opening and closing silently.

“I mean, w-we just heard the screams, so we ran over and—”

Zappa and Lord Dale looked at one another.

“W-We both heard her, right?!” Zappa whispered nervously. Lord Dale nodded at Zappa, then Zappa nodded at Lord Dale. Then both men nodded at each other again. “That’s why we came over here.”

This response caused Aria to yell at them even louder than before. “My body is in goddamn agony! Instead of punching us over some stupid misunderstanding, how about you hurry up and get lost, you useless pieces of trash! No one called for you! Read the damn room! Now scram unless you want to be speared through!”

The two men left—or fled in a hurry, rather—while Aria took some deep

breaths, trying to collect herself. She looked at me and said, “Th-That was...pretty scary when they suddenly tried to punch us, right? I kinda lost myself there.”

As she smiled at me through her pain, I was left with nothing to do but agree.

“Yeah...” I replied. “I did get a bit scared.”

I couldn’t tell Aria that *she* was the scary one. Not to her face. But yeah...she definitely was.

Sorry, I thought at her, but I think you’re terrifying.

After I returned to the hut and laid Aria down on her mat, I noticed Sophia was writhing in discomfort on the next mat over. It seemed like every time she tried to move, pain raced through her. Every once in a while her body twitched as if she was being jabbed.

“Oww!” she moaned.

Novem moved over to the mats. “You’ll be fine,” she murmured to her in reassurance. “Just stay in bed and rest for a while. You can tell me or Miss Zelphy if you need anything.”

I was certain Novem, Zelphy, and Sophia had heard the commotion outside, but they didn’t bother bringing it up. No one mentioned my quarrel with Lord Dale, or all the stuff Aria had yelled.

Novem was tending to Aria and Sophia by herself, so I hesitantly raised a hand and asked her, “Is there anything I can do?”

Zelphy scratched at her head, thoughtful.

“No, we’re fine, milord,” Novem replied, turning me down gently. She seemed troubled. “Can you handle the work outside?”

The fourth head’s sigh rattled in my ear. “Lyle, why don’t you let the girls look after the girls? There are some things women would prefer the other sex go without knowing.”

Really...? I wondered as I walked back out of the hut.

I had nothing better to do, so I decided to take a stroll through the settlement. The first two days we'd been here, I'd been too busy to get a good look.

It wasn't long before I spotted Lord Dale; he was helping an old woman carry a heavy parcel.

"Let me handle it, ma'am."

"Thank you kindly, dear."

Other citizens greeted him as he passed by, warm smiles on their faces. He smiled at them in return, children gathering around his feet as he did.

"Hey, Mister Dale, let's play!"

"There's still a good amount of work that needs to be done out in the fields," he told the kids with an awkward smile. "You'll have to wait until next time."

As far as I could tell, Lord Dale's populace adored him. I just couldn't find it in myself to think of him as a terrible lord, even though my ancestors were convinced he was hopeless. He *had* tried to hit me, but only because he'd thought I'd made Aria cry. Taking that into consideration... Perhaps he was a decent guy after all. As far as being a decent lord, though, I couldn't say.

As I watched him from afar, I muttered to myself, "He seems like a good person."

"His people love him," the second head muttered. "I can see why they pinned all their hopes on him when he first inherited."

"Then everything will turn out okay, won't it? I feel like things will work themselves out, one way or another."

"Like I care!" the founder cried, aggravated. It seemed he was still angry that Lord Dale had proposed to Aria. "I hate him! Just look what he made her do... It's *his* fault she got all worked up and said all those things..."

"I don't know, I think that came pretty naturally to her," the third head said awkwardly. "I mean, she enjoys working up a sweat, and she doesn't stress herself out over the small stuff. Plus, she's pretty quick to throw hands, isn't she? I feel like that's just who she is."

“You’re wrong!” the founder wailed. “Aria’s a proper lady, goddammit!”

He sounded like he was on the brink of tears. Not that I cared, but the sight of an old man crying was one that I’d prefer to avoid.

I went ahead and tuned my ancestors out, my eyes dancing over the tranquil rolling scenery, the smiling people of House Pagan, and Dale Pagan, their lord.

Chapter 24: Getting Along

Back in the narrow hut where Lyle's party was staying, noon had already zipped by. Aria and Sophia still lay on their mats, feeling just as bad as they had when they'd woken that morning. Novem had smeared an herbal paste over their bodies which was meant to numb their pain before she and Zelphy had gone out, leaving the two girls to their own devices. The harsh smell of the paste filled the air as they both gazed at the hut's ceiling.

The hut was filled with the sounds of the two girls' grunts and groans. Neither of them could move a single muscle without causing their bodies to ache. According to what Novem had told them, their bodies were being reconfigured so that they were in the optimum condition to utilize their Arts. Apparently, in order to use Arts, your physical makeup had to be tailored to the ability you manifested. Neither of the girls had heard anything about such a thing before.

A long silence passed between them, and then Aria spoke.

"Hey."

Sophia started to turn to face Aria. "What is—?" Pain hit her, and she cried out. "O-Ow..."

Their bodies were still in tatters since they'd overused their newly acquired Arts.

Aria craned her neck, trying to get a look at Sophia's pained face, but...

"Ungh!"

Agony raced through every fiber of her being.

Sophia couldn't help but giggle at the sound of Aria's grunt. This led to further agony, which led to even more writhing.

Restraining any further urge to laugh, Sophia asked Aria, "Wh-What is it? Did you...*urgh*...have something you wanted to ask me?"

"Y-Yes, I did! Why do you speak so harshly to Lyle? Be a bit more gentle with

his feelings next time, all right?”

Novem had told Sophia the details of Lyle’s past, but knowing them didn’t change her opinion. “There are some parts of his story I sympathize with,” she told Aria. “But what does that matter? When you want to make your feelings clear, it’s better to be harsh about it.”

“You’re—!” Aria’s voice came out high-pitched and vehement, the force of it sending pulses of agony through her. She mumbled a soft “Ow...” before falling silent for a moment. She laid there quietly, waiting for sweat to stop beading on her skin.

After a few labored breaths, they resumed their conversation. They hadn’t moved an inch, and yet both of them were drenched in sweat.

“If you always spoil him, it’ll hold him back,” Sophia told Aria.

“I just think you’re being way too harsh out of nowhere,” Aria immediately shot back.

Sophia whispered, “You may be right.” But she had no intention of changing her attitude. “I don’t really understand how to be kind about it,” she said, her voice a bit sorrowful. “Back when I lived at House Laurie, my grandfather was always harsh with me. He didn’t hesitate to smack me around. There was a time when I thought that was perfectly normal.”

Aria recalled her own father.

My father was still kind when I was little, so he never hit me, Aria realized.

Struck by the thought, Aria found she no longer had it in her to criticize Sophia for acting the way she had.

“He was overprotective,” Sophia went on. “Or maybe it would be more accurate to call him old-fashioned. Regardless, thanks to him, I spent most of my time in the courtyard of our estate when I was growing up. On the rare times my father took me outside its walls, my grandfather was at his throat. I hated to see him that way. By the time I realized that I’d hardly ever spoken to anyone else my own age, it was too late to change anything. Every time I asked them about it, they’d just tell me I had to stay isolated because I was a girl waiting for her wedding day.”

It seemed that Sophia's life had been quite a strict one, even though not everyone around her was unkind.

"I always thought you were weirdly stiff and formal with everyone," Aria told her. "I guess that's the reason why."

Silence fell between them for a moment before Sophia muttered, "Honestly, I'm envious of you."

"Why's that?" Aria asked.

Aria couldn't think of anything about herself that Sophia could be envious of. She was a daughter of a fallen house, her father had been sentenced to harsh labor in punishment for assisting a group of bandits, and in the eyes of society, she was considered a prostitute. Even if it was only for appearances, it was no less shameful.

"But...when you were abducted by the bandits, Lyle saved you, didn't he? You had someone who was willing to come to your rescue. I envy that," Sophia confessed. She sounded ashamed.

This answer took Aria completely by surprise. She choked on air, then burst out laughing. "Ha ha... Agh! Ha ha ha... Hraaaagh!"

The more she laughed, the more her chest ached. The more her chest ached, the more the pain in her body stirred to life. By the time she stopped laughing, her whole body was in agony. She writhed with it, screaming as her pain surged.

When Sophia saw Aria's reaction, she flew into a rage.

That jerk's making fun of me, she thought.

"Wh-What's so funny about—? Hnnngh!"

The two of them made a mutual decision to wait for the pain to wear off before they continued. When they spoke again, their breathing was all over the place, making it hard for them to speak.

"Sure, he saved me...but it's not like...he really cares about me...as a person," Aria panted, teary-eyed from the pain. "We don't...have the sort of relationship...you're thinking about..."

"The result...is the same," Sophia panted back, equally badly off. "A-And...I

hear you...got a marriage proposal. It must be nice...to have so many men...courting you. I'm...jealous."

Having finally caught her breath, Aria replied, "That didn't make me happy at all. I mean, the lord's got someone else he likes anyways."

"He does?"

"That's right. Umm, Paula, was it? Sometimes you can catch that Dale guy looking at her with this conflicted look on his face. The only reason he went after me was because he wanted my magician's blood. It's idiotic. He wouldn't have acted that way if he knew how worthless the Lockwood bloodline has become."

Sophia fell silent. Now that Aria had mentioned her family name, Sophia remembered the situation Aria's father had put her in.

A short time passed, then she said, "I'm sorry, Aria. It was silly of me to say I envied you without considering the circumstances you're in..."

"Don't worry about it," Aria answered. "I'm an adventurer now, thanks to Lyle. I wanted to thank him, you know. But...I'm just completely useless. I figured being nice to him was the least I could do."



“Honestly, I’m always wondering if I’m just using Lyle,” Sophia said, the words coming straight from her heart. “I might as well forget repaying my debts. At this point, I’m just dragging him down and forcing him to look after me on top of everyone else. It’s pathetic. I tried to figure out what else I could possibly offer him, but being firm with him about his faults was all I could think of...”

They’d been thinking the exact same thing! Upon realizing this, the girls burst out laughing. Their laughter was almost immediately interrupted by agony, though, and they began to writhe once more...

I stood in front of our hut with a pail of water in hand.

“Can I go in yet?” I asked. My ancestors had instructed me not to enter.

The second head seemed like he was getting fed up with me, but he agreed to let me go inside. He told me that I should wait a little longer, though.

“If you go in there now, Lyle, they’ll think that you overheard them.”

“But...I did overhear them.”

Indeed, the girls had been speaking—and yelping and groaning—loud enough that I could hear them from my place outside the hut. I’d been listening when the topic of their conversation had drifted to me.

“Don’t you say a word to them about how you eavesdropped, Lyle,” the fourth head cautioned me. “Got it?”

“Yes, sir.”

At this point, I was already used to people insulting me behind my back, and I didn’t mind when people gossiped about me. Until recently, I’d had to deal with the servants and vassals of House Walt spreading malicious lies about me on a daily basis. Whenever they complained about me, they’d always compare me to Ceres. I’d gradually learned to just live with it. It occurred to me, now, that perhaps they’d meant for me to hear the awful things they said. They could have been purposely speaking in places where they’d known I would pass by.

But this time was different. I felt strangely embarrassed. The way Aria and Sophia had talked about me had made me feel...treasured.

The founder's choked voice filtered into my ears as I stood there, waiting to go inside. "Aria, you were thinking so much about how to support Lyle..."

Maybe our founder just cries strangely easily...?

"Is that really something you should be crying about?" asked the third head. "More importantly, Lyle...good for you."

"What do you mean?" I asked, cocking my head in confusion.

The fifth head sighed. "You've got some fine women around you, even though they're kind of awkward. I'm not going to tell you to marry them, but you'd better treat them well."

"Hey, don't be so wishy-washy! Just marry Aria!" the founder demanded. "She's such a wonderful girl!"

"Well, I mean...you've got to take Lyle into consideration, you know." The sixth head's voice seemed troubled. "He doesn't have that kinda resolve, and they're not anywhere near that stage yet..."

It was clear that as far as my ancestors were concerned, I was completely unreliable.

Maybe that's why they get so anxious about me...

"The sixth head's right," I told them. "I mean, I don't even know if I can make Novem happy, let alone... Hey, it seems pretty quiet in there. Guess I'll go in."

I stepped into the hut. Aria and Sophia were both sound asleep, exhausted either from their conversation or the writhing that had followed.

It had been four days now since we had arrived at House Pagan's settlement. Aria and Sophia had both recovered from their injuries, and so we'd decided to try and fight some monsters in the nearby forest. We'd tried to get Lord Dale's permission, since we were in his territory, but...

"No can do. The materials and Demonic Stones in our territory belong to the settlement. We're taking an eighty percent cut."

As luck would have it, Zappa had arrived while we'd been speaking with Lord Dale at his manor. He'd intruded on our conversation and immediately brought

up the subject of loot distribution.

“Zappa, they’ll be the ones defeating the monsters,” Lord Dale said, sounding just as troubled as we were. “Can’t we at least give them half? Actually, why don’t we just let them have the Stones? We can use the materials to—”

“Why do you always have to be like this?!” Zappa screamed. “You’re the same with the baron’s soldiers. Those bastards make off with everything and don’t spare us a second glance. It’s that attitude of yours that makes them look down on you!”

Lord Dale appeared unable to refute this claim.

I ran my fingers over the Jewel, wordlessly asking for my ancestors’ opinion on the situation.

The founder was the first to respond. “You want my take? I hate guys like that! If it was me, I’d say something like... *Ahem*, ‘You gotta be screwing with me, demanding half of the spoils when you haven’t even lifted a blade!’”

The second head chose to ignore the founder’s point. “This *is* Dale’s territory,” he said. “Making a decision like this is within his rights. But—and this has been bugging me for a while—he doesn’t have any decent supervisors.”

“Lyle, supervisors are indispensable to running a village,” the fourth head explained. “You know how some commoners have last names, like chieftains and officials? Zappa here’s a good example; he acts as the head of the village youth.”

The third head took over the explanation from here, his voice drowsy and uninterested. “Essentially, supervisors are the ones who really manage a settlement or village. If they’ve got a good handle on things, that makes the lord’s job a lot easier. Sometimes you’ll find a supervisor that’s even more capable than their lord. Oh, I can’t tell you how envious I am of places that have subjects like that...”

“On the other hand,” the fourth head added tiredly, “*this* is what you get when you have a supervisor that’s completely hopeless. A strong lord would normally have just brushed Zappa’s opinion firmly aside.”

“It’s Dale’s fault for making him a supervisor, end of story,” the fifth head spat

coldly.

This brought to mind the supervisors Lord Dale had elected for his settlement: Paula and Zappa. Both were young and unreliable, but I didn't think the problem was with their ages. They were both just unreliable in general.

Not that I'm one to talk...

At this point, Zelphy had grown irritated with Lord Dale. "Fine, I've got it," she growled. "It's part of their training, in any case. We'll take twenty percent of anything we get. If you'll allow it, I'd like to take our pay in Demonic Stones. They're easier to carry."

Lord Dale looked apologetic, while Zappa looked triumphant—*too* triumphant.

"You fool..." snarled the second head. But his low, threatening voice didn't seem to be directed at Zappa.

He's speaking to Lord Dale, I realized.

It was clear at this point that Lord Dale had trouble contradicting anything Zappa said. Part of it was probably that Zappa was older, and the lord looked up to him like he would an older brother.

Is this nonsense over the loot distribution Zappa's way of getting back at me? I wondered.

I couldn't be sure. Regardless, it was obvious my ancestors couldn't stand how receptive Lord Dale was to Zappa's opinions.

Not long after our discussion with Lord Dale, our party made its way to the forest. We'd worn less armor than we typically did, which made it easier for us to move through the wooded terrain. The forest itself wasn't too far from the settlement, but we'd loaded all our belongings into the wagon and taken them with us anyway. The hut had been left empty.

Zelphy scanned the area around us. She was wearing leather armor, a shield held in her left hand and a sword held in her right. She leaned the sword against her shoulder as she said, "First lesson. When you're far away from home,

whether you're staying in a village, settlement, fort, or even a camp in the wilderness, *always* make sure you look after your belongings. It doesn't matter where you are—when you're going to be away from wherever you're lodging, make sure you take your stuff with you or leave a lookout to watch over it."

Sophia's head drooped. "It's depressing to think about, but someone might turn out to have sticky fingers."

"It's in everyone's best interest to be careful," Zelphy said with a nod. "Sometimes an adventurer's equipment can be quite expensive. A local might think they'd only be committing a petty crime if they snatched an item or two, only to find out later they'd unknowingly committed a much more serious crime with a much heavier sentence. Just make sure you manage your belongings so nothing gets stolen. Oh, and from time to time, you might come across people who act especially nice to you in order to get you to leave your things with them. Be *very* careful with folks like that."

Zelphy paused as an insectoid monster burst from a thicket of trees. It was pretty close to us, since we'd been chatting by the forest edge. "Well," she said, "here they come!"

Our foe was a moth, its wings stretching around two feet across. It fluttered about, looking like it would start gnashing at us at any moment, as drool oozed from its mandibles.

Zelphy lifted her sword from her shoulder and held it up in the air before slamming it down onto the moth. She'd used the body of the sword instead of its sharp edge, so the move was more of a bash than a slash. It was almost like watching someone swat a fly.

"See that?" Zelphy asked. "Knocking them down is pretty effective. It's better than stabbing them and scattering their fluids everywhere, at least. Plus, stabbing and slashing at moths tends to cause them to get stuck on your blade, and it's a pain to get them off. Especially if you end up fighting a bunch of them at once."

Zelphy deftly pulled on her gloves, then picked up the moth. She extracted a red Demonic Stone from the monster's body, then tore off its wings to keep as material.

“Also...I’m sure you all understand this already, but don’t you *dare* use fire or lightning magic while you’re in a forest. We don’t want a forest fire on our hands. Every once in a while some idiot will try burning down an entire forest so he can kill all the monsters inside it. The monsters living in the forest go fleeing in every direction, which ends up causing anyone nearby heaps of trouble.”

Apparently, if someone decided to burn a forest down, they’d just cause the monsters inside to escape and wreak havoc upon the surrounding lands. It seemed forests could conceal a surprisingly high number of monsters. Some of those monsters could be particularly vicious, and had been known to go around destroying nearby villages once driven from their territories.

Novem looked around, seeming to pick up on something. “Come to think of it, there don’t appear to be any elves in this forest. It seems overgrown and hard to navigate.”

Elves were said to be the most beautiful of the demi-human races. They rarely settled in one place, and were typically thought of as belonging to one of two groups—the hunter-gatherer elves who kept to the forests, or the entertainer elves who traveled from one city to the next. As was their nature, neither group held any permanent residence. It was most common to run across the city-dwelling elves in everyday life; they were mostly performers who earned their bread with song and dance.

Zelphy put away the Demonic Stone and the materials she’d gotten from the moth and said, “If elves were living here, there’d be far fewer monsters, and the forest would be better maintained. Keep in mind, though, that elves are more trouble than they’re worth.”

Aria cocked her head. “Demi-humans’re pretty buddy-buddy...” She paused for a moment, clearly struggling with how to speak to Zelphy when the older woman was in work mode, before managing to rephrase herself. “I mean, demi-humans get along well with humans, don’t they? So why do you think the elves are a problem?”

“The performers aren’t too bad, but the forest elves are more impulsive. You’re safe as long as you don’t do anything stupid. The thing is, forest elves are obsessed with gathering information on the outside world. If they catch you,

you won't be leaving anytime soon."

"The elves love their songs and stories," Novem said, giggling. "I've heard that the forest elves are starved for them."

"They do sound like a bit of a pain..." Sophia muttered.

Zelphy nodded and pulled off her gloves. "They are. Elves have plenty of stamina to spare, and the forest is like their backyard. It's no easy feat to escape one once you've got them after you; they'll hold you up for days if they think you know an interesting story. They're good judges of character, though, so they typically don't approach dangerous people."

As Zelphy explained the peculiar nature of elves to us, we began to wade our way into the forest. Once we were all inside, Aria and Sophia immediately stepped out in front of the rest of us.

"Leave this to me," Aria declared. "I know I've been a total mess so far, but now that I have my Art, I'll show you how useful I can be!"

"Finally, I can repay my debt," Sophia said firmly. "Let's go!"

The two girls charged into the forest.

"Umm, shouldn't we act as a group?" Novem called after them.

Neither of them seemed to hear.

"Oh..." Novem said haltingly. "It seems they've...vanished..."

"They're in for a beating once they get back," Zelphy growled. The veins in her forehead popped to the surface, bulging with the force of her rage.

In the end, we had to search for them.

Aria had tried to use her Art in the forest, but she'd ended up getting caught up in some tree branches due to her speed. We found her dangling from them limply; she'd hit her head on something and fainted.

We found Sophia standing in front of a tree, struggling to pull her battle-axe loose from the deep notch she'd carved in its trunk.

The second head didn't waste a moment before declaring what he thought of them.

“They’re both idiots.”

After we recovered the girls, we returned to the forest’s edge. I quickly abandoned them to Zelphy’s lecture, entering the woods alone while Novem waited outside the tree line.

My role was to be a lure. Once I had enough monsters following me, I would run out of the forest and let Novem blow them all away with her magic.

I moved into the trees, swinging around a machete I’d prepared earlier. The machete had a blade with a squared-off tip and a handle that had a slight curve to it. It proved quite useful for clearing the branches and vines that blocked my path.

“What do you say, Lyle? A machete’s pretty easy to use, isn’t it?” the second head said in a jubilant tone.

“I guess so,” I replied. “It’s more useful than my dagger would be in this situation, at any rate.”

As I advanced into the forest, I sporadically checked the surrounding terrain using the fifth head’s Art, Map. I used the sixth head’s Art, Search, at the same time, scanning the area for enemies.

“Take care, Lyle,” the second head instructed me once I’d detected my first monster. “Try not to make a sound. Can you see it?”

I slowly moved toward the monster, mindful of my feet. I made sure to be as quiet as I could. Once I could see it with my own eyes instead of through Search, I stopped and observed.

It was a rabbit, one the size of an average dog. But it wasn’t *just* a rabbit. It was...well, people called them a variety of names. This type of rabbit monster was typically referred to as a killer rabbit, a horned rabbit, or a jackalope, among other names. Its most noteworthy feature was the conical horn which grew at the center of its forehead.

This one had sharp, belligerent red eyes, and though it was currently munching on grass, its sharp teeth made it appear more like a ravenous

carnivore than the peaceful herbivore whose form it resembled. This feeling was backed up by the fact that killer rabbits were known to attack any humans that approached them. Even if that was hard to believe, looking at the monster's fluffy, white coat.

As I switched my weapon from machete to saber, I heard the second head let out a surprised "Huh?!" for some reason. I ignored him, drawing closer to the killer rabbit.

Maybe he's disappointed I'm not going to use the machete in battle...?

"H-Hey," the fifth head said, sounding slightly panicked. "That one won't bother you as long as you don't approach it. How about you just l-let it go?"

"Dad..." the sixth head said, his voice tired. "Is that sickness of yours acting up again?"

"Don't call it a sickness! I mean, don't you feel sorry for it?!"

He feels sorry for a monster?!

I'd never even dreamed the fifth head would have sympathy for monsters. He was usually so quiet and composed. In fact, he seemed to be the least kind and compassionate of all my ancestors.

I didn't have time to dwell on it, since the founder, second head, and third head surprised me by immediately flying into a shared fit of rage.

"You *what*, mate?!" cried the founder. "I feel nothing but hatred when I look at that abomination! Bash its head in this instant!"

"Just looking at all that fluffy, white fur irritates me," snarled the second head. "I'd shoot it and skin it right now if I could."

"You should kill monsters as soon as you see them," the third head added. "That's a Walt family tradition. Search and destroy."

Even the third head sounds genuinely infuriated. He's normally so nonchalant...

And, almost as if it could hear the ruckus brewing in the Jewel—the monster noticed me.

“I’ve been spotted! Don’t tell me it can hear—”

“Lyle, it’s a wild beast,” the founder interrupted. “It followed your smell. You should keep the direction of the wind in mind.”

The killer rabbit took off, beelining straight toward me. It tilted its horn forward, like it was going to try and impale me with it.

“Look out!” the founder cried. His voice was suffused with joy. “It’s charging!”

The monster took one last giant leap, its horn shooting forward to run me through, and...

“Now! Sidestep!” the founder yelled.

I dodged to the left, leaving the killer rabbit bereft of its target. I swung my saber as it soared past me, sprinkling the fresh leaves with splatters of the monster’s crimson blood. The color stood out vividly against the verdant green of the forest. The bracing scent of the foliage was soon overtaken with the stench of iron.

As the killer rabbit fell to the earth, the fifth head’s scream resounded through my head.

“Nooooo!!!”

“Hey, hold on... When you scream like that, like your life depends on it... It drains...my mana...”

I prayed for the fifth head to shut his mouth; I was in mortal danger of collapsing right where I stood, far from the safety of the forest’s edge.

My prayers were interrupted by the sound of three jolly voices.

“Phew, looks like a sinister plague has been lifted from the fields.”

“I feel refreshed.”

“Those killer rabbits are the enemy of all crops. They even make a mess of the ones they don’t eat! Not to mention—”

The third head never got to finish his point, since the fifth head rudely interrupted him.

“What need was there to murder it?!” he cried. “You could have just avoided

it, and that would have been the end of the whole thing!”

“Dad, please...” the sixth head muttered. “Just shut up already.”

It was rare for the sixth head to say anything that contradicted his father. But I was less interested in that than in why the fifth head had decided to stand up so vehemently for this monster in particular.

“Did something happen to the fifth head?” I asked. “He didn’t say anything when I was fighting other monsters.”

“Well, it’s just that, you know... He’s an animal lover,” the sixth head confessed. “He especially likes the fluffy and cute ones.”

But he always seems so disconnected and bored with everything! I thought, shocked by this turn of events.

“Yeah, so what? Is that so wrong?!” the fifth head demanded with a rare burst of emotion.

The sixth head chuckled. “Yeah, it kinda is. When someone dotes on their pets more than their own children, they’ve clearly got some screwed up priorities.”

Confusion swirled through me. “Huh...?” I asked. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

But neither head seemed inclined to say more. The sixth head typically treated his father with a great deal of respect, I’d noticed, but this issue seemed to be a point of contention between them.

“Well, now the beast is serving as nourishment for Lyle’s first Growth,” the second head said in a matter-of-fact tone. “And so will the next one, and the one after that. Isn’t that nice?”

Defeating monsters was supposedly one of the ways you could hasten a period of Growth. Although we were currently trying to put that theory into practice, I didn’t feel any closer to a Growth than I had before.

As I approached the killer rabbit’s body, the founder started to call out instructions.

“First, you should bleed it out,” he told me.

“You want me to do that *here*?”

“If the smell attracts other monsters, just let them chase you. Wasn’t that the plan? Go on, get to it!”

This would have once been an impossible task for me, but since I’d become an adventurer I’d started to pick up on some things. I stabbed my saber into the ground and pulled out a clean knife, then used it to start bleeding the killer rabbit dry. Killer rabbit meat was considered to be a material, since it was edible for humans; I didn’t want to contaminate the meat by using my saber.

As I worked, I used my ancestors’ Arts to observe the movements of nearby enemies. Before long, I noticed they’d started to gather.

“We’re heading out,” I told my ancestors.

I held the killer rabbit in one hand as I sheathed my saber with the other. Retrieving my machete, I tore off into the trees and toward the edge of the wood. I adjusted my speed as I ran, making sure that I went slow enough that monsters continued to gather in my wake. The sludge of the forest floor caught at my feet as I ran, making me trip every once in a while.

Finally, I sprinted out from the dim gloom between the trees. At the sight of me, Novem readied her silver staff and began to prepare a spell. In the corner of my eye, I could see Aria and Sophia where they sat on their knees. Apparently Zelphy was making them sit out the fight as punishment for their recklessness.

“There’s seven of them!” I shouted to Novem. “They’re fast. Try to burn them all at once!”

Novem couldn’t use fire magic in the forest, but neither of us stood within the thick clutch of trees anymore. Not to mention Novem was a master at regulating her magic, so it was a simple task for her to avoid setting the trees alight.

Holding her staff high, she chanted, “Firestorm.”

Just as I passed where she stood, a swarm of moths erupted from the woods behind me. They shot straight at Novem. But before they could reach her, a whirling torrent of flames burst to life right at the heart of where the seven

monsters flew. The fiery inferno swallowed up all seven of the moths, but ventured no farther; it was a neatly contained fire, the flames forming the shape of a blazing pillar.

I cast aside my machete as the temperature shot up, using my free hands to cover my face. As far as I could tell, none of the monsters had managed to escape the range of Novem's spell.

"Nicely done," I complimented her.

Novem offered me a slight bow. "You did a fine job yourself, milord."

Moments later, Zelphy approached us, clapping her hands.

"Good work," she said. "The materials burned up, but that's not our problem. Now, *you two*. Go ahead and collect the Stones from the cinders!"

Aria and Sophia rose from where they'd been condemned to sit at the edge of the clearing, hands clutched around their weapons as they used them to support their numb legs. They headed over to where Novem's spell had burnt up the moths so they could retrieve the monster's Demonic Stones.

"I tried so hard, but..."

"It's such a shame..."

Well, I thought, they really did try their best. I can admit that.

But I couldn't say I wasn't troubled over the way they'd rushed into the forest, or the fact that they'd managed to immobilize themselves with their own Arts...

"Oh, that's right," I said, handing the killer rabbit to Zelphy. "I defeated this along the way."

"You should bleed it—oh. You did already. Good, I'll have those two cut it up."

Aria and Sophia both jerked upright. They usually only ever dealt with slimes. This was the first time they would be dismantling something this complex. As expected, they were still rather resistant to dealing with such a large monster.

"Well," Novem said, bringing a hand to her mouth. "That's a fine punishment indeed."

The second head sighed as he watched the two girls strip the killer rabbit of

its materials, their eyes filled with tears.

“They’re idiots,” he repeated.

This time, the founder couldn’t stop himself from sticking up for Aria. “Y-You’re the idiot!” he cried. “It’s cute, goddammit! Aria’s teary face is cute! Lyle, are you sure you want her to grow out of this sorta stuff? I’m gettin’ a bit concerned. You don’t want her to end up too rugged and fearless, right? I mean, look at how adorable she is now!”

I tried imagining a fearless, rugged Aria. For some reason, it was incredibly easy for me to picture. I decided to keep that thought to myself, though. I didn’t think the current version of Aria—the one that cried when slicing up a rabbit monster—would appreciate it very much.

Chapter 25: Truth

Evening had fallen on our fourth day at House Pagan's settlement by the time we returned to the manor with our spoils. Zappa watched over us as we presented what we'd gathered to Lord Dale, his body shaking with rage.

"Those numbers don't add up!!!" he howled.

It seemed the riches Zappa had forecast for himself had fallen quite short of the mark.

Truth was, we hadn't felt the need to try gathering much of anything, since eighty percent of our loot was going to be taken away. We'd known we could never make a profit defeating monsters when the lord was taking that big of a cut, so we'd only collected the materials we'd found necessary.

Zelphy grinned and shrugged, saying loftily, "Well, you see... The materials got all burnt up. Stuff was beyond all salvation. There's nothin' we can do about it now! Anyways, we'll go ahead and take our twenty percent cut of the spoils. If you're feeling suspicious, feel free to take a look at the cinders. You'll find 'em near the forest's edge."

The third head burst out laughing. "That's what you get for trying to take eighty percent, kid!" he chortled. "If it was forty, or even fifty, they'd have at least tried to keep the materials intact. You got too greedy."

"Screw off!" Zappa snarled. "If that's all you've got for us, we're taking *all* of the Stones!"

"So that's how you're gonna play it, hmm? I guess I'll just have to go tell the Guild that they might want to keep an eye on whether or not you're selling each and every one of those Demonic Stones to them. They might overlook a little loss, but...that's quite the pile of Stones we've got here." Zelphy shot Zappa a grin. "It's starting to look like we might have a bit of a problem on our hands."

Zappa let out a frustrated moan. "Y-You *bitch*..."

"That's enough, Zappa," Lord Dale said, finally stepping in. "As long as you

give us the materials you have, we'll give you your twenty percent."

As this exchange was in progress, Paula raced into the room. At first, the dim light of the evening didn't seem to reveal anything amiss in her appearance. Once she drew closer, though, her face seemed blanched and pale.

At the sight of her complexion, Zappa and Lord Dale both jumped to their feet.

"Lord Dale! Zappa!" she cried. "We have envoys from House Maini!"

My party and I followed the two men to the entrance to the settlement, where five retainers of House Maini stood, armed and seething.

Once the envoys had been escorted to Lord Dale's manor, they told us the tale behind why they'd been sent.

The first thing they'd told us was the following: "We found traces of battle in the forest on our side of the border."

It seemed they'd come across a location they thought was the site of the murder of House Maini's retainer. If it was true, then it was the place where this whole conflict had sprung to life. They'd found traces of battle and some equipment scattered about, as well as copious amounts of blood. Plus, on further investigation, they'd discovered that the personal effects of the murdered retainer had been chucked nearby, strewn out of sight among the tangle of bushes and trees. To make matters even worse, they'd found all of this in House Maini territory, in a stretch of forest across the river that bordered the two houses.

"We ask that you hand over whoever found the body," demanded one of the envoys. "A detailed investigation is in order."

Zappa remained silent. There was sweat on his brow.

Strange, I thought. Normally he's so obnoxious and loud...

But before I could dwell on it for too long, Lord Dale spoke up.

"Hold on a moment!" he cried. "That makes it sound like you're suspecting us!"

The envoys glared at Lord Dale. It felt like they might start slicing him up with their weapons at any moment.

“It doesn’t just *sound like* we suspect you; we *do* suspect you. Based on what we find moving forward, we may decide to demand reparations. Why don’t we go ahead and explain the situation to our benefactors? We’ll speak to our viscount, and you can speak to your baron.”

The mention of money had the lord hanging his head. “How much money are we talking about?”

“We still haven’t come to a decision on what our retainer’s life was worth,” the same envoy replied. “But we’ll be asking for one thousand gold coins.”

I reeled back at the exorbitant figure.

“Don’t be so surprised, Lyle,” the sixth head told me in a calm voice. “This is a negotiation. You start with a nonsensical number, and from there both sides search for a compromise. The Maini’s don’t honestly believe this settlement has that much money.”

“We don’t have that much money!” Lord Dale exclaimed.

“I’m afraid that’s not our concern,” the envoy replied, as cold as ever. “You must admit there’s no logical reason a bandit would choose to transport a heavy corpse from one territory to the next. Plus, if they were hiding the body, wouldn’t they have placed it somewhere it wouldn’t be found? And yet someone from House Pagan *just happened* to stumble across it... Suspicious indeed. I can’t shake the feeling you staged the whole thing in order to seek monetary compensation from us.”

“There’s no way we would do that!” Lord Dale snapped, beginning to lose his temper. Paula fidgeted nervously beside him.

“You know...” the third head said, completely detached from the argument going on, “the skies are looking pretty cloudy. You might want to stay inside a bit longer.”

It was clear my ancestors had no plans to offer their guidance on this situation, no matter how bad it got. Maybe they were right, and it really was a bad idea for me to get myself involved in other people’s business.

Suddenly, I felt a presence. My eyes shifted to the window, where I saw a short man peering into the manor.

I could swear I've seen him somewhere before... Oh!

He was the man who'd been in the blacksmith's shop when I'd gone to replace my saber in Darion. The plump kid who'd been arguing with the proprietress.

"That's the guy who wanted that suit of armor mended, isn't it?" asked the second head. It seemed he remembered him too. "Well, isn't that fishy...? Lyle, you should go capture him. You gain nothing by being stuck in here. But if you take him in for questioning, on the other hand..."

I left Zelphy to continue supervising Lord Dale's exchange with the envoys. I didn't tell her about the man outside; I just told her I was heading out.

After I found my way outside and met up with the girls, we promptly went and apprehended the peeping man.

The girls and I had restrained the man and taken him to the same hut Lord Dale had given to us for lodging. Apparently his name was Pini. He had a gentle look to him, and short, curly brown hair. Even though everyone in the room was a woman apart from me, he was still quivering in fear.

"Are you sure he has some relation to the murder case, Lord Lyle?" Novem asked me.

"Yes, actually. To tell you the truth, I ran into him before at the smithy in Darion. He was asking the proprietress there to service a set of armor for him. It was pretty obvious it wasn't his."

Sophia scanned Pini's face. Her gaze was naturally quite piercing, and he cowered. He must have thought she was glaring at him.

"I-I'm sorry!" he moaned. "B-But back then, I didn't have a choice!"

"'Back then'?" Sophia asked in a low voice. "What do you mean by that? It almost sounds like—"

"Hey!" Aria cried, cutting her off. "Wait just a second. You don't have the

authority to ask questions like that.”

“I know,” Sophia replied. “But he’s clearly related to the murder! I can’t just drop the matter!”

“Calm down, both of you,” Novem said, trying to pacify them.

The founder was starting to grow irritated. “Smack the truth out of him!” he demanded from his place within the Jewel.

“You can’t do that, Lyle,” the third head told me. “It would cause problems, since that young man is one of Lord Dale’s citizens. But now that we’ve got him here, let’s hear what he has to say. We don’t want to get held up in this place for too long; that’s no fun. If this kid’s the culprit, you can just turn him in and have Pagan and Maini sort things out between themselves.”

“You’ll be able to demand a mediation fee from the viscount, I’m sure,” the fourth head chimed in. His tone was gleeful, as it always was when the subject of the conversation turned to money. “It’s only fair, since it seems the entirety of the blame lies with House Pagan. Oh, I’m so envious...”

“Lying’s not in your best interest,” I told Pini, lowering my face until it was level with his. I’d decided I’d try my best to hear him out. “What exactly were you doing at the smithy back then? And where have you been since we got here? We haven’t seen you once.”

Pini’s eyes wandered the inside of the hut as he began to explain the circumstances behind his actions. “A sh-short while ago, Zappa told me to... Oh, Zappa is kinda like the leader of the young men here...”

“I know. What did he tell you to do?”

“He...he had me go to Darion to buy weapons.”

Aria and Sophia could no longer remain calm now that weapons had been brought into the picture. Sophia, especially, had a serious look on her face.

“And what exactly did he plan to do with those weapons?” Sophia demanded. “He didn’t intend to go to war, did he...?!”

“He wouldn’t stand a chance,” the second head told me from within the Jewel. “You can make up for quantity with quality to a degree, but he has

neither. Go on, Lyle, just push him a little further.”

I waved at Sophia to stand down, then let Pini continue.

“When I reached Darion, I heard rumors that our settlement had gotten into a dispute with House Maini, but that the baron had only dispatched adventurers... That was different from Zappa’s plan, so...”

“What exactly *was* Zappa’s plan?” I asked.

“He...wants to become a knight.”

“A knight?”

The founder wasted no time letting us know what he thought of that. “Just get on the battlefield and earn your stripes!” he muttered. “Hell, all you—”

“Not everyone can do that, dear founder,” the third head said, interrupting his rant. “I get it now. Zappa wanted to start a war. That’s why he sent Pini to get weapons.”

So, Zappa wanted to start a war? I thought slowly. If he accomplished his goal, that would have given him a place to distinguish himself so he could earn a place as a knight. But was such a thing really possible?

“A vassal knight, you mean?” Sophia muttered. “Don’t tell me he wants a war?”

Pini nodded repeatedly. “Th-That’s right. Zappa said our lives would be easier if he became a knight. And that he didn’t want to be tilling fields for the rest of his life.”

The third head scoffed. “That kid should try being in my position,” he grumbled. “Good grief, you youngsters really have your heads in the clouds. That’s why you’re so...”

During his time as head of House Walt, the third head had died in battle. That was why he was so irritated by Zappa’s ploy to earn himself a promotion through starting a war.

“Wh-What absolute nonsense!” Sophia cried. She looked like she couldn’t believe what she was hearing. “How many people will die if he causes a war?! And that’s not even the only thing to worry about. Just think about the damage

this settlement will incur!”

Out of our whole party, Sophia was probably the most knowledgeable when it came to this subject. I, on the other hand, was feeling rather oblivious.

“How exactly do you think a scenario like that would end up panning out?” I asked her.

Sophia’s head was in her hands. She seemed utterly disgusted that Zappa’s reasoning had centered on such an idiotic idea.

“I believe House Maini would call upon their viscount, while House Pagan would call upon their baron,” she told me. “Due to the season, it would be difficult to amass the proper number of soldiers, but I’d imagine each side would be able to get around two to three hundred men. If House Maini took the situation seriously—which they naturally would—they would outnumber House Pagan from the onset of the conflict. It’s highly unlikely that House Pagan’s settlement would be able to hold out until reinforcements arrived from the baron. The settlement would end up getting ravaged by its enemies, its resources stripped down to nothing!”

At this point, Pini was dribbling sweat. “B-But if war breaks out between houses, you send a declaration with a time and place first, and then—”

“It won’t be such an easygoing war!” Sophia yelled at him. “One of their retainers is dead! They’re not going to wait around until it’s more convenient for you to fight them!”

Would it really be such a massacre?

I looked at Aria, curious as to what she thought, but she just shook her head. Maybe she was just as oblivious with this sort of thing as I was.

Novem looked Pini in the eyes. “While it’s true that in some instances the two warring factions will decide on the time and place of a battle beforehand, not all wars are the same.”

Sophia nodded in agreement. “And this battle wouldn’t be one of those fought to show off the two houses’ military might. Lord Medard does not hold back against his enemies. Based on what you say from here on out, there’s a chance that a lot of innocent blood might be spilled.”

Pini was trembling even harder now.

But something seemed off to me. I pondered a moment before a question leaped to the forefront of my mind.

“But both houses are provinces of Banseim, right? Would they really go that far?”

Sophia gave me a tired look.

“Of course, they would!” the founder roared. “If someone did to my house what Pagan’s done to Maini’s, I’d give them hell!”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” the second head said, exasperated. “The entire concept of holding back is foreign to you.” He took a deep breath, then focused on me. “Just to let you know, Lyle, if one of my allies was murdered and his corpse was treated like that, I wouldn’t hold back when it came time to fight. My people wouldn’t have stood for anything else.”

“War’s no joke,” the third head added sullenly. “Once one starts up, there’s no way to escape it. Lyle, you sure you don’t want to head over to House Maini before it gets too late?”

For some reason, I feel like that would be against the rules...

Pini was full-on crying now. “I... I never thought it would come to this...”

“What did you do?!” Sophia screamed. “Out with it already!”

And so, at last Pini began his tale.

It had all started a few weeks ago, when Zappa and Pini had entered the forest. They’d been planning to defeat some monsters so that they could sell the Demonic Stones and materials to passing peddlers. Though selling their loot to peddlers would earn them far less money than if they’d sold it to the Guild, it also meant they wouldn’t have to go to the trouble of traveling to Darion.

“Zappa, haven’t we already gone far enough?” Pini mumbled. “We’ve already gone over the river...”

“Oh, shut it,” Zappa snarled in reply. “We need as much loot as we can get

before the next peddler comes. Then I can get myself a weapon. Paula's going to see me in a whole new light."

Zappa was certainly not the only one in the settlement who was in love with Paula. She was the darling of her generation, after all; all the men who lived within the settlement carried some level of a torch for her.

Pini was no exception. The affection he held for her was slight, but it was still what had driven him to study reading, writing, and arithmetic. He knew, though, that Paula would never look his way. Rumor had it that Zappa—the leader of their pack of young people—would propose to Paula someday.

"But..." Pini whined to Zappa, "we didn't get Dale's permission for this. It feels bad going behind his back."

"I'm the captain of our settlement's guard!" Zappa replied. "I run our defenses! If I say we're good, we're good!"

Now that they were within House Maini's territory, the two of them started searching the woods for monsters. Every once and a while, they'd come across various fruits and other edible wild plants, which they'd toss into the basket they'd brought with them. There was no doubt that what they were doing was a crime.

Zappa's gotten worse lately. Pini thought to himself. *Now that Paula's dad, the lord, and Dale's brother are gone, there's no one to rein him in.*

After so many people had died in the war, Pini and Zappa had suddenly found themselves without anyone to scold them. On top of this, their new lord was Dale, a man that they'd always been on good terms with. All of this had led to Zappa having a greater voice in the settlement than he'd ever had before.

The two men were still walking through House Maini territory when they heard a voice. Though perhaps it would be more accurate to call the sound a yell.

"You, over there! What are you doing?!"

The speaker was a man clad in armor, a large sword hanging over his back. The way he was outfitted made it immediately clear that he was a retainer of House Maini.

“Th-This is bad!”

“Zappa, hurry and apologize!” Pini said in a panic.

The moment Pini pressed him to apologize, Zappa began to shift the blame to someone else. “I t-told him not to do it,” he said pitifully. “But he needed to forage for supplies for his sick mom, and he—”

“Zappa!”

As they argued, House Maini’s retainer approached them, the machete he’d been using to clear his path in hand. “You’re from House Pagan, aren’t you?” he accused them. “So, you admit to crossing the river? Leave your bags and get lost.”

But Zappa wouldn’t back down, even though the man had told them he was willing to forgive them if only they left their stolen harvest behind.

“H-Hey, hold on! We picked half, no, almost all of it in House Pagan territory. We’ll return everything we got over here, okay?”

“You expect me to trust you? This is why you Pagans are—”

A roar ripped through the forest. The sheer intensity of the sound sent Zappa and Pini to their knees, their balance lost.

“An orc?!” the retainer exclaimed, drawing the sword on his back. “What’s it doing here?”

The three men watched the monster as it approached. The orc had a pig head with two large tusks that protruded from its lower jaw. It must have been around seven feet tall. Its arms were covered in fur, and it clutched a stone axe in its right hand. Its waist was wrapped in cloth.

As the orc used its burly hands to push through the trees toward them, the more slender saplings snapped and fell before the monster’s might. In no time, the monster was standing before them, an animalistic growl erupting from its mouth.

“Run!” the retainer cried. “My comrades are nearby! Call for them!”

The retainer slashed his blade through the air, but it was quickly smacked aside by the orc’s axe.

House Maini's retainer was at a clear disadvantage. Not only was he weaker than the orc, he also had to contend with the difficulty of fighting with such a large sword in the closed-in space of the forest.

"Dammit!"

If the retainer had a moment to form an excuse, he'd have said he'd never expected to come across an orc inside of the forest. A machete was enough to deal with most of the monsters around these parts, so he'd only carried his greatsword with him out of habit. But a mere machete was no match for an orc. It wouldn't be effective against the orc's thick skin and burly limbs. The retainer knew that his best bet was his greatsword, even if it did put him at a disadvantage.

At the retainer's command to run, Pini had taken off into a sprint. He didn't get very far, though, before Zappa grabbed him by the trousers and sent him tumbling to the ground.

"Zappa, why did you—?"

"I c-can't get my legs to move! It's... It's the same as what happened back then..."

By "back then," Zappa was referring to three years prior, when the two of them were out on their first campaign. House Lobernia's forces had served as the core of the army, while the other lords contributed what they could to support their troops. House Pagan hadn't been able to offer much in terms of military support, so their forces had been stationed at the rear. They'd been given the duty of watching over the food supplies.

This hadn't been enough for Zappa, so he'd gone running off in search of greater glory. Paula's father had chased after him, along with the House Pagan's lord and his eldest son. Pini had rushed around all the while, reporting the reason they'd broken their ranks to the other units and begging for their assistance.

By the time the lord, his son, and Paula's father had found Zappa, he'd gotten caught up in an enemy ambush. Zappa's legs had given out on him, and as he'd sat immobile, all three of his comrades had died protecting him. Zappa had only managed to survive because of the assistance of the reinforcements Pini had

managed to muster.

The results hadn't actually been considered that bad—an ambush had been drawn out before it could do major damage to the main army. House Pagan, however, had suffered a massive loss.

“L-Let go of me!” Pini cried. “I need to go tell his comrades what’s going on!”

But Zappa wouldn't release him.

“You’re just going to run away!” he shrieked. “Don’t leave me behind!”

Their petty argument only managed to distract the retainer from his fight. He'd already lowered his guard a little, since he'd managed to land a deep cut on the orc's right arm.

“What are you doing? Hurry up and—”

In a matter of seconds, the retainer was dead. The orc had swapped its axe from its right hand to its left, taking him by surprise. Pini and Zappa stared at the orc's looming form, their mouths agape. In that moment, they'd been certain the orc would kill them too—sooner rather than later.

But the orc didn't attack them. It just looked down at the blood oozing down its arm, then at the retainer's fallen greatsword, and then at its own stone axe. It seemed to be deciding which weapon it most preferred. The monster gave Pini and Zappa a cautious look, then took the sword and left.

A relieved Pini had immediately headed in the direction of House Maini, but Zappa had refused to let him go.

“Zappa, enough—”

“Pini... We're taking that old man's body.”

“Huh?”

It was then Pini learned that Zappa wanted to make it look like one of House Maini's retainers had died in House Pagan's territory.

Now that we'd heard the entirety of Pini's tale, we were all shocked by how

haphazard Zappa's plan had been.

"From there, it kept getting bigger and bigger, and I got scared... But Zappa kept saying that this was our chance. That if we could make House Maini out to be the bad guys, and get the baron to send an army, we could beat them in a war."

"Err, so you're saying all of this happened just by chance?" I asked him. "Why didn't you stop him?"

"I can't win against Zappa!" Pini wailed. "Whenever I tried to go against his wishes, he'd smack me..."

I knew it was pathetic, but I could see a bit of me in him.

Is this how my ancestors see me? I wondered.

"Originally, we were supposed to hide the body somewhere no one went, so no one would find it. But it was impossible for the two of us to carry a body through those dangerous woods all by ourselves. We did our best to get it into House Pagan's territory, but we dropped it just barely over the border. Zappa said we needed to claim we'd found the body before anyone else had the chance; that someone else might bury it otherwise."

"I despise people like that Zappa brat," the second head muttered in irritation from the Jewel. "The ones who run around causing trouble for no reason, and who can't seem to speak at any level below a scream. That kid only acts strong around people who're weaker than him. He's the epitome of a guy who does nothing but complain."

You know... The second head sure hates a lot of different types of people.

"Well, you can find your share of idiots everywhere you go," the third head said with a sigh. "Now, what should we do about this mess...? Let's just turn in this kid, expose Zappa, and leave."

Oh, I thought. So even after all that, we're still leaving House Pagan to its fate.

"H-Hey!" Aria cried, her voice panicked. "Won't there be trouble if someone doesn't do something about this...?"

"There probably will be," Novem said, placing a hand on her cheek and tilting

her head to the side a fraction. “However, I don’t think we can do anything. The fault lies entirely on House Pagan’s side. Their benefactor might even abandon them.”

I couldn’t think of anything to say in House Pagan’s defense.

“Lyle...” the fourth head prodded me. “Ask about the armor and the letter.”

I looked at Pini. “Umm, are you the one who sent the letter to House Maini, telling them where to find their retainer’s body? Also, what was going on with that armor you wanted repaired...?”

Pini started to cry again.

“That was m-me,” he admitted. “After he saved our lives, it felt too cruel to just leave him in the forest like that. And the armor... Zappa told me to go sell it, but I just couldn’t. I just thought, you know, I could get it repaired and send it to his family, so they’d at least have something of him left.”

I recalled what the proprietress had told me back then. She’d said that the damage to the armor had come from a monster, and that it had probably been an orc. It lent some credence to his story.

“If you’re honest about it,” Sophia said, folding her arms, “you might still be able to settle this peacefully. You can’t leave the orc be, though. There must be a reason that it’s in a place like this...”

“Wait!” the third head shouted out of nowhere. “What if—?”

“It’s possible!” the second head cried out, excitement overtaking him all of a sudden. “It’s not the same here as it was in Walt territory back in our day. There are villages around, and the monsters are regularly taken care of. It’s strange to find an orc here! Indeed, given what we know, such a thing should be impossible!”

The founder didn’t seem to understand what they were getting at. “I mean, it’s just an orc. Is it really that crazy? Back in my day, there were brown bears all over the place.”

Brown bears were a type of monster that took on the form of a bear. They were seen as more troublesome than orcs. This wasn’t to say that orcs couldn’t

do quite a bit of damage themselves, particularly due to their ability to use tools. It was just that, even taking those abilities into account, brown bears could do even more damage with just their overwhelming brute strength.

Apparently our founder didn't see orcs as even a little bit of a threat.

"Oh, good. Splendid! Absolutely wonderful..." the fourth head rejoiced. "If we're right about this, then this is our chance to break the bank! *Ahem*, I mean, this will be a good experience for Lyle!"

"Oh, so that's what you guys were talking about," the fifth head said. It seemed he'd caught on. "Then it actually might be a good idea to intervene."

"He he he, so there's really a chance one of them's here?" the sixth head asked, seeming to look forward to whatever it was.

Even the seventh head appeared to have completely changed up his attitude. "Lyle, you should intervene, and help House Pagan. Get them in your debt. Seeing as how a monster appeared that usually never shows up, *and* it's made an appearance despite regular patrols...there's quite a high chance we're right. Very nice. Very nice indeed..."

"It's starting to get interesting around here," the third head said excitedly. "Lyle, I'll help you out a bit, so let's get this problem resolved."

Why're you guys so motivated all of a sudden?!

Chapter 26: The Joint Investigation

We untied Pini and escorted him straight to the manor. By the time we got back, House Maini's envoys had already left. Apparently they were adamantly against sleeping in enemy territory and had rushed off despite the lateness of the hour. Still, it was far too dark to properly navigate, so it was possible they were camping out in the fields somewhere, regardless of their principles.

Within the confines of Lord Dale's manor, Paula and Zappa sat beside the lord on a sofa. The lord himself was busy cradling his head in his hands.

"Dale, we should look into the murder too," Paula murmured. Her tone was softer than usual, a tone reserved for when only close friends were around.

Zappa, however, seemed determined to avoid the investigation. "They're lying!" he insisted in a desperate tone. "Come on, Dale, you have to believe me. Send a letter to Bentler and declare war on those idiots! All you've gotta do is decide on a time and place; Pini can deliver the letter."

Pini twitched at the sound of his name. Now that Sophia had told him the reality of House Pagan's position, he knew just how much danger his house faced.

"If it's weapons you're concerned about," Zappa continued, "Pini went and bought some. If we arm up..."

As I stared at Zappa, I couldn't help but wonder, *How can he be so irresponsible?*

"If it were me," the founder said tiredly, "I'd knock House Pagan down a peg the moment that Pini kid delivered me such a ridiculous letter. I'd gather all my men and ride out."

I could well imagine our founder swinging around his greatsword, a band of barbarians following in his wake.

The second head, meanwhile, was clearly irritated—not at Zappa, but at Lord Dale.

“No matter where you go, you’ll find idiots and people with overinflated egos,” he said. “But the moment Dale appointed that idiot to his post, he became responsible for all his decisions. He’s the worst lord there is.”

“I wouldn’t say the whole situation is completely Dale’s fault,” said the third head. He seemed to have a little sympathy for Lord Dale. “Sometimes people like Zappa get their stations based on personal relationships or as the price for the lord to reach a compromise with a faction within their house. Honestly, Dale’s essentially the puppet of his people. He’s just letting them push all their ideals onto him, so he only manages to give them what they want, not what they need. If only he had better supervisors to guide him...”

It seemed that the third head didn’t consider Lord Dale to be anything more than a figurehead for his house. His ability to act as an effective lord was bogged down by the hopes and dreams of his people—whether that was good or bad, I couldn’t tell. All I knew was that the current situation was heading in a bad direction.

“I don’t care how he rules his house, to be quite honest with you,” said the fourth head. “But when a lord’s territory has been pushed into a corner like this, he must take responsibility for the situation. A lord’s duties to his people are the same, whether he is surrounded by terrible people or not. Dale has my condolences.”

Maybe this whole situation does fall on Lord Dale, I thought. He didn’t take any precautions against something like this happening, and he trusted Zappa far too much.

Something seemed to be bothering Novem; her eyes danced around the room. Seeing as Lord Dale and his supervisors seemed more preoccupied with their own conversation than with us, we backed off and began to whisper among ourselves.

“This room has been cleaned, but it’s not particularly tidy,” Novem said softly.

Aria gave her a dubious look. “You sound like a scary mother-in-law.”

“That might be so,” Sophia retorted, “but Novem’s right—cleanliness is important. Some lords might look down on Lord Dale if they notice he’s not keeping his house in order.”

“I heard Lord Dale dismissed the servants,” Novem continued. “I’m sure he detested the noble lifestyle. And we know that he cut taxes by a wide margin... Perhaps he doesn’t have the funds to hire anyone.”

Pini’s head drooped. “That’s right. We don’t have the funds to maintain all the village facilities, so many of them have been abandoned. More and more people are complaining about how the house used to be managed better...”

“No matter how you run things, people will complain,” the fifth head said in a low voice. He didn’t sound any less angry than he’d been after we’d gone hunting in the forest.

Maybe he’s still holding a grudge over that horned rabbit...

“Lyle, once a lord collects taxes from his people, he is free to use them however he wishes,” the fourth head explained. “However...those taxes are where the lord gets the money to pay the maintenance fees for his house’s general upkeep, as well as the fees required to maintain roads and expand fields. If the lord lowers the tax, naturally he’ll have less funds to use in order to improve and maintain his house. It’s important to keep a good balance.”

The third head chuckled. “Some lords don’t bother doing any of that. They just stuff all the money in their pockets and force their people to work!” Suddenly he grew quieter, a frightful tone entering his voice. “Now then... How about we go ahead and open that fool lord’s eyes already?”

“Lord Dale,” I called over to him. “Pini told us everything. Apparently the one who murdered House Maini’s retainer was a monster.”

The look on Lord Dale’s face as he stared at me told me this news was no surprise to him. Zappa, meanwhile, had begun to look slightly panicked. He tried to glare at Pini, but Sophia stood in the way of his gaze.

Pini clenched his fists, his eyes cast down at the floor. “It’s true—it was a monster that killed the Maini retainer! It was an orc! I’d never seen a monster like it before! B-But...”

Zappa lunged, grabbing at Pini, but I held him back. He tried to wrench his way out of my grasp, so I was forced to sweep his leg out from under him.

Even as he fell, Zappa cried out, “Pini! Don’t!”

“But...the ones who stripped him of his armor and his valuables, the ones who carried him into House Pagan territory... It was us! Me and Zappa!”

This confession left both Lord Dale and Paula dumbfounded.

Lord Dale rose from his seat, staring at Zappa. “Zappa...what is the meaning of this?”

“Y-You’ve got it all wrong!” Zappa cried in response. “It wasn’t me! That damn idiot Pini told me to do it! I tried to stop him, but he—”

Zelphy looked at me and scowled. Her face screamed, *Now you’ve gone and done it.*

Intervening left a bad taste in my mouth, but now that my ancestors actually seemed motivated for once, I knew they’d make a ruckus if I didn’t step in to set the record straight.

“It seems to me you were preparing for a war,” I said. “You planned to sell the valuables you got off of House Maini’s retainer so that you could arm yourself, didn’t you?”

Zappa glared at me from the floor. “An outsider’s got no right to complain about what we do!” he snarled. “Dale, between me and this bastard, who do you believe?! We grew up together—right here in this settlement!”

Paula looked at Pini for a while. Finally, she said, “Dale, Pini isn’t lying. Zappa’s always pushing him around; there’s no way Pini would order Zappa to do anything.” The words had all rushed out of her in a single breath, and once she was done, she looked at Zappa with palpable disappointment. “Let’s go apologize to House Maini, Dale. It looks like we were the ones in the wrong.”

Lord Dale’s head slumped downwards. He covered his face with his hand, squeezing words out of shaking lips. “I’ll head to House M-Maini first thing tomorrow morning. I don’t know if they’ll forgive me, but I’ll make sure they don’t harm any of you.”

It seemed Lord Dale’s final thought was to protect the people of his house. I wanted to respect him—really, I did—but my ancestors seemed completely indifferent to his struggles.

“Now that the cat’s out of the bag, let’s move on to the next stage of the plan,” the sixth head said. Despite the fact that he was looking at Lord Dale’s rather tragic figure, he sounded like he was having fun. “You decided to stick your nose into someone else’s mess, so now it’s time to make sure you’re rewarded for your trouble!”

“If apologies solved everything, war wouldn’t exist,” the seventh head declared in an unfeeling tone.

I explained the situation to Lord Dale just as my ancestors and I had discussed beforehand.

“Your apology won’t settle this dispute,” I told him. “Lord Medard might still think House Pagan was the one who killed their retainer. At best, you’ll have to pay reparations. At worst, they’ll invade... And Lord Bentler might be too fed up with you to send reinforcements.”

To be honest with you, I didn’t have a clue if any of the things I was saying were true. I was just fanning the flames of their anxiety.

Lord Dale’s face turned pale. “B-But it was a monster who killed—”

“House Maini’s *livid*,” I interrupted him. “Why would they listen to you? They might decide to claim you purposely guided that monster to murder their retainer.”

Now that everyone was more anxious over the situation than they’d ever been before, I raised my hand into the air.

“Where do you think you’re going to get a thousand gold coins to pay them in damages?” I demanded. “Who do you think you’re going to borrow that money from?”

“Oh, that’s right, *you’ve got no one*,” I said, punctuating my words with a grandiose gesture. As I continued, I kept swinging my arms about, using each movement to punctuate the terribleness of the future that may lay ahead for their house.

“No one’s going to send you money, Lord Dale—you don’t even associate with the other lords! That means you’ll have to pay House Maini back in installments, and with interest, I’m sure. Your taxes will rise whether you like it

or not. Seventy...no, even eighty percent! Otherwise, you'll never be able to pay them."

Lord Dale's eyes widened, as did Paula's.

"How are we supposed to do that?!" the lord demanded. "What do you expect to happen to the children and elderly?!"

In a house's time of need, those of working age would be relatively safe from misfortune. They had to be kept around, or there would be no harvest. The young children and the elderly, however... Well, it was always the weak who were the first to be sacrificed.

"Our people won't survive if we tax them so harshly!" Paula cried. "Even if we repay our debt, this settlement will..."

"Then will you fight?" I went on. "At the very least, House Maini can mobilize fifty fully armed soldiers. They'll end up sending more around a hundred and fifty, I'd say, since they're so close. It'll be a bloodbath, I assure you. They'll ride off with your harvest and anything remotely valuable. Your women will be—"

At this point, Lord Dale grabbed me by the lapels. The look in his eyes sent terror spinning through me.

"Are you going to hit me?" I asked him. "Will that resolve all your problems?"

Lord Dale didn't move.

"If you'll let me say my piece, Lord Dale, I'm of the opinion that the responsibility for this mess lies squarely on *your* shoulders. Instead of just working in the fields, you should have prioritized your other lordly duties. Your house is in this situation because you didn't understand that. And now that you've run out of measures you can take to save your house, you're got no choice but to accept that you're a failure of a lord."

"That may be true," Lord Dale replied, gritting his teeth. "But you don't know the first thing about any of us! My whole childhood, I'd watch as my father and brother went off drinking with the other lords, spending all our funds on lavish gifts. I would hear the violent arguments they had with Paula's father over raising taxes. And in the end, they just marched off to war and...and died! And they took Paula's father down with them. We've all been through hell!"

Lord Dale looked down, staring at my hands.

“I can tell, you know,” he said, his voice quavering. “Those hands of yours...they’ve never worked a field. They’re hands tempered to hold a weapon. How could you understand what we’ve been through? You must have grown up in a wealthy house. You don’t know how it feels, watching your family play around as the people of your house suffer. I never wanted to be the lord! Not once! And yet everyone was always coming to me, telling me they couldn’t survive if we didn’t lower the taxes! ‘Do you see your father?’ they’d ask me; ‘Do you see your brother?’ And I couldn’t do a thing! But they’d still vent their frustrations on me anyway. Even now that I’m the lord, and I’ve done exactly what they asked me to, they still complain! Even though... *Even though...*”

Lord Dale released my hand, slowly crumpling to the floor. I’d already known he’d lived a pretty hard life, but seeing him like this made me feel pretty pathetic for riling him up the way I’d had.

“He’s kinda pathetic,” the founder said. He seemed to have a bit of sympathy for him now. “He could try taking charge a bit more...”

“It’s all because he kept trying to please people,” the second head said harshly. But his tone had gentled.

“Well, to be fair,” the third head said in a soft voice, “Dale was born into this—he didn’t get to choose whether he wanted to be a lord or not. Now, Lyle...how about you lend him a hand?”

Only the first four generations of my ancestors could truly empathize with Lord Dale’s plight. Back when they’d been alive, House Walt had been of a similar size to House Pagan, and they’d been considered small-time lords ruling over a small plot of land. But once House Walt had reached its fifth generation, my ancestors had become benefactors themselves, which meant they had a different perspective on situations like House Pagan’s.

There were no further kind words for Lord Dale from this group of my ancestors. But although they had no empathy for him, they could still sympathize with his situation.

“How come that kid has such a hard time governing a settlement this puny?” the seventh head muttered.

The fourth head understood both sides, so he simply added, “Running a small settlement has its own unique set of hardships.”

“Do you want a way out of this situation?” I asked Dale. “If you request my services, I’ll find a way to resolve your problems.”

Dale just stared at my face.

From behind me, I heard Novem say, “When Lord Lyle gets all commanding and firm like this, he seems so manly to me. It’s wonderful...like if I only stood behind his strong back, I’d be safe forever...”

“If only he was always this bold and tactful,” Zelphy said with a sigh.

“H-He’s acting a bit different than normal, but I kinda like it!” Aria said, sounding a bit excited.

“But how are we supposed to resolve an issue like this?” Sophia asked doubtfully. “House Maini won’t forgive them that easily.”

Lord Dale slowly rose to his feet. “Come to think of it, the baron *did* write that you were a man I could rely on... And you managed to meet with House Maini... Are you connected with them in some way?”

“Connected with them? Not in the slightest. Well, excepting Sophia—we’ll be using her connection with Lord Medard to arrange a meeting with him and offer a proposal.”

Everyone was waiting raptly to hear what I was about to say. I felt nervous. *Terribly* nervous. I was just as terrified as I’d been when I’d stood in front of that crowd of people before we’d subjugated the bandits, trying my best to play the part of a foolish noble scion.

Sensing my anxiety, my ancestors began to call out encouragement to me.

“Get a grip, Lyle!” the founder roared. “Are you my descendant or not?!”

His words almost made me laugh out loud. Considering that he’d once said he’d never acknowledge me as his descendant, this was some significant progress. For some reason, it felt like the founder, who had once despised me more than any other of my ancestors, now approved of me the most.

“Lyle, don’t let them see how nervous you are,” the sixth head said with a

chuckle. “As long as you stay confident, they’ll believe in you. They’re easier to deal with than Bentler.”

Well, that’s certainly true, I thought. Negotiating with Lord Bentler was much more difficult than this.

“Both houses shall inspect the murder scene,” I declared.

Everyone waited for me to go on, but I just silently folded my arms.

It was Aria who responded to me first. “Huh?!” she exclaimed. “That’s it?”

Fortunately, I’d been waiting for someone to ask that.

“Don’t worry,” I told them. “I happen to be good at this sort of thing. Just trust me—all we need to do is get both houses to inspect the murder scene, and the whole situation will be flipped on its head. I come from a long line of earls, you know. Our two-hundred-year history is not for show.”

“Y-You’re an earl?!” Pini gasped.

No, no, I thought. The earl’s my father, and I’m just the expelled dredge.

Thankfully, I wasn’t forced to explain further. The group from House Pagan seemed to be stunned by my supposed earldom. To people like them, earls were practically transcendental beings; their daily existence felt so far removed from that of an earl’s that the latter might as well have been living among the clouds.

“Lord Dale, have orcs ever appeared around here before?”

Lord Dale brought a hand to his chin, thoughtful. After a moment, he shook his head. “I’ve never heard of it happening. Not since I was born, at least.”

“You guys have really got it good,” the second head said, green with envy. “Back in my day, orcs were the least of my worries.”

We came from some pretty harsh lands, didn’t we? Suddenly I felt a bit sheepish. Maybe I should have picked up on that after I saw the founder’s village get attacked by a dragon...

I focused back on Lord Dale, then continued, “Lord Bentler’s troops come to your lands periodically to clear out the monsters, don’t they? I can’t deny that

there's a possibility that the orc drifted in from elsewhere, but... There's something else that could have happened, isn't there?"

Zelphy caught on immediately. "You think there's a dungeon around here?" she asked. "It's possible. Darion keeps a tight leash on the monsters in the region, and our neighboring territory is quite proactive in their hunts as well. Knowing that, there's a higher chance of there being a dungeon nearby than that orc wandering in from who knows where."

Lord Dale looked taken aback.

This was the reason my ancestors had become so motivated all of a sudden. The possibility that a dungeon had sprung up nearby, and that I might obtain the right to conquer it as a reward for resolving this incident, had been more than enough to spur them into action.

"If there's a dungeon in the area, then there's no time to feud, is there?" I continued. "The monsters that come out of the dungeon will be a plague on the area. It's incredibly dangerous to leave it unmanaged like this. For the people of House Pagan *and* House Maini."

Lord Dale nodded. "Y-You have a point... There's no way we can subjugate a dungeon, and I don't think House Maini can either. We really might need to ask Lord Bentler for his assistance..."

"You fool!" the sixth head bellowed. "If you do that, Lyle won't get his turn! A dungeon that has orcs in it is a great place to rack up experience. Like hell we're going to let you take that from us!"

The fourth head decided to share his opinion as well, but it wasn't exactly, uh, on topic... "All that treasure belongs to Lyle! We need it to replenish our war chest! We absolutely cannot let this chance pass us by!"

I cleared my throat. "Since you've requested my services, I require a reward. The problem is, this settlement couldn't possibly pay my rates."

Everyone looked at me anxiously.

After a while, Paula raised her hand. Her other hand was nervously clutching her skirt, and there was a serious look on her face.

Her cheeks a bit red, she stammered, “Th-Then, you can have my—”

All seven of my ancestors cried out in turn.

“Don’t let her say it!”

“Yeah, that’d be nothing but trouble!”

“There’s no need for such self-sacrifice! You’re...you’re just making it worse for poor Lyle!”

“Treasure yourself more!”

“We have our sights set elsewhere!”

“Hmm, this will be a tough one for Lyle to manage.”

“Tough indeed. Ah well, he should be able to get a handle on it himself.”

I hurriedly held up my hand, and Paula, understanding that I didn’t wish for her to speak further, fell silent.

Was it okay for me to do that? What was she about to say? I really don’t get it...

My ancestors, at least, seemed to be on the same page.

“So instead of paying me, Lord Dale, I’d like to propose something else. If there turns out to be a dungeon in House Pagan territory, I’d like your permission to conquer it. I want to be its first challenger.”

Although Darion had a dungeon, it would be quite difficult for me to get approval to enter it. But if there was a dungeon all the way out here, I’d be able to explore it as long as I had Lord Dale’s permission. If it was in House Maini territory, I’d just have to negotiate with them for the rights instead.

“H-Hey!” shouted Zelphy. “I can’t permit that!”

But after a moment of thought, Lord Dale nodded. “If you’ll do something about the situation we’re in with House Maini, then I’ll permit it.”

I didn’t want to give Zelphy the chance to force her way into the conversation, so I just smiled and thanked him. “We’ll exchange a formal contract later,” I told him.

“Oi!” Zelphy snarled. “I haven’t given you my approval to enter a dungeon.” Zelphy grabbed my shoulder. “I absolutely *will not* permit you to do something so dangerous.”

At this point, Lord Dale’s manor was filled with an uncharacteristic amount of noise. As we argued among each other, Zappa remained splayed across the floor, despondent. He muttered something under his breath, but no one bothered to listen.

The next day, my party immediately headed over to House Maini to have a meeting with Lord Medard. The only member of the House Pagan crew we had brought with us was Pini. We would have brought Zappa as well, but he continued to insist that none of this was his fault, and was acting considerably violent.

After hearing the full story, Medard was furious. His face had turned beet-red with fury, and his arms were crossed tightly over his chest.

“Seeing as you brought the boy here,” Lord Medard rumbled, “I take it you’re giving us permission to judge him as we see fit?”

It seemed he wanted me to hand Pini over to him immediately. Judging by the amount of rage rippling under the surface of his voice, we were on the fast track to a public stoning.

“I’ll let you discuss that with Lord Dale,” I replied. “For now, I’d like it if we could have both houses investigate the scene of the murder. It’s important for everyone to have a firm grasp on the situation.”

“At this point, I suspect this orc tale could be another lie,” Lord Medard said, glancing over at Pini. “If there was a dungeon nearby, that would be dangerous, I’ll admit. But...can you really tell me with a clear conscience that I should trust this man?”

“Well, what would you do if what he’s told us *is* true?” I answered with a smile. “You’ll have to confirm it one way or another. If there’s no dungeon to be found, then that’ll be the end of it. Plus, this is your opportunity to investigate what House Pagan’s been doing with their territory. If there is a dungeon there,

and they do leave it neglected, it'll be a huge mess for everyone in their vicinity."

From what I'd heard, dungeons would store treasure within their winding corridors in order to lure people to go inside of them. This lure failed to be effective, however, if a dungeon developed out of sight and no one knew such treasure existed. This meant that the monsters living within the dungeon would continue to propagate freely, until eventually they grew beyond the dungeon's capacity to hold. At that point, the dungeon's natural fail-safe would be triggered—implosion. The monsters contained within the dungeon would be expelled all at once, set free to wreak havoc on the surrounding lands. Even a small dungeon could expel tens of thousands of monsters. A small settlement or town would be crushed far too easily in the face of such a horde.

As I watched Lord Medard, waiting for his reply, I let the seriousness of this knowledge settle into my expression.

"You need to properly agitate his sense of danger," the sixth head said. He seemed to live for moments like this. "Remember, investigating the scene is just a front. We need both houses to work together or finding the dungeon's going to be a pain."

I kept hearing that dungeons were nothing but trouble for lords, whether they ruled over towns or settlements. But House Walt evidently saw things very differently. My ancestors practically treated a dungeon appearance as a sign of good luck.

"Oh, I can't wait," the seventh head chirped. "What sort of dungeon will it be? If there are orcs, can we get our hopes up?"

Lord Medard's expression was in stark contrast to the joyful energy my ancestors were giving off. He didn't look pleased at all.

"Lord Medard, the dungeon will not care about the border between your houses," I said firmly. "The outbreak of monsters will cause great damage to your house as well as House Pagan. If there's a chance there is one located nearby, it should be looked into."

Lord Medard closed his eyes. I could tell he understood my logic, but his anger at House Pagan was preventing him from sincerely accepting my offer.

Still, Medard Maini knew his duties as a lord. He opened his eyes, then nodded. “Very well. I shall take you up on your offer. If there is a dungeon, it would be dangerous to leave it unattended. And I cannot trust House Pagan to do what must be done. I can promise to give you the permission to challenge the dungeon first if it is within my territory, but I will need to consult with my benefactor before I give you my final answer. So for now, the agreement is only tentative.”

Oh. Seems like he still doesn't trust House Pagan, then...

“Dammit!” the second head lamented. “If Maini’s going to be like this, you need to find that dungeon yourself and head straight in. The viscount could send his own men to take care of it.”

I couldn’t exactly tell Lord Medard to refrain from telling his benefactor what was going on, so I simply nodded.

“Luckily, I happen to be quite good at finding things,” I told him. “I think you’ll appreciate my assistance.”

I tugged stiltedly at the chain around my neck, jangling the blue Jewel for him to see.

“You’re using quite the antique,” the lord said, seeming slightly surprised. “But regardless, you have my gratitude. And if you manage to find the dungeon, I’ll offer you an additional reward on top of permission to enter.”

Medard had called the Jewel—or rather, Gems in general—antiques. He wasn’t wrong. Demonic Tools had overtaken Gems in popularity, since Gems were so difficult to handle. The majority of people who tried using Gems quickly discarded them, so there weren’t many left who used them in this day and age.

“Is this what you’re really like, then, Lyle? You seemed quite uninterested the last time you stopped by.”

He wouldn’t understand if I told him my ancestors were fired up by the dungeon... I glanced at Sophia, who was sitting nearby. She was about to take a sip of tea, but when she saw me looking at her she froze and stared back.

“Wh-What is it?” she asked.

“To be honest, Lord Medard, Sophia here gave me a good scolding. After that, I thought I better set my attitude straight...”

I was telling the truth. Partly...

Laughter burst from the Jewel.

“Never knew you were a jokester, Lyle,” the third head said, chuckling.

Sophia looked like she had *a lot* to say to me. Her face had gone bright red.

Lord Medard was laughing, slapping his knee with the force of his amusement. For the first time since I’d arrived that day, he smiled at me.

“Is that so? She really is a Laurie girl. She knows how to run a tight ship.” A conflicted look flickered over the lord’s face as he spoke.

The lord had known Sophia for a long time, after all. She’d grown up well, and become a reliable person. But although Lord Medard seemed delighted at her growth, he also seemed somewhat saddened. It was possible he felt bad for her, since her house had fallen and she’d been demoted to adventurer status. The nobility in Banseim typically didn’t have a very favorable impression of adventurers.

“N-Not you too, Lord Medard! Lyle, I wasn’t trying to scold you, I was just...!”

The sight of her panicking sent a rush of confusion through me. “Huh?” I said, cocking my head. “But...”

“No buts! Just listen to me! Jokes should be saved for the proper time and place. Otherwise you’ll be seen as quite uncouth.”



Pini looked a bit relieved as the mood softened. My ancestors, meanwhile, seemed delighted that the negotiations were complete. A bustling conversation was brewing in the Jewel.

“Finally, a dungeon!”

“Not yet! We’ve got to investigate the area first.”

“How annoying. Want to go off and find it on your own, Lyle?”

“What sort of treasure should we be expecting? It would be nice if the core metal was gold.”

“We’re mainly going so that Lyle can gain experience, right? Hopefully, the monsters aren’t cute...”

“Let’s hope for a dragon in the innermost chamber!”

“No, that would be too hard with the size of the party we’re working with. But if there *was* a dragon...what a joy that would be.”

I’d already ended my conversation with Lord Medard, and was about to depart, when the lord stopped me. It seemed he wanted to have a conversation just between the two of us.

“Lyle.”

“Yes...?”

“Young Sophia... She’s a bit of a pitiful girl. I know I shouldn’t speak on how other houses raise their daughters, but she was brought up very strictly. She may say harsh things, but please don’t abandon her.”

At first glance, Lord Medard gave off quite the villainous impression, but I could see now that he was genuinely worried for Sophia. Maybe that was part of why Sophia was so loyal to him. I felt like I was starting to see a bit of myself in her.

When I first was driven from House Walt, I’d been saved by our elderly gardener, Zel. Then Novem had stood by my side. Now I’d met Aria, and Sophia, and Zelphy... And in Darion, there was Hawkins and Rondo’s party as well...

I’ve met quite a few people in such a short time... I thought.

“Don’t worry. We get along quite well,” I said.

The lord let out a relieved laugh. “I see. That’s good to hear. I guess Sophia found herself a fine partner.”

Hmm...? Something about the way he said that...doesn’t sound quite right.

Chapter 27: Blessings Be to All

We were in the forest that straddled House Pagan's and House Maini's territories. We'd gathered together representatives from both houses, along with laborers, to help us search for the dungeon that may have appeared in the area. House Maini had sent ten people, with Lord Medard taking the lead. House Pagan had Lord Dale, Paula, Pini...and Zappa. Technically they had our five-person adventurer party as well, so their number came to nine.

It was apparent our party still had plenty to learn about traveling in the forest; though one wrong step could send you tumbling to your knees, the locals fared far better than us when it came to navigating the thick tangle.

Once we'd arrived at the murder scene, I noticed that the men of both houses had gotten there shortly before us. They were glaring daggers at one another.

I looked away from them and scanned the area. There were certainly signs that a battle had taken place—the collapsed tree Pini had mentioned was there, along with the sort of marks a stone axe and a greatsword would have left behind.

"How could this be...?" Lord Medard said mournfully, shutting his eyes as grief overtook him. The memory of his earnest retainer seemed to have shaken his composure. "I'll prove your innocence as soon as I can."

He's desperate to restore his retainer's honor, I thought. He won't rest until he proves that his man never crossed House Pagan's border.

"This spot is undoubtedly in House Maini territory," Lord Dale said, looking around. "The battle took place here, right, Pini?"

Pini nodded. "Y-Yeah. I mean, uh, correct, sir. This is where we encountered the orc. The monster stole the greatsword House Maini's retainer was using, and Zappa and I transported the body over into House Pagan territory."

Lord Medard was glaring at Pini and Zappa, as were all the men he'd brought with him.

“Are you sure you didn’t take the sword as well?” the lord asked angrily.

Lord Dale found he had nothing to say. He looked to Pini for an answer, taking great care to ignore Zappa. At this point, no one would believe a single word that came out of Zappa’s mouth.

“We didn’t take his sword. It was taken by the orc! Honestly!”

Lord Medard’s eyes took on a sharp gleam. “You want us to believe the words of the men *who carried off my retainer’s body?*” he demanded in a low, angry voice.

Pini’s mouth opened and shut silently. Lord Medard’s intimidating air seemed to have shocked him.

Zappa spoke up then, completely absent of any shame. “Oh, come on. Like you’d believe anything that came out the mouth of someone from House Pagan.”

“Zappa, I have not permitted you to speak,” Lord Dale said, his voice rising. “Shut your mouth unless told otherwise!”

But despite the firmness with which the lord spoke—which had certainly grown a bit from the day before—Zappa just scoffed at him.

“Don’t even try me. I don’t wanna hear it—*especially* from a guy who came crying to me, whining about how he didn’t want to be a lord. This would’ve never happened if you were a better—”

I sighed and braced myself to step in, but Zelphy got there first. Or rather, her fist did.

The founder whistled as he appraised Zelphy’s punch. “Now that’s a nice right straight! She really put her weight into that one!”

Zelphy looked at Lord Dale, who nodded in approval. She then refocused on Zappa, who’d been knocked off his feet due to the force of her blow. She grabbed him and hoisted him back up. “We came to House Pagan on House Lobernia’s request,” she told him, voice cold. “Taking orders from Pagan’s lord is part of the job. And kid...you’re stalling the discussion. Don’t speak unless you’re spoken to. Got it?”

It was only a slight threat, but it was enough to make Zappa nod. He stood there silently, holding his cheek.

“That kid acts tough when he’s up against someone weak, but the second he thinks he can’t win... What a coward.” The second head sounded thoroughly fed up. “He’s not smart or particularly quick-witted either. He was never meant to have a position of authority.”

The third head laughed. “He’s the sort of guy who’d become a tyrant if he became a lord.”

Lord Medard looked down at Zappa, his eyes cold as ice. When he spoke, though, it was to Lord Dale. “I cannot trust House Pagan when I know its lord is foolish enough to keep someone like *that* by his side. Speak honestly—are you hiding anything else from me?”

Lord Dale just looked down at the ground silently, his head hanging low.

“Despite what Medard’s saying, Lyle,” the third head explained, “I’m sure House Maini has done all sorts of nasty things to House Pagan as well. To put it simply, you’re going to find idiots no matter where you are, and there’s no way that every single person living within House Maini territory is smart enough to refrain from causing trouble.”

Just as my ancestors had told me, there was no guarantee every lord would be a wise ruler, or that his people would be entirely clever and virtuous. In that same vein, every lord was not a villainous oppressor, and his citizens were not all stupid and evil. The reality was much more balanced.

“Maini and Pagan are neighbors, for better or worse,” the fifth head explained in his usual emotionless voice. “Their two houses interact with each other in countless different ways. Even if you solve this particular problem between them, they’ll be feuding over something else sooner or later.”

Then what am I supposed to do?

When I thought of how the people of both houses would live the rest of their lives filled with such hostility toward each other, I felt a bit depressed.

The sixth head picked up on my thoughts from the look on my face. “If they can’t stand one another,” he advised, “just find a third party for them to fight

against. They'll rally together against a common foe."

Would that really resolve anything? Creating an enemy in order to bring two other enemies together...

It sounded pretty hopeless to me, but none of my other ancestors raised their voices in opposition to the sixth head.

Regardless of what they thought, if I wanted the search for the orc to get anywhere, it was about time I took charge.

"Just standing here talking won't resolve anything," I said. "Why don't we start by investigating the scene? Maini's retainer was killed here. Then, after that..."

"Zappa and I carried the body over to House Pagan territory," Pini said, nodding. "When I say it was an orc that killed him, I'm telling the truth! Even though I've only ever seen that kind of monster in a book, I swear it was an orc. I've got no doubts about it."

There was a standard version of a monster encyclopedia that had detailed illustrations, and was a common enough item to be found even in a rather small settlement. Reading such a book and gathering information on the enemies you might face could make all the difference in a fight. As far as how many citizens could actually read such a book, well...it was hard to say.

"Regardless of how the murder was committed, it is necessary for us to search the area to see if there is a dungeon nearby," said Lord Medard. "The moment you find anything suspicious, notify *everyone*. Do not operate on your own by any means. And if an orc appears, scream to alert your allies."

Lord Medard's men responded enthusiastically as their lord issued one order after the other. A separate individual—a man with white flecks scattered through his dark hair—who was presumably one of Lord Medard's supervisors, stepped forward. He began working through the finer details of how the search was to be run, dividing House Maini's group of men into parties of three and sending them off to scour different sectors of the forest.

The second head looked at Lord Medard and his men with envy in his eyes. "They're well-regulated," he muttered. "If only, *if only...*"

He must be comparing Lord Medard's men to his own back in the day, I thought.

Unlike the people of House Maini, who moved with direction and precision, Lord Dale seemed rather confused over what to do. He didn't have very many people to work with, and he was duty bound to keep an eye on Zappa.

Zelphy took in Lord Dale's state and sighed. "You're better off keeping a low profile," she told him, "seeing as we're in Maini territory right now. When they start searching Pagan territory, all you have to do is accompany them, and that should about do it."

"I agree," Lord Medard said with a nod. "I don't want you going off on your own. You may oversee us once we enter your territory." He turned to address his supervisor. "Assign someone to watch them, will you?"

And so, a House Maini soldier ended up walking over to our group to watch over Lord Dale and the rest of House Pagan's people. The soldier had sharp eyes and was clearly brimming with resentment at Lord Dale. Zappa tried glaring at him, but after noticing the man was armed with a spear and a machete, he immediately looked away.

"Well then, we should be able to move freely now," I said, turning to my party. "So how about we find ourselves a dungeon? Hmm..." I looked around, then pointed down a path that traveled alongside a nearby river. If we followed it, it looked like we'd be heading upstream. "This way looks good."

Novem nodded. "Should we split up, milord?"

"No," I said, shaking my head. "We're not used to the forest, so we should stick together to alleviate the danger. I'll take the lead with..." I paused for a moment, debating between options. "Zelphy. Novem, you take the center, with Aria and Sophia on either side of you."

Novem gave a delighted nod at that.

Was she testing me...?

"I don't see what's wrong with splitting—" the founder began, but the second head cut him off.

“Absolutely not,” he said firmly. “Lyle’s party should be utilizing a spread-out formation, and Lyle himself should be navigating as he’s been trained to. What if they run into a monster that’s even more difficult to handle than an orc? If that happens, they’re better off fighting together. And let’s not forget that Lyle’s the only one who can use Arts like Map and Search.”

If I used the fifth and sixth heads’ Arts in combination, I’d be able to glean precise information about my surroundings, including the location of House Maini and House Pagan’s men and the movement of nearby monsters.

I started using Map first, then added Search. The sixth head’s Art added quite a few red markers to the map in my head—we were surrounded by those markers, in fact. I nervously looked around. Most of the people in the area had yellow markers, while my party had blue ones. Lord Dale, Pini, and Lord Medard also had blue markers.

House Maini, however, seemed to have quite a few red markers. Zappa’s marker was red as well.

The sixth head let out a sigh. “Well, it reacts to hostility, you know,” he told me. “Doesn’t matter if they’re allies or not. If they hate you, they’re red.”

Meaning Zappa did not think too kindly of me.

Yeah, I don’t really care.

“What’s wrong, milord?” Novem asked. Apparently she’d noticed me staring at Zappa.

I just shook my head and started walking.

Zelphy started walking as well, getting into position beside me. “Let’s get going then,” she said. “You know...if there really is a dungeon, that’ll be the third one around Darion. And we’re already shorthanded as it is.”

Subjugating a dungeon generally took a good amount of time. Those who were assigned there would have to remain at their station for a prolonged period. This high time cost therefore resulted in a high personnel cost as well.

A second dungeon had already cropped up in Darion territory, and Lord Bentler had dispatched his knights, soldiers, and adventurers to deal with it. The

sour look on Zelphy's face must have meant that this dispatch had left Lord Bentler short-staffed. He'd had no other choice—dungeons were simply too dangerous to leave unattended to.

"If only we could just seal off the entrance or burn it down..." Zelphy murmured.

The fifth head seemed to be of a similar opinion. "I considered trying that before. But, well...even if you set a dungeon on fire, or seal it shut, or fill it with poison, it won't result in the dungeon's subjugation. Ultimately, all you'd end up doing is irritating the dungeon. You'd just set it up to burst."

Over the long history of our continent, several countries had experimented with these dungeon-clearing methods, and perished as a result. The reality was just as true now as it had been back then—dungeons could be erased by human hands alone.

"You fool!" the founder cried out in protest. "There's no value in subjugating a dungeon unless you do it with your own hands!"

That's an unsurprising opinion, coming from you, I thought.

We made our way through the trees with only conservative Art use on my part. The terrain was incredibly difficult—sludge, tree roots, and slippery grass made our path a struggle. The five of us trudged forward, machetes in hand, until I saw an area on the map in my head that looked a bit strange. It was the only spot that looked distorted, and there were no clear markers in the affected area. There were plenty of red markers around it, however, and there was a section of the distorted area that was shaded a blurry crimson. The distortion was bad enough that I couldn't tell how many enemies the blur indicated.

Suddenly, my ancestors were astir with excitement.

"There we go!"

"You're in luck, Lyle!"

"That's one problem solved—at the very least, there probably won't be a war."

"You should head in immediately," the fourth head declared. "Come to think

of it... Will Lyle be able to utilize Map once he's inside?"

Apparently the fourth head wasn't that knowledgeable when it came to how his son's Art worked. I found myself curious to know the answer to his question as well, since at the moment all I could see of the dungeon was a blur.

"Don't worry," the fifth head replied. "My Art may portray the dungeon like that from the outside, but once you go in, it'll clear up."

"My Art will function inside the dungeon as well," the sixth head tacked on. "It works the same even if the dungeon has multiple floors or is just one incredibly vast area."

"Now, this takes me back..." the seventh head rejoiced. "This sense of discovery!"

We're talking about a dungeon here, I thought. Shouldn't they be more anxious?

I'd already known that my ancestors viewed dungeons as places to load up on experience, Demonic Stones, and materials, not to mention treasure. But Lord Dale and Lord Medard didn't seem to be nearly as cavalier about its appearance as they were. Perhaps it was just that my ancestors had higher status among the peerage, and any lord with baron status or higher would react the same as they had...?

Regardless, I thought, I guess dungeons are a lucky find if you're in it for the profit.

I stopped walking.

Zelphy's attention focused on me. "What's wrong?" she asked.

I turned around so I faced the rest of my party.

"There's a dungeon ahead," I told them.

We'd eventually found the entrance to the dungeon right by the side of the river. I stood in front of the entrance as a goblin came toward me, a stone axe swinging from its hand. I stabbed it in the vitals with the saber I held in my right hand, then quickly extracted my blade.

I immediately drew a dagger as the goblin fell, searching for my next mark. When I saw another goblin leaping in my direction, I drew my hand back and let the dagger fly. Its point pierced through the goblin's head, sending it tumbling to the ground faceup.

A short distance away, the soldiers of House Maini had surrounded another goblin, which they were thrusting at with their spears. It was evident, watching them, that having a numerical advantage made hunts like this nice and easy. My gaze danced over the five goblins I'd defeated on my own.

Novem walked over to me, collecting my dagger from the goblin's head as she came.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I told her. I didn't sense any more enemies nearby, so I went ahead and began to wipe the blood from the blade of my saber. "We've got so many people around that I didn't have to worry about getting surrounded."

From where I stood, I could see Lord Dale and Zappa. Lord Dale had adopted a strong, steady stance, but his sword shook in his hands. Zappa had tucked himself away behind him.

The two men noticed me looking their way. "You gotta be messing with me," Zappa mumbled. "I mean, what the hell is that?! Why's an oblivious city boy like him that strong?"

Zappa might have thought me weak before, but now he was trembling just looking at me. Apparently, I was now scarier to him than the goblins—which were not a common sight in the area, mind you.

"He's an adventurer," Pini chastised him. "Why would he be weak?!"

Zappa glanced over at me, a conflicted look on his face. He'd underestimated me, since I was younger than him and was surrounded by a group of women. Now that he knew I was stronger than he'd anticipated, he was at a loss.

"Pini's right," Paula agreed. "More importantly, Zappa, stop hiding behind Dale. Get out there and fight!"

"Well, I w-would," Zappa stammered in return. "I j-just need a weapon!"

A strong front indeed, I thought sarcastically.

Not that I disagreed with him—having a weapon did make a world of difference.

I was drawn from my thoughts when Lord Medard walked up to us, glaring at Zappa. “Keep your bravado in check,” he snarled at him. “At this point you’ve gone beyond unsightly—you’re nothing more than a farce.” The lord turned to me, dismissing Zappa. “You’re more skilled than I expected, Lyle. I’m a bit surprised, to be honest.”

I wasn’t used to compliments, so I had no idea how to react. I decided I’d start off by offering Lord Medard my thanks, but before I could say anything he turned away and began looking around. Once he’d surveyed the area he turned back, glancing at Novem and Aria as he explained, “That adventurer there—she’s your instructor, right? She went inside with several of my soldiers, and it looks like there’s no mistaking it.”

The dungeon was less than a hundred meters from Pagan territory, but it was still on House Maini grounds. Thus, all the rights to the dungeon fell to them.

How peculiar, I thought. The dungeon is so close to the border, and yet the rights were assigned in a split second.

Zelphy had returned to stand with our party after her brief exploration, and I could tell she was feeling a little relieved. Lord Dale seemed relieved as well. The existence of a dungeon backed up Pini’s story that an orc had appeared and killed House Maini’s retainer. It also meant that this was no time for the two houses to feud.

“Ah, so it’s confirmed,” I said. “It really is a dungeon.”

“Indeed it is,” Lord Medard conceded, clearly displeased. “There’s a higher chance now that an orc actually did kill my retainer.” His eyes turned to Pini and Zappa. “I still can’t forgive what you two have done, however.”

“What’s your problem?!” Zappa screamed, his eyes cast down in humiliation. “It was a monster, dammit! The armor... Well, that was us... But now you should be satisfied!”

Lord Medard glared at Zappa as his men readied their arms. They pointed

their spears at Zappa, as well as the other members of House Pagan. The only ones spared were our party.

“Silence, whelp!” Lord Medard growled. “Because of you, my retainer’s good name was practically dragged through the mud. He was nearly slandered, denigrated as an incompetent who was murdered and looted while infiltrating a house that is barely worthy of claiming its status! And you want me to be satisfied, just with this...? Don’t you dare think this is the end of it!”

From Lord Medard’s perspective, the truth of his retainer’s death must be intolerable. After all, if Pini was to be taken at his word, then Maini’s retainer had tried to protect Pini and Zappa. Not only had they watched him die, they’d ignored his sacrifice and even tried to fabricate a crime scene once they’d stripped him of his valuables.

It was terrible. Deplorable, even.

“I can’t even bear to look at you,” Sophia said, shifting so she didn’t have to look at Zappa.

“I definitely think there’s something wrong with the way you acted,” Aria agreed, though her tone wasn’t nearly as harsh as Sophia’s had been.

“Well, I’ve seen worse,” Zelphy said with a sigh. “But you know...” she trailed off into silence.

Zappa’s behavior was ridiculous—everyone seemed to agree on that.

But there—

The third head suddenly started talking, cutting off my thoughts. “It’s just that, you know... I don’t think young Zappa here has even begun to fully process what happened. The problem is more fundamental than him understanding whether what he did was good or bad. He can’t even get himself to start thinking about it.”

The third head paused for a moment, then continued, “Perhaps Dale forgave him so many times that he got a big head. Now he’s gotten a sudden dose of reality, and it’s driven him into a frenzy. Not that that’s any reason to forgive him.”

Zappa had always been allowed to do whatever he wanted within the narrow world of the settlement, the third head explained. Then his childhood friend had become the lord of their house. Zappa was like an older brother to the lord, and so no one had called him out on his behavior when he'd acted like he was above the other residents. All the adults that would have scolded him were gone, and he knew nothing of the outside world since he rarely left the settlement. When he'd stumbled into this problem with House Maini, it had snowballed into something more massive than he ever could have imagined. If he'd had a bit more knowledge, or if he'd known a bit more about the situation of the two houses, maybe everything would have turned out differently.

Instead, Zappa had grown arrogant, and he'd done something he couldn't undo. Now everyone around him was chastising him, and his mind couldn't catch up fast enough to understand why.

The founder kept his thoughts brief. "Is he a toddler?" he demanded.

"All he knew was the tiny settlement he grew up in and its immediate surroundings," the third head went on tiredly. "Despite the fact that he lacked experience, he was practically the leader of all the other brats his age. Maybe the power went to his head and made him think he could do just about anything. Even though he went to war before, and... Well, I don't even know what he thinks he's doing anymore."

If everyone here starts to boil over, it's going to cause me some problems, I thought.

I stepped forward, trying to get between Zappa and Lord Medard, but Novem spoke before I got the chance.

"This is a dangerous place for an argument," she said. "Why don't we return to somewhere safe and get the situation in order first?"

It was almost like she was saying, 'You can continue this sham of a trial there.'

Lord Medard's soldiers reluctantly lowered their weapons, though Zappa was still the subject of many a cold stare.

As I looked at him, I wondered, *What's so different about him and me?*

Before I'd been driven from my home, the only places I was familiar with were

my room and the yard just beyond it. I'd known absolutely nothing. Once I'd ventured into the outside world, I'd been nothing but trouble; I'd been showered in criticism, and at this point, I was heartily sick of it.

When I thought of my life and compared it to Zappa's, I couldn't help but draw parallels. But something was clearly different, and I needed to know what it was.

What's so different about the two of us? What is it?

I must have been spacing out, because I jolted back to reality when Novem called out to me. "Lord Lyle, we're on the move."

"O-Oh..." I mumbled, shaking my head. "Right."

I started walking, but before I got more than a few steps a terrible feeling overwhelmed me. It wasn't a reaction from any of my Arts; I wasn't using any of them at the moment.

"Wait..." I said slowly. "Is it just me, or...are the birds making a ruckus...?" I started to turn, and then...

"Lyle! Draw your saber!" the founder roared.

I hurriedly drew my weapon, sending the people around me into a frenzy.

"Full Over..." I whispered, activating my Arts as I slowly lowered into my fighting stance. "Map, Search... Everyone, an enemy is coming!"

Was it keeping an eye on us as we loitered around the dungeon entrance?

I could hear the sound of trees toppling as whatever it was drew near. There was only a single marker moving toward us across the map—it was red. The creature's footsteps sounded impossibly large, and as they drew closer, birds boisterously took off flying from their perches, fleeing the area before it was too late.

By then, everyone had realized something was headed our way through the dim light of the woods, and they'd unsheathed their weapons.

Lord Dale readied the sword he'd brought from his manor, calling out, "Paula, get behind me! Pini and Zappa, you too!"

“In formation!” Lord Medard ordered. His soldiers positioned themselves in rank and file to protect him, their spears facing outwards.

“That was a decent response,” the second head mused, watching Lord Medard’s soldiers. “His men are well trained.”

Zelphy pulled her shield from its place on her back and held it in her left hand, drawing her sword with her right. Novem raised her staff. Aria and Sophia took their stances as well, though they were a beat behind.

Lord Dale stood in front of his people so he could protect them, while Lord Medard stood behind most of his soldiers so he could direct their movements.

Even their battle formations are completely different...

The footsteps of the creature gradually grew louder and louder. I didn’t even need my Arts to know it was getting close.

“It’s here!” I called out. “It’s right in front of us!”

A shadow leaped over the craggy dungeon entrance. Its silhouette was humanoid, but this was no human. It was a monster.

“Hmm, that’s rare,” the fifth head exclaimed.

The monster that had come to meet us was an orc, but it didn’t look like any orc I had ever heard of. The discrepancy between my knowledge of what orcs were like and the reality of this one felt quite significant.

The monster stood with its left hand clutching the hilt of a greatsword, the blade propped against its shoulder. It towered over us at a height of at least seven feet, though I wouldn’t have been surprised if it was more around ten. Its two large protruding tusks and its pig nose were characteristic of an orc, but this one also had fur growing from its shoulders, and its skin was a different color from what I had read about.

In addition, normal orcs only wore a cloth around their waists, but this one was more well-covered. It had cloth wraps and protectors on its arms and legs; it seemed decently equipped for a fight. As we stared at it, its large crimson eyes locked onto us. A low, growling noise burst from its mouth, which was slightly ajar.

“That sword... It’s him!” Pini screamed. “B-But the weapon wasn’t that large —”

The sword had grown larger...?! This is just absurd.

“So it’s you!” Lord Medard yelled. “Men, ready your spears! Charge!”

Ten soldiers charged at the monster, thrusting their spears forward with fine form. And yet...their polearms failed to pierce the orc’s skin. The sound of cracking wood and grating metal filled the air.

Orcs had tough skin—I knew that. But it shouldn’t have been *that* tough.

“Get back!” cried Zelphy. “That’s a variant!”

The orc swung its blade at Medard’s soldiers—the same ones whose spears its body had bent and broken. The greatsword sliced through the air horizontally; the blow lacked all technique, relying on brute force alone. Any weapon that had withstood the first attack shattered under the weight of this second blow.

The way the orc wielded its sword reminded me of the careless swings I’d taken with my machete as I’d traveled through the forest, slicing away at the annoyance of the grass or vines which blocked my way.

Zelphy rushed forward. “Lyle, you guys give me some support!”

She leaped in front of the orc, attacking it with her sword to give the soldiers a chance to retreat. Her blows only seemed to make the orc’s thick skin grow even harder, while the monster’s gargantuan physique seemed like it swelled to even greater proportions.

This thing...it’s like vileness incarnate.

“Novem,” I yelled. “Provide support fire! Try not to set anything alight.”

Novem brandished her staff, drawing in all the wind currents that rushed nearby. “Very well,” she said calmly. Her eyes sharpened as she stared at her foe.

“Aria, Sophia!” I called to the two girls. They stood motionless, their weapons at the ready. “You two guard Novem!”

The two girls shifted so that Sophia stood on one side of Novem, and Aria

stood on the other.

Then, Novem announced, “Ready to go.”

Now that she’d finished preparing her spell, Novem pointed the tip of her staff toward the orc.

Zelphy was still fighting with the monster, chipping away at it with her blade as she avoided the swings of its greatsword. Sparks scattered each time her blade hit home. She’d barely even managed to scratch it.

“Zelphy!” I called.

At the sound of my voice, Zelphy rolled out of the way of another of the monster’s wild swings, tumbling across the ground until she was out of reach of Novem’s oncoming attack.

“Wind Cannon!” Novem chanted.

A ball of compressed wind shot forth from Novem’s staff, flying into the orc’s massive form. The winds burst free at the impact, gushing around the monster’s warped silhouette. The surrounding trees shook violently at this burst of magic, their fresh green leaves dragged into the swirling stream of the wind with enough force to tear them from their branches. As the air settled, countless dancing leaves rained down upon us.

It had been a formidable strike, in terms of both speed and sheer power.

We all stared at the orc, which appeared to be perfectly fine. When Novem’s spell had hit, it had thrust its sword into the ground and hung onto it. The winds had only managed to push it back a bit...not even three feet in total. As we watched, it slowly extracted its weapon from the earth.

A normal monster—a normal *orc*—would have been blown off its feet, yet this variant had endured Novem’s spell with ease.

“My apologies,” Novem said. “I will prepare something stronger...”

“I’ll buy you time,” I told her, stepping forward. “Zelphy looks like she could use some help.”

I drew my spare saber, clutching it in one hand while I held my main saber in the other.

Zelphy had already climbed back to her feet and started to approach the orc once again. I rushed forward, taking up a position on the orc's opposite side.

"Get him in a pincer attack," the second head advised me. "You'll be able to buy yourself some time that way, as long as you don't bite off more than you can chew. This thing seems like a pretty difficult foe. Looks like fire or lightning might do the trick, but..."

"Yeah," the third head agreed. "We're not in the best location to be using magic like that. And that's not even taking into account how close you are to the dungeon. If you start a fire, you risk agitating it." The third's head voice was oddly light, like he was talking about something that didn't involve him at all.

That's kind of the norm for him though, isn't it?

"Get a grip!" I heard Lord Medard shout. "Take out your machetes and protect the girl!"

If we had any chance of achieving victory, the key lay in Novem's magic. This made securing her safety absolutely indispensable. House Maini's soldiers stood around her, armed with the machetes they'd used to traverse the woods.

They don't exactly look like they're ready to fight off monsters when they're only armed with machetes...

"So, they do have some guts!" the founder boomed, chuckling. "You should show your stuff too, my boy!"

I mean, I'd like to, I thought. But I don't think I can get through its skin...

It would be too difficult to pierce the monster's hide with my saber. Even if I tried to stab it, I could tell my weapon would be the one that gave out first.

As I pondered my next move, Zelphy shifted in front of the orc. Now that she was facing the monster head-on, I moved around it until I faced its back.

It noticed my movements and turned sideways so it could look at me, leaving itself open for an attack from Zelphy. She immediately unleashed a slash onto the orc, which then turned back in her direction.

Once the orc turned away, I took a swipe at it myself.

The monster flailed its sword around in reaction, smacking the blade against

the trees surrounding us. I thought the trees would halt the swing of its sword, but the orc just cleaved them straight through. Watching the force with which the monster swung its blade, I couldn't help but think that if the monster landed a blow, even a knight in full plate armor would be torn apart.

Variants are so much stronger than regular monsters, I thought. It's crazy!

"Why's its skin got to be so damn hard?!" Zelphy growled, irritated.

She kept her distance from the orc, avoiding its attacks and taking jabs when it gave her the chance.

I was doing much the same. We couldn't do much more than mildly harass the beast, since one hit would be enough to seriously injure us.

Zelphy purposely positioned herself in front of a nearby boulder, and held out her shield. Now that she'd stopped moving, the orc took a swing at her with its blade. Zelphy dodged, allowing the monster's metal sword to clash with the rock-hard stone.

"All right, that should... Oh. It did...absolutely nothing."

The orc's greatsword, seemingly unbreakable, had only sliced deep into the rock.

"*Goddammit!*" Zelphy snarled. "Is that some legendary blade or something?!"

"Don't be absurd," Medard refuted. "It wasn't that—"

The orc forcefully yanked its sword from the boulder, shattering it to pieces. In that moment, I caught a brief glimpse of the blade. Cracks spread across its surface. Then, a glow flashed and the blade was back to normal.

"How is that fair?" I shouted.

I wanted to scream foul play, but that wouldn't get me anywhere. I readied myself to continue harassing the orc, but then I heard Novem's voice calling for me.

"Lord Lyle! Zelphy...! I'm ready whenever you are!"

We immediately backed off.

"Earth Hand!" Novem cried, the earth under the orc's feet jerking upward at

the sound of her voice. “Earth Needle!”

The first of Novem’s spells sent countless hands shooting from the soil; they grabbed onto the orc and held it in place. The monster’s thrashing was enough to destroy them, but Novem had only needed to keep the orc still for a short time. As long as the monster didn’t move, nothing else mattered.

That was when her second spell activated. A large conical spike shot out of the ground, impaling the orc. The spike was even larger than the monster was, and it shot forth with enough force to tear its body in half.

“We did it!” Aria rejoiced.

Everyone else heaved a sigh of relief. Not me—I was still clutching my sabers.

The orc had lost the entire lower half of its body, but...its head still twitched. It no longer had a right hand, so it clutched the greatsword in its left, using it to destroy the spike Novem had conjured. It was truly a surreal sight. It was almost like the orc’s impaled, torn-up body was piecing itself back together.

“Tch,” Zelphy clicked her tongue. “This is the worst. It’s all going to shit!”

“Go on, Lyle,” the fifth head urged. “End it. Don’t just wait for it to recover.”

I leapt forward, driven by the fifth head’s words. I began to swing both of my sabers at the orc. Zelphy hurriedly joined me, along with her sword, but no matter how we sliced up the monster, its body never seemed to stop regenerating. Not only that, but the orc continued to swing its blade at us, despite the fact that it was missing half its body!

I backed off, looking down at the bloody sabers in my hand. I’d stabbed one of them through the gaping wound made in the orc’s body by Novem’s Earth Needle, piercing it straight through the heart.

But it was as if I’d done nothing at all. The orc continued to slowly regenerate. The monster had already regrown its right hand; it looked down at its palm as it opened and closed its regrown fingers, almost like it was trying to confirm whether or not it was fully functional.

“How...are we supposed to fight this...?” I mumbled in shock.

The problem came down to the fact that we were at a distinct disadvantage

when it came to the terrain. We were fighting an enemy that had to be destroyed by magic, since it regenerated if you sliced it or stabbed it, but we were in a terrible location to use magic. The fight would have been simple if we could just burn the orc whole, but we couldn't use fire magic since we were in a forest.

"I could use Arts to let us get away..." I started, but then quickly trailed off. "Never mind."

If I used the fourth head's Art, Speed, I could most likely outpace the monster. But even if I gave everyone else the ability to use my Arts, they wouldn't have any time to get used to using them. It would only make it more difficult for them to run. In the worst-case scenario, my Arts would trip them up, just like what had happened to Aria and Sophia during their fight. We'd end up leaving people behind to die by the orc's blade.

Despite our situation, the second head had somehow remained calm. "I see..." he mused. "That orc must have manifested an Art. Some sort of regeneration ability. You couldn't have picked a worse battlefield to deal with something like that. I'd love to just blow it away, but..."

Oh, that's right, I thought. I forgot monsters could manifest Arts too.

"Are you doubting him, Lyle?" asked the third head. "Remember, monsters undergo Growth just like humans do. It's not that odd for one of them to have an Art. Not that it's exactly common."

"If possible," I whispered, "do you think you could give me some advice on how to beat it?"

"Well, that's simple!" the founder said with a laugh. "Slice it up until it can't regenerate any—"

"You just have to run," the second head said, cutting his father off once again. "It's simple; you don't want to risk stimulating the dungeon by fighting here. You need to find a spot you can fight with all your strength."

"Even if I wanted to flee, where would I...?"

"You can't call it *fleeing*," the third head muttered. "You're luring it. That sounds far more optimistic, now doesn't it? As for your escape destination, just

ask the locals. They should know the shortest route out of the forest from here.”

“What’s the shortest way out of the forest from here?!” I cried, holding up one of my sabers.

For a moment, everyone froze. Then Lord Medard shouted, “I-It’ll be faster if we go through Pagan territory! Head across the river, that way!”

Why does Lord Medard of all people know something like that? I wondered.

But I didn’t have time to ask, so I just looked at Lord Dale and asked, “Is he correct?”

“Y-Yeah,” Lord Dale said hesitantly, his voice wavering. “But there aren’t many roads in that direction. No one goes there. If you want to get through—”

“That settles it,” the second head decided immediately. “If that way’s the shortest distance, it doesn’t matter whether it’s well kept or not. The way we got here wasn’t an easy trek either.”

The second head explained his plan to me: House Maini’s soldiers and the other members of our group would take the lead, guarding Novem as they navigated their way through the forest. I would take the rear, fighting the orc to buy us more time. Once Novem was stationed outside of the forest, I could lure the monster to her location and she could use her most powerful spell to finally kill it.

Zelphy had no choice but to keep the orc occupied as I explained my plan to the others. I could tell her energy was beginning to flag; it was no wonder, since she’d fought the monster for nearly the entire battle, and she’d even stalled it long enough for me to have the time to think the situation through.

“Get Novem out using the shortest route possible,” I told everyone. “I’ll buy you time. If you can prepare some markers to show me the way, I’ll be able to follow them and lure the orc to your location.”

“But you can’t!” Novem objected. “Not *alone*—”

Zelphy was out of breath already. “Lyle, you’re sure you can follow markers while fighting, right?”

“I’ll do my best,” I told her.

It would be difficult, but not impossible as long as I used my Arts. The problem was, I’d have to use Map while I was fighting. It was difficult for me to use multiple Arts at the same time. It was unbelievably tiring, plus it cost a hunk of my mana. It wasn’t like my concentration was endless either.

“Don’t propose an idea like that if you’re not confident!” Zelphy screamed at me.

The orc sliced its greatsword in Zelphy’s direction. Aria suddenly stepped out in front of her, having used her acceleration Art to reach the forefront of the battle in mere seconds.

“I c-can fight it too! Come on, rely on me...a little!”

Aria’s words prompted Sophia to take a stand as well. She took a swipe at the orc with her battle-axe. “I can do this!” she cried as the monster took a swing at her.

Sophia caught the orc’s blow on her axe. When I looked closer, I noticed that her feet were sinking into the ground.

“Hmm, that’s an interesting Art,” the third head said in a serious voice. “It can make things both heavier *and* lighter. Yes, all right... Why don’t you let those two fight along with you? If all three of you are distracting the orc, you should definitely be able to buy the others time.”

The third head might have recognized Sophia’s and Aria’s abilities, but the second head was markedly less enthusiastic.

“Good grief,” he mumbled. “Now we’re relying on two idiots. Lyle, make sure they don’t get injured.”

“Aria, please...” the founder wailed in a voice that would never reach her.

I clenched my hands around my sabers. “Change of plans—Aria, Sophia, you stay here with me and distract the orc. Everyone else, protect Novem and get moving.”

“You put that plan together fast,” Lord Medard muttered. “Got it. I’ll cooperate. Everyone, protect Miss Novem! Quit dawdling! We’re going to clear

the way for Lyle!”

That was when Pini’s voice rang through the wood.

A few moments ago, Pini had hurried over to Zappa. Zappa’s legs had given out on him again, so he’d just been sitting there on the ground, his hands clasped around his shoulders.

“Zappa, there’s a path nearby,” Pini told him. “It’s the same path we used to enter Maini territory!” He shook Zappa by the shoulders until Zappa’s face suddenly snapped toward him.

“D-Don’t be stupid,” Zappa muttered. “That path was dangerous... We can’t just go tearing down it... W-We’ve...gotta run...”

Pini cut him off before he could say anything more. “You’re actually going to just run away from this?! Everyone’s going to die! And you... You’ll be useless, right up to the end! Are you okay with that?!”

Pini was usually so weak-willed, but his tone had gone rough with emotion.

Lord Dale joined them, having heard their conversation. “There’s a path?!” he demanded.

They were in a pretty rugged area. It would be difficult for their group to make their way through territory that hadn’t been maintained. There was no doubt that in their travels they would stumble over many treacherous spots that they’d have to figure out how to navigate. If Pini and Zappa knew an even somewhat safe road, it would be far quicker if they took the lead.

Pini nodded at Lord Dale, then turned to Zappa. A stubborn expression had settled on his face. “I’ll stay behind and guide Lyle,” Pini told him. “You lead everyone through the woods.”

At first, Zappa was relieved to hear he wouldn’t have to stay. But then, he looked at Pini. “W-Wait,” he stuttered. “Why are you staying? Let’s both go and —”

Zappa might be stupid and hopeless, but he was still a part of House Pagan. He felt he had a responsibility to stop his childhood friend from doing

something dangerous.

“I’ve had enough already!” Pini cried. A wave of self-hatred came over him. He hated that he’d been able to do nothing for House Maini’s retainer even though the man had saved his life. “That man...he tried to save us. And what did we...what did we do? We just... This time, I *have* to...”

Paula peeked out at Pini from her place behind Lord Dale. “Oh, Pini...” she said softly. “Dale, let’s leave this to him. Zappa can guide us. Our first priority should be getting everyone out of here.” Frustration filled her voice. “All we’re doing...is holding them back,” she muttered.

There was nothing else they could do to help Lyle and his friends. Or, at least, *mostly* nothing. Lord Dale understood that.

“Please,” Lord Dale asked Zappa, “Lead the way. No, I didn’t say that quite right. You *will* lead the way. That’s an order. Everyone’s lives are depending on you.”

Zappa could only offer a few short nods in return. He climbed to his feet as Pini shouted in Lyle’s direction, “I’ll show Lyle the way out! Everyone else, Zappa will be your guide! Follow him!”

I mulled over Pini’s proposal. I wanted a guide, but I wasn’t sure I could protect Pini when I already had to look after Sophia and Aria.

“Let him do his job, Lyle,” the third head urged me. “Otherwise, Dale and Zappa are doomed. You need to give them a bit of the spotlight if you want to help smooth this situation over. Better yet, give them an opportunity to put their lives on the line.”

With this in mind, I came to a decision almost instantly. “Pini will remain with me, along with Aria and Sophia. Everyone else, get moving through the forest!”

“Lord Lyle...” Novem said, sounding reluctant.

“Just go!” I strengthened my tone. “The only one who can defeat that orc in one strike is you, Novem... You’re the only one!”

Novem hung her head and gritted her teeth, following Zappa as he made his

way into the trees. Lord Medard and his soldiers surrounded the two of them so they could protect them during the journey.

Someone had to be the one who was left behind, and the one who made the most sense was me; Novem couldn't fight in close quarters like I could, and she was better at magic than I was.

"Sorry about this," Zelphy said, looking at the four of us. "But I still consider myself an instructor. And you know...if I ran now, I'd be a total failure—as an instructor and your senior! Don't you go smearing my name!"

Zelphy had done so much already. I wished she'd just stand back and rest. Instead, she was pushing herself to stay behind with me and the others, even though she was still breathing in short pants.

But despite what I felt, when my mouth moved, it was to say: "Glad to have you on the team."

And so, five of us remained—Sophia, Aria, Zelphy, Pini, and me.

Sophia parried a swing of the orc's greatsword. "We just have to lure it in the right direction, yeah? We should be able to fight while retreating..."

Suddenly the orc opened its large mouth and let out a rending roar. The forest burst with activity.

"What's...?"

When I checked our surroundings with my Arts, I saw a bunch of red dots—and they were on the move.

Chapter 28: Say Its Name

Zappa led the small army as it proceeded down the mountain path. Lord Dale and Paula walked closely behind him, while Novem was protected deep within the army's ranks. As they moved along, Lord Medard's soldiers would go out in front of the group and clear away the tall grass and the more troublesome branches which blocked their way forward, making the precarious path slightly more manageable for the others.

Lord Medard, meanwhile, stuck close to Novem. The girl had told him that she was not used to traversing so deep within the woods, so he'd thought she would need some instruction on where to place her feet. And yet Novem made her way through the difficult terrain without issue; she didn't even appear to be breaking a sweat.

The lord found himself rather startled by how hardy and athletic she was, contrary to her endearing appearance. But that wasn't the only mystery when it came to Novem; the lord couldn't quite figure out how she was managing to keep up with the locals who had been learning how to navigate these woods their whole lives.

"You know how to carry yourself out here," the lord told her. "Have you trekked through a forest before?"

"I have, but it was a long time ago," Novem replied, her expression unchanging. "And only for a short time."

Lord Medard had thought at first that someone might have to carry the girl through the woods, and had been quite relieved to discover this would not be the case. They needed to get out of this wooded area—they didn't have a single moment to spare.

This area's gotten very, uh... Well, I guess it has been twenty years. It's understandable, I guess, that it has fallen into such disrepair.

Being here brought back memories of the times when he'd entered Pagan

territory in his youth. He'd been so young then—nothing more than an ignorant child. Even back then, there had been plenty of disputes between House Maini and House Pagan. The river had served as a clear dividing line between the two territories, but no one had kept watch over the portion of the border within the forest. The two houses would cross back and forth, infiltrating each other's territory.

Back then, I would vent my frustration by defeating monsters in Pagan territory. I thought it would make me strong...

A monster flew into Lord Medard's sight—a large moth. He smacked it down with his machete.

The monsters are gathering, it seems.

"Why the hell are there so many of them?" Zappa grumbled as Lord Dale swatted a moth down with his sword. They didn't have any time to collect its Demonic Stone or its materials, so they just left it there to rot. "It's never been this bad before..."

Novem glanced over her shoulder, back up the path. "Milord..." she murmured softly.

The sight put Lord Medard in a rather conflicted mood.

Back when Lyle had first come to visit House Maini's estate, he had brought Zelphy and Sophia with him. He'd brought them both the next he'd come as well. To Lord Medard, it had looked like Sophia was learning to let her hair down around the boy. He'd thought they were lovers, but now...

You're growing close to an outrageous man, Sophia.

If Lyle's only stand-out feature was the fact that he led around a team of lovely women, Lord Medard would have considered him quite dull. But now he'd seen the boy volunteer to fight against a horrific monster, and then follow that up by immediately proposing a measure to defeat it. His comrades, along with Sophia, had chosen to fight alongside him without a second thought.

I've heard that the Walts disowned their eldest son, but...why? Was it because of his womanizing?

Lord Medard couldn't help but question why Lyle had been cast from his house. He'd already known of Lyle's circumstances when they'd met for the first time at his manor. He'd thought the boy looked a tad unreliable, he recalled, but he hadn't thought Lyle was a bad person.

But no matter what questions the lord held, for the moment escaping the forest took priority.

"We're almost there! If we just get through—"

As Lord Medard watched, Zappa made it through a particularly hazardous stretch of terrain. Moments later, the end of the forest came into sight.

Farther down the path, Aria was locked in combat with the orc variant.

Her hands gripped her spear as she avoided swings from the monster's massive greatsword. She got in some attacks of her own as well; she dodged swiftly around the monster and thrust her spear into it whenever she had an opening.

I could tell Aria was using her Art to accelerate her movements; her Art was not so dissimilar from the fourth head's, in practice, apart from the fact hers provided a more instantaneous burst of speed.

"How is this thing's skin so tough?!" she snarled.

Aria's spear was of sturdier make than the ones the soldiers had used, but even though it hadn't broken, it didn't seem to be able to pierce the monster's skin.

I stepped forward, calling, "Aria, let's switch out!"

Our group had decided to fight the orc in pairs—Aria and I being one, and Zelphy and Sophia being the other. Zelphy and Sophia were on standby, resting at the next baiting point, while Pini was even farther up the path, scouting ahead. The plan was to continue slowly luring the orc out of the forest, fighting and resting at intervals.

It was a simple system, but the forest terrain still made it quite a struggle. We were lucky that the group of warriors who'd gone before us had cleared away

some of the tall grass and branches stretching across the path, making it somewhat easier to navigate. This gave us at least a hint of the path we should follow.

“G-Got it!” Aria stammered, beginning to move in my direction.

As I waited, I sliced through a goblin that had burst through the thicket of trees around us. We were having to fight other monsters on top of fighting the orc variant; our battle seemed to be drawing in any monsters in our general vicinity.

I waited until Aria had made it past me, then turned and ran.

As soon as the orc saw my unguarded back, it lifted up its greatsword and sent the weapon plunging through the air in my direction.

That was where the second head’s Art, All, came in—I used it to gain a detailed perception of my surroundings, which enabled me to tell where I needed to dodge even without looking.

The orc’s blade slammed into the ground right beside me, sending dirt flying in every direction.

“Maybe I can do a bit of damage with Limit Burst...” I muttered.

Using the founder’s Art seemed like my best bet to injure the orc. It would allow me to push beyond my own limits, exhibiting abilities I wouldn’t be able to otherwise. Unfortunately, my two sabers weren’t of very good quality. If I tried to tear through the orc’s thick hide, I wasn’t sure they’d do the job.

“If only you had a more reliable weapon...” the founder growled, a bit of frustration in his voice.

He’s probably thinking of the greatsword he used back in his day. A horse-slaying sword like that would certainly have a better chance against that orc than these sabers...

After Aria and I had run for a short while, we’d caught up with the rest of our party. Now it was Zelphy and Sophia’s turn to face the orc.

“Come at me, you orcish bastard!” Zelphy yelled.

"I... I can do this!" Sophia cried out, plunging forward.

I zeroed in on Pini. It was my job to find out our next stop from him.

"Is there any better place to fight along the way?" I asked him.

Pini shook his head. "I can't imagine so. From here on, the path is rugged and narrow... It's rare for people to ever come this way."

As I continued to walk, I glanced back at the battle.

Seems Sophia's taking the lead for now...

I turned away from the fight, looking over at Aria instead. She was breathing heavily.

She must be having a really hard time, I thought.

Aria wasn't used to fighting with her Art, and this was just about the worst environment she could possibly have to figure out how to make it work.

"Lyle, are you still good to go?" the second head asked, concerned.

I squeezed the Jewel in confirmation. My body did hurt a bit, but I could bear it.

"All right, then," the second head continued, "let all three of the girls sit the next fight out. Once you know the way, you should lure the orc by yourself."

The second head's concern was not for me, apparently. It was for the other members of our group. Perhaps that was only a natural response for him, with all the other members being women except for Pini.

"Lyle," the fourth head chided me, "you need to communicate more with your party."

Which means...he probably wants me to ask Aria if she's okay.

I heeded the fourth head's advice and did just that. "Are you all right, Aria?"

She forced a smile, but I could see she was in tatters from how reckless she'd been, fighting her way through the forest. She was drenched in sweat. I leaned over and started picking the leaves out of her hair.

"I'm going to have all three of you take a break at our next stop," I told her.

“Why don’t you go ahead of the rest of us and wait there? That way you’ll be on standby if we need help.”

“B-But if I do that...”

“My dear Aria is such a good girl...” the founder moaned, both moved and concerned by her attitude. “I don’t want to push her too hard.”

“Lyle, just tell her that resting is part of the plan,” the second head said in a slightly stronger tone. “If she tries to fight in her current state, she’ll just get in the way.”

Even though the second head is always calling Aria a nuisance, I thought, he seems like he’s worried for her in his own way. He probably just can’t bring himself to say how he really feels.

I broke from my thoughts, focusing back on Aria. “Once we catch back up to you, I’m planning on having all three of you girls fight the orc together. I want to get some rest myself, so I’m counting on you to buy me some time.”

Aria paused for a moment, thinking over my words, then finally nodded.

Sophia’s clothes stuck uncomfortably to her skin. She could feel sweat dripping over herself as it poured from each and every one of her pores.

Lyle was currently fighting the orc alone so the three of them could get some rest.

“If only I could...use my Art better...” she groaned softly.

Sophia’s Art allowed her to regulate the weight of things. Novem had told her it was a peculiar Art, one that was quite rare. Thanks to this newfound ability, Sophia was now able to alter the weight of her battle-axe and swing it around without repercussion. She’d even discovered that she could increase the weight of the axe as she swung it downward, producing a stronger strike than she was typically capable of. She wasn’t accustomed to this technique yet, however, and had a hard time getting the timing right.

Currently, Sophia’s axe was the only weapon that could properly clash with the orc variant’s blade.

Sophia's attention strayed to where Aria sat leaning against a tree, hugging her spear to her body. As she watched, Aria tried to take a swig from her water canteen. *Tried* was the operative word; the water was long gone.

Seeing this, Sophia had the sudden urge to drink some water herself. She began to search for her own canteen. Alas, she must have dropped it somewhere along the path, for it was not at her waist.

She let out a long sigh.

Lyle's out there buying us time, she thought, and all I'm doing is taking a break.

Sophia found herself watching Zelphy, who was still on her feet. The older woman was on high alert, focused on securing the area so the others could be sure of a safe rest. Whenever she noticed any odd monster wandering into the area around their resting spot, Zelphy would jump into action.

In a moment of downtime, Zelphy tossed a canteen at Sophia.

"Stay hydrated," she told her firmly.

"Oh, but... Umm..."

It was clear that Zelphy had tossed Sophia her own canteen. If Sophia drank it, then Zelphy wouldn't have any water, and Zelphy was far more tired than either of the other two girls.

"You idiot," Zelphy snapped, waving off Sophia's concern. "Do you seriously think you greenhorns could beat me when it comes to stamina? I'll be counting on you again in the next round, Sophia, so you'd better rest up right. Aria, how are you holding up?"

Aria just looked at Zelphy and nodded. At this point even her hair was drenched in sweat.

"We're nearly there," Pini said to the three of them. "We'll be out of the woods soon."

"When a local says almost, it usually feels like a long way to us outsiders," Zelphy said, scratching her head awkwardly. She glanced down the path to where Lyle was fighting. "You know...Lyle's proving to be quite reliable in times

of crisis like this.”

Sophia took a swig of water from Zelphy’s canteen, then wiped her mouth.

“You’re right,” she said, nodding. “Sometimes it’s like he becomes someone else entirely.”

Sophia had noticed that whenever things got difficult, like they had during the bandit subjugation, Lyle would suddenly become more reliable than usual.

I know I can count on him, she thought. From the bottom of my heart, I know it.

“Lyle, how about you smack some of that mud into the orc’s face?” The third head suggested. “If you can crush its eyes while you’re at it, it’d be a whole lot easier for you to fight.”

These words brought me to a momentary stop as I looked down at the sabers I held in both hands.

Did he seriously just suggest that I throw down my weapons and pick up mud instead?!

“He means *with your feet*, Lyle,” the sixth head said with a chuckle. “You can kick up mud with your feet. You shouldn’t bother crushing its eyes, though; this thing will just regenerate them. The mud should do the trick.”

Something seemed to occur to the fifth head at that moment. “Go on, Lyle, give it a try!” he exclaimed. Despite his vehemence, he still somehow managed to maintain his air of indifference. “Well-mannered fighting is not always enough to keep one alive. Think of this as...practice. Practice, I say! Oh, and make sure you crush the eyes too. Just for practice, you know...”

They can’t be serious, I thought incredulously. How could they actually want me to use a variant like this orc for fighting practice?!

“You’re all enjoying this far too much!” I told them sternly.

I avoided the orc’s next strike, then scooped my boot down into the mud until a clump had formed over my laces. I kicked my foot forward, then, sending the mud clump flying at the orc’s face.

I waited till the monster started to try and scrape the mud off, then used my sabers to slice at its eyes.

A mixture of blood and muck splattered the area around us.

Despite its injuries, the orc seemed unmoved. The regeneration of its wounds began almost immediately.

The third head whistled. "Not bad," he said. "Looks like you're able to properly aim your blade at a small target. You definitely have good technique, if nothing else."

My eyes narrowed.

You don't have to make it sound like technique is the only thing I have, third head, I thought, stung.

"What next?" the second head asked, voice pensive. "Do you want to try blinding it with projectiles?"

The third head snapped his fingers in agreement. "That's a great idea. You heard him, Lyle! Hop to it."

"I know you guys get to take it easy in there," I said sarcastically, "but do I look like I have that kind of leeway?!"

The orc raised its greatsword.

I jumped out of range of its swing, eyes focused on how the orc was handling its greatsword. With each swing, the orc's weapon handling improved a small bit. It was getting used to its sword little by little, slowly mastering it.

I looked down at my sabers. They might be low-grade, mass-produced pieces, but they'd been brand new when I bought them. Now they were in tatters.

I'll either have to buy better sabers next time, or switch to a different weapon.

Each time I hit the orc, the sensation that rattled up my blade was the same as if I had been trying to slice into a moving boulder. Cutting through such tough skin was obviously far beyond what these flimsy blades could handle.

"It's almost like I'm fighting a rock..."

I started running toward the next baiting spot, drawing the orc along behind

me.

As I moved, I used Map to check the distance to the edge of the forest; we'd already traveled a good distance up the path, and our exit point wasn't too far. From the movements of the markers, it looked like Novem and the others were already outside and preparing for our arrival.

"Couldn't we have chosen a path that was a bit easier to walk on?" I grumbled.

"You think there's an easier path to walk in *this* forest?" the second head laughed. "They don't even bother to maintain the place. It would've been the same no matter which path we chose, Lyle. If you traveled any other way you'd only have to deal with the big guy back there for even longer."

He had a point, I could admit. Plus, fighting like this was hard on my mana and stamina.

I sighed. *Maybe it really was best to take the shortest route.*

"Now then, that should be good enough," the third head told me. Apparently he'd been keeping track of time. "Let's move on to the next point."

I turned my back to the orc again, leading it up the path. It immediately started chasing me. It swung its greatsword, and I just barely managed to perceive the swing in time to dodge it using the second head's Art.

To be honest, I was reaching my limit.

I went tearing down the path that I'd verified earlier with Pini. As I lured the orc on, I almost tripped and stumbled several times over various types of forest debris.

"Ugh," I groaned. "I'm starting to feel completely pathetic."

As I ran and ran, a feeling of self-hatred came over me. I hated that I was running away.

"Hey, don't be so serious," the third head said, chuckling. "It's not like you don't have a plan; you're not just running away because you're scared. This is an operation you're staging to lure him out of the woods. You should be happy

it's going so well. We've only got one last stretch to go from here, and then we've done it."

That cheered me up a bit. He was right—that mindset made things a lot easier.

I do want to figure out some measures I can take if I find myself in a circumstance like this again, though.

Finally, I arrived at where the other four were waiting for me.

I ran past the group of girls and continued down the path, Pini at my side.

"Good luck buying time!" I called over my shoulder.

"Just leave it to us!" Zelphy called back, raising a hand.

Novem stood in the open area outside of the forest, preparing her magic as she waited for Lyle and the others. She was completely convinced that Lyle's plan would succeed.

It's all right... she told herself, gripping her silver rarium staff with both hands and closing her eyes. *Lord Lyle will make it here without fail. And with those two and Zelphy by his side... It will be all right.*

Novem tried to convince herself that everything would work out, repeating the words "It's all right" over and over again in her mind.

Zelphy has experience, she reminded herself. *She won't lose without putting up a fight. And he's got Aria and Sophia as well. Aria's Art is acceleration—she won't lose to that adapted seed so easily. And Sophia has weight manipulation, she can even fight the orc head-on if necessary.*

Novem soothed herself with these thoughts. She understood both girls' Arts well enough to know just how valuable they were. Just as she knew the orc was an adapted seed...

Aria aside, it was a spot of good luck for us to come across Sophia, Novem thought. *We can use her. It'll be a nuisance if they get done in, so...*

Novem broke from her thoughts and slowly opened her eyes.

She was surrounded by people from House Pagan and House Maini. All she had left to do was to invoke her spell. As her eyes adjusted, she heard the sounds of battle erupt from near the edge of the forest.

“Here they come...” she murmured.

Most of them must have survived. They wouldn't be able to put up such an intense fight otherwise.

“Pini!” Lord Dale cried out.

It seemed Lord Dale's friend had been the first one to breach the tree line.

Novem brandished her staff, falling into her magic-casting stance.

The four of us had made it to the edge of the forest; our exit was in sight.

Unfortunately, escaping wasn't our ultimate objective.

Instead of running out into the clearing beyond the trees, the four of us were engaged in combat with the orc, who was, well...trying to wade its way back into the depths of the forest.

“You don't get to go back after we got you to come this far!” Zelphy snarled.

The third head let out a thoughtful hum. “Did it figure out what we were doing?” he asked, sounding mildly surprised. “Well, maybe it just got a bad feeling.”

“You see them, now and then—the smart ones,” said the second head; it seemed he'd caught on to whatever the third head had been thinking. “There are clever goblins, so I'm sure there are clever orcs.”

“There's no way these things know how to think!” the founder roared.

The fourth head started to say something to the founder, then paused and appeared to rephrase. “Well, if you think about it logically, there are humans who make their way through life without a single thought in their heads; if that's possible, what's to say there aren't smart monsters?”

As the founder mulled over this statement, the fourth head redirected his attention to me. “Still, it could be that it's trying to flee since you've weakened

it considerably, Lyle.”

“If it manages to escape, all your hard work will have been for nothing,” the fifth head said in his usual, emotionless voice.

The sixth head didn’t seem particularly bothered by this potential failure. “If that happens, all it’ll mean is that a troublesome fiend is still making itself at home in these woods. Lord Medard’s benefactor will no doubt do something about it. Though it would make all we’ve gone through feel like a waste.”

The seventh head growled in irritation.

“Lyle’s prey is getting away!” he grumbled.

None of us had wanted our fight to end here. We wanted to bring our plan to fruition—that’s why we’d all surrounded the orc and continued to fight.

Aria held up her spear, circling around to cut off the orc’s escape path.

“You don’t get to leave!” she cried. “Not after all you put us through!”

“Get out there already!” Sophia snarled as she took a swing at the monster with her battle-axe.

The blade of Sophia’s axe dug deep into the orc’s arm, but it hadn’t gone far enough to sever it entirely.

The orc began to thrash, the violence of its motions lifting Sophia into the air before finally tearing her hands from the hilt of her axe.

Sophia let out an endearing little “Kyah!” as she was sent flying through the air.

I rushed over to where she was going to land and caught her in my arms.

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled miserably.

“No worries,” I told her. “Just please stand down for now.”

In the distance, Sophia’s battle-axe fell to the ground, pushed from the orc’s wound by the monster’s regenerating flesh.

The monster reached out to pick it up, but Zelphy quickly blocked it.

“Not on my watch!” she cried. “That thing’s already hard enough to handle

with that sword. We're not giving it a new weapon."

Should I use my trump card? I pondered as Zelphy held the orc at bay.

"I might be able to force out Limit Burst if I tried..." I mumbled consideringly.

Sophia grabbed my hand.

"Lyle," she said, "please use my weapon."

I looked at the battle-axe on the ground.

Now there's a weapon that can match up against that orc variant...

I stabbed both of my sabers into the earth.

"I'll take you up on that," I told her.

I took off toward the axe, calling out the name of the founder's Art as I ran.

"Limit Burst!"

Blue symbols etched in light surfaced over my body as I scooped up the fallen axe from where it lay on the ground. My strength had increased, along with my perception; it felt like the scenery around me had suddenly become more vivid.

I closed the gap between myself and the orc in an instant, swinging Sophia's axe horizontally through the air.

The blow didn't land; the orc blocked it with the body of its greatsword.

"Brute force...isn't gonna cut it," I breathed as I continued to fight.

Limit Burst had increased my physical strength. In a battle against an orc, this additional power would usually grant me the upper hand. Even against a foe as mighty as this variant, the battle was now slanted in my favor.

I swung the axe again, cleaving a nasty groove into the monster's body from its belly to its chest.

But the wound...immediately closed up.

I kept fighting, inflicting wound after wound on the orc, before a realization finally came over me.

"I can't push it back," I mumbled to myself numbly.

Even with Limit Burst, I didn't have the strength to push the orc into the clearing beyond the forest's edge.

Sparks flew as Sophia's battle-axe collided with the orc's blade. The axe was sturdy, as befit an heirloom of House Laurie.

It might even be made of a type of rarium, like Novem's silver staff, I thought.

Aria and Zelphy were blocking the orc's path so it couldn't escape back into the forest, but at this rate, I would reach the Art's limit and collapse.

I... I need more power...

The scene the founder had shown me in the Jewel flashed through my mind. I could see him, clad in flames, heroic and fierce as he'd defeated the earth dragon.

If only I had that kind of strength...

The moment that thought entered my head, the symbols laying over my skin began to quiver. Something was happening in my body. It felt like something hot was about to explode out of me.

Why is this happening to me...?

For some reason, it felt as though I wasn't that far from activating the third stage of the founder's Art.

There was only one problem—I didn't know its name.

"If I just knew its name, then..."

Then I can get it to work. All I need is that tiny little phrase.

From his place within the Jewel, the founder noticed a change come over Lyle.

"Lyle, you... You can already go that far without me teaching you at all?"

The founder hadn't reached the third stage of his Art until he was in the prime of his life, not long before he'd fought the earth dragon. Yet at the age of fifteen, Lyle had almost invoked it as if it were nothing.

The founder could tell the boy was trying to forcefully draw the Art out of

himself, even though he hadn't taught that kid a thing about it. He opened his mouth, trying to tell Lyle his Art's name, but then stopped as he noticed small grains of blue light beginning to break off from his body. The dazzling sight was reflected in the eyes of all the other past heads of House Walt.

"Dad..." the second head muttered.

"Ah, I see," the founder said, looking at his right hand and clenching it. "So that's what's going on here. Guess I should have seen it coming. If that's what our role is...then it should be obvious how it ends."

The founder laughed as he scratched up his hair, but something about his laughter sounded lonesome as well. He hung his head and stood from his seat. Then he lifted his face and stared at the scenes of the outside world projected above the table.

"There were a few more things I wanted to teach him," he said softly. "But, yeah. Anything I can teach him, you guys can teach better. This is as good a time as any for me to go."

The founder had wanted to continue watching Lyle grow, but he knew what he was. What *all of them* were. The Jewel had revived the memories of its past wielders to teach Lyle their Arts. Not to transmit their knowledge or experience.

"Now that I think about it...there's nothing more for me to say to him. Nothing more for me to teach him. Good grief," the founder said as he folded his arms and watched Lyle fight the orc. "I'm so pathetic..."

"Any words you'd like us to pass on for you?" the third head asked.

The founder shook his head. "Not yet. I won't allow myself to disappear yet. I'm a stubborn guy. It's what the missus always praised me for. She was always saying that if someone actually managed to kill me, I'd never stay dead."

The missus—that was what the founder called the woman who he'd married.

The fourth head adjusted his glasses with a slight chuckle. "What an...incredible compliment. I can't even tell if she was praising you at all."

"Oh, I have no doubt about that!" the founder chortled. "Anyways, what I'm trying to say is, I'll tell him what I need to all by myself. Most importantly, I at

least need to give him... Give Lyle my goodbyes.”

The founder raised up his burly arms and slammed them onto the round table. It was a strike great enough to rock the room itself; the eyes of each of the other historical heads widened at the impact.

The founder lowered his head to his six descendants. “Can you six take care of the rest? That kid’s my descendant, and he’s a good guy. He’s proof that even the blood of someone like me can be passed down for centuries.” The founder broke into a smile, momentarily distracted. “And to think I even got to see Miss Alice’s descendant...” He sighed then, becoming serious once more. “I know Lyle’s unreliable, but...please try and help him out a bit.”

“Y-You idiot!” the second head snapped, clenching his fist. “He’s our descendant too! Isn’t it bloody obvious? Don’t worry about something like that. It’s not like you.”

The founder tilted his head back and laughed up at the ceiling. “I’m counting on you. You’re all a whole lot more reliable than me. I’m just an idiot, ya see. The only thing I can really do for Lyle is entrust him to all of you.”

Now that the founder had settled into his resolve, his chair vanished from the round-table room. In its place, a greatsword manifested. It was a silver horse-slaying sword like the one the founder had used when he was alive.

“What’s this?” the founder asked, staring at the sword as he smiled. “Looks like I can leave him something after all.”

The founder had understood the moment he’d seen the sword. *This* was the weapon he would be leaving to Lyle.

At that moment, the founder turned to the ceiling and shouted, “Lyle, my Art is already yours! Say its name! Full Burst...that’s my final Art!”

Outside of the Jewel, Lyle’s head lifted. He’d heard the founder’s words.

Chapter 29: Lyle's Growth

"Lyle, my Art is already yours!" the founder roared. "Say its name! Full Burst...that's my final Art!"

He sounded terribly delighted for some reason, but I didn't have the time to linger on his attitude—I needed to break through the stalemate I was in with the orc.

"Full...Burst!" I screamed, invoking the third stage of the founder's Art.

The pale symbols covering my body shattered as blue flame gushed forth from inside of me. I could feel power surging up from the deepest depths of my being. The power burst inside of me like an explosion, and somehow I knew that the strength I possessed now was absolutely incomparable to what I had wielded before.

I grinned. "This'll do it..."

I narrowed my eyes at the orc, taking one powerful step forward. I could feel the muscles in my arms swelling as I readjusted my grip on Sophia's battle-axe.

Power bubbled up inside me, spilling out in waves.

"Sorry, but it's over for you," I told the orc.

I closed in on the monster, axe held aloft.

The orc fell into a defensive stance, bewildered by my new speed.

The Jewel gleamed blue light as I tore the axe through the air in a vertical slash, cleaving through the orc's body—greatsword and all.

The orc's face colored in shock as it staggered back, its wound beginning to regenerate immediately. The sword, however, seemed to repair itself more slowly—it would be some time before the monster could wield it again.

The orc seemed to realize something had changed about me. It turned, casting aside the splintered hilt of the greatsword in favor of fleeing into the forest.

I immediately moved to cut off the monster's escape route, Zelphy and Aria at my side. The two girls shifted their positions until the three of us had surrounded the orc.

The monster's eyes lingered on the battle-axe I held in my hand—the mere sight of me holding it seemed to strike terror in its heart. But moments later its eyes shot away, focusing in on Sophia, who was still unarmed.

Sensing a possible weak point, the orc launched itself toward her.

I pulled my arm back before whipping it forward, sending the battle-axe flying in Sophia's direction. It cut an arc through the air before slamming into the ground by her side.

Sophia snatched the weapon from the earth, then immediately tore the blade through the air in a powerful swing.

"Take this!" she cried.

The orc had no weapon with which to defend itself, so Sophia's attack sliced a deep gash into its arm.

Now that Sophia was using the axe to keep it in check, the monster found itself surrounded once again. With no other options available, it merely stood and waited for its wounds to heal.

The next time the orc tried to flee, it decided its best bet was to run out of the trees.

We let it go, following close behind.

"Keep up the pressure!" I called out to the others.

We burst out of the trees moments after the orc. I caught sight of Novem where she stood surrounded by soldiers, her staff held at the ready.

The orc had frozen, left dumbfounded by the sight of what awaited it outside the woods.

Has it realized we've been baiting it? I wondered. If it has, we have to act fast. We need to take it out before it gets away.

"Novem!" I cried out.

She glanced over at me, a look of mild surprise flickering over her face as she took me in.

What is she surprised for? I wondered. *Maybe the pale blue flames are what got her...?*

Novem's surprise didn't last long, however. As she looked at me, a beaming smile broke out across her face, accompanied by a look so delighted it must have come from the bottom of her heart.

When she finally looked away, she thrust the butt of her staff into the ground in front of her.

"Here I come!" Novem cried. "Flame Burst!"

Flame Burst was considered to be quite a high-level spell—if you found yourself a book that listed all the different types of fire magic, you'd find it classified near the top.

Zelphy and the others had braced themselves, ready to jump out of the way of Novem's attack, but I held up a hand to stop them.

The orc bounded forward, but the next time its feet hit the ground, a magic circle manifested beneath it. The circle was vast, its shape comprised of a complex array of red lines.

I could already feel the temperature of the air around us rising.

The orc took this in, took one look at Novem, and turned—much to our misfortune—right back in our direction.

"Oh, I see," the third head said with a sigh. "Novem's clearly the bigger threat here."

It seemed the orc found Novem even scarier than it found us. Its face was the epitome of desperation, its features locked into an expression of true terror. It looked a bit sorrowful, even—though perhaps that was my imagination.

But, that aside...

"We can't let it run away!" I yelled.

No matter how strong Novem's spell was, it would be pointless if it didn't

make contact. When it came to magic, the most important skill was actually the ability to hit your mark. In pure output, I could likely rival Novem...probably.

At the moment, we were in no condition to stall the charging orc. I'd retrieved my sabers, but they were no match for the toughness of the orc's skin. Zelphy and Aria were exhausted, and their weapons weren't too effective either—they couldn't pull it off any more than I could. Sophia was hardly any better—she seemed like she was only managing to stay on her feet by clinging to the handle of her axe. Her face was drawn with pain.

We had all reached our limits, and I couldn't be sure if Novem had another spell in her or not.

Sparks spouted from the circle. At this rate, the orc would get away. All our troubles would have been for—

"You fool!" the founder howled. "What are you giving up for? Even if your weapon's no good, you've still got your own two fists! Show 'em what you're made of, Lyle!"

The founder's words might have been harsh, but the feeling in his voice made it clear he believed in me more than anyone else.

I found myself smiling as I tossed my sabers aside and took off, rushing to meet the orc as it barreled toward us.

"Oi, what are you...?!" Zelphy cried out from behind me, her words fading as the distance grew between us.

As I drew near to the orc, a torrent of flames began to pour from the magic circle Novem had conjured. The spell would soon be invoked.

I knotted my hands into fists and pulled them back, preparing myself for battle. The blue flames pouring from my body coiled around my wrist in accordance with my will, burning as brightly as ever.

The orc raised its own fists, telegraphing a giant swing. It let out an intimidating roar from its gaping mouth as it tried to knock me out of the way.

"It's over for you!" I screamed at the monster.

I heard the founder roar, "Give it to him good!" but I was already in motion to

do just that.

I kicked off the ground, hips twisting as my fist plunged toward the orc.

The world abruptly seemed to snap into slow motion. I watched as my knuckles made contact with the orc's ghastly face, my fist sinking deep into its cheek.

The force of my strike was like an explosion—the sheer might of it shook the air with a *boom* as the orc went flying off its feet. It went soaring through the air, straight toward the fiery maelstrom that had manifested behind it.



As it flew helplessly toward the flames, the orc turned its head to look at Novem, stretching out a single hopeless hand.

Mere seconds later, it was swallowed up by the maelstrom, never to be seen again.

The world sped back up as I slid from the air back to the ground. As soon as I landed, I waved my hand and called out, "Ice Wall."

I'd only intended to shield myself from the flames of Novem's spell, but my magic seemed to be out of control. A massive wall had formed in front of me, blocking the inferno's heat with layers upon layers of ice.

I had only stood there for a few seconds, staring at the wall, when I noticed the girls walking over. Or more like stumbling over, in Sophia's case. Aria had her shoulder wedged under one of Sophia's arms, keeping her from falling over.

"Ha ha ha," Aria chuckled weakly, staring up at the massive pillar of flames. "I'm spent... I don't ever want to fight anything like that again."

"I'll have to agree with you on that one..." Sophia replied.

Zelphy seemed to be of a somewhat different opinion.

"Stay in the business long enough, and you'll find yourself facing monsters a helluva lot worse than that one," Zelphy told them. "Get strong if you want to live. Right, Lyle...? H-Hey!"

The flames coiling around my body were about to peter out. A terrible sense of fatigue had come over me. No matter how much I wanted to move my body, no matter how much I wanted to maintain consciousness, I had hit my limit.

I see, so this is that problem the founder mentioned... I thought. Full Burst has a terrible recoil effect on the user.

"S-Sorry," I mumbled. "You guys...take care of the rest..."

Footsteps pounded in my direction as my eyes drifted shut and I collapsed to the ground.

Everything went dark.

A day had passed since the events in the forest, and Lyle's party had decided to take some time off to rest and recuperate once they'd returned to House Pagan's settlement after the joint investigation.

The battle against the orc had been brutal, and everyone was exhausted. The entire party, excepting Novem, had collapsed into their beds once they'd finally made their way back to their borrowed hut.

Dawn had shifted all the way to dusk as Novem lingered at Lyle's side, nursing him instead of resting like the others. He still looked like he was in a good deal of pain.

"Does your body hurt, Lord Lyle?" she asked, concerned. "Even if it does, you should still eat something."

"I don't want to..." Lyle moaned.

A terrible, washed-out feeling had settled into his bones, coupled with an immense sense of lethargy and intense muscle pain. He was in such a poor state that he couldn't even sit up. And now he was rejecting the porridge-like concoction Novem had prepared for him.

Novem brought a wooden spoonful of the porridge to his mouth regardless.

Lyle ate a reluctant mouthful, then muttered, "It's bitter."

"I used a few medicinal herbs as ingredients," Novem told him with a smile. "They should put you at ease once they kick in."

She scooped up another spoonful of porridge and ferried it over to his mouth.

Lyle was not shy in expressing his clear distaste for the concoction, but Novem was adamant enough that he eat it that he allowed her to feed him one more spoonful.

"It's...so bitter..." Lyle moaned again, but no one reacted.

Though perhaps it would be more accurate to say that no one had the willpower to react...

"Ungh..." Aria groaned as she struggled to turn over.

"E-Everything...smarts..." Sophia grumbled.

Zelphy was restoring her stamina through sleep.

Novem looked over all of them with a smile.

“You all did wonderfully,” she said. “Apparently negotiations are scheduled to resume the day after tomorrow.” She looked at Lyle. “Both Lord Dale and Lord Medard seemed tired, but I believe the real reason their meeting was delayed for so long is because they both felt it was important to wait until you were able to be present for their discussion.”

“Do I look like I care?” Lyle murmured vacantly.

Novem just stroked his forehead.

“Please get better soon, milord,” she said.

Novem continued to nurse Lyle and the other four members of her party as dusk deepened into night. She wasn’t even close to being in peak condition, but she felt it was her duty to care for them, as she was the only one who could actually move.

She was watching Lyle, who was still pale-faced and clearly fighting pain and other bodily aches, when a knock came at the hut door.

Novem swung the door open and walked outside; her eyes quickly found Paula, who was waiting silently on the hut’s doorstep.

“Umm...” The House Pagan girl lowered her head, then shouted, “Thank you for everything!”

Novem offered her a gentle smile. “Don’t worry about it. It might have been Lord Lyle’s decision to stay and help, but it was a fine experience for all of us.”

Despite the tension between the territories, and the difficulty of the battle with the orc variant, Novem considered this venture to have been an incredible benefit to their party.

And that’s not even taking into account how Lord Lyle managed to pull off Lord Basil’s Art. Something must have happened to trigger it. In fact, I think I know just what it was...

From Novem’s point of view, she should have been thanking House Pagan, not the other way around.

“The lords have decided to pardon Pini,” Paula explained. “He’s already left for House Maini territory so he can return the mended armor to the retainer’s family and inform them of what happened during his last moments. House Maini discovered that Pini was the one who sent them the letter that led them to the remains of their retainer, but thankfully they ultimately decided to forgive him.”

Paula’s expression was one of heartfelt relief.

Seems like she was more concerned for Pini than she was for Zappa, Novem mused.

Pini might have been threatened by Zappa into carrying the retainer’s body into House Pagan territory, but he’d still been brave enough to decide to inform House Maini of their retainer’s death. And instead of selling off the dead man’s armor, as Zappa had ordered him to, Pini had had it repaired and returned it to the retainer’s family. He’d kept his actions secret from Zappa, who had wanted to use what little money they could get from the armor to scrounge up a weapon for himself.

Pini had also shown great courage during the battle with the orc variant, and had pushed through his fatigue after to head straight to House Maini to meet with the retainer’s family and try to offer them what closure he could.

With all this taken into consideration, it made sense that Pini had managed to get the lords to forgive him. But he was the *only* one who had been thus forgiven.

Naturally, Zappa had received no such pardon from House Maini or House Pagan.

“That’s good to know,” Novem told her. “Also, and this was bothering me... Was Zappa the reason you couldn’t marry Pini?”

Paula’s eyes widened.

She nodded and said, “I’m not sure if Pini knows, but there were talks of marriage between us three years ago. My father and the previous head knew Pini was learned in reading, writing, and arithmetic, and they’d already taken a liking to him besides. They told me they thought he’d do a good job managing

things around the settlement.”

Paula sighed. “I think perhaps Zappa grew frustrated when he heard Pini and I might get married. He probably thought that if he got some merits under his belt, he might be able to marry me instead. And so he went out and did something...*truly* idiotic. He’s always selfishly making a mess of things...and because of him, my father...” Paula choked on tears. “I *despise* him.”

“I see,” Novem muttered.

Paula’s story made sense. Her house served as the settlement’s main mediating force, so combat strength had never been a priority to them. They’d been looking for a husband for Paula who had the skills necessary to become a supervisor, and management skills were on the top of that list. Pini’s ability to do desk work like reading, writing, and doing math had naturally been of high value to them.

Zappa had never had a chance with Paula—he’d been gravely mistaken from the very start. Unfortunately, his misunderstanding had caused him to go off on his own while House Pagan had been at war, and his foolish actions had caused the deaths of both Lord Dale’s and Paula’s parents.

Zappa’s most recent actions were no different—he was the same oblivious kid he’d always been.

He’s completely different from Lord Lyle, Novem thought.

Lyle might be oblivious, but he was always trying to learn. Whenever he hit a roadblock, he’d think it over again and again until he could find a way to press forward with his own strength.

I’m so proud of you, milord, Novem thought affectionately.

“But,” Paula said, lifting her head, “this should be the end of all that. There aren’t any other candidates for my hand, and no one’s stopping me from making my own decisions. I’ll finally be able to be with Pini.” Paula smiled brightly at Novem. “So, thank you again.”

“Good for you, Paula,” Novem said softly.

She felt an abrupt pain in her heart at how happy the girl looked.

Am I...feeling envious of her? she wondered.

Paula thanked her once more before heading back into the settlement. Novem watched her go, feeling a tinge of jealousy over how easily Paula could be with the person she loved.

I woke on the day of the inter-house discussion free of fatigue, pain, and suffering. It was like I had been completely reborn.

I understood what was happening from the moment I opened my eyes, from the very moment the tingling sensation erupted throughout my body.

Yes—this was Growth!

I climbed to my feet and stretched, beaming at the light streaming in through the hut's window.

“What a refreshing morning. It's like I have been given a whole new life, a chance to start anew...! *Ah yes, so this is Growth!*”

I spread my arms wide, looking out at the scenery laid out before me. Every slice of the wild landscape outside my window felt new and different to my eyes. As if every single facet of the existing world was blessing my new, reborn self.

“Oh, I can *feel it*. I'm feeling it now...! My body—perfection! My mana—overflowing! Yes, I knew it... I...am...*amazing*.”

My past indecisiveness suddenly felt incredibly idiotic. What need was there to worry about anything? Now, I could do *anything*. The world was my oyster.

Yes... I was a brand-new man.

I held my arms out, spinning my body in a pirouette. As I swirled to a stop, I wrapped my arms around my bare chest and squeezed.

“Oh, this is incredible... I could soar through the open skies right now if I wanted to! Well no, maybe that's a bit much... But my spirits, at least, are sky-high!” I took a hearty breath. “My heart screams for *FREEDOM!!!*”

I planted one leg firmly on the ground, thrust my hands over my head, and

screamed, “*This* is Growth! *This* is the new me! I don’t have to be scared of anything anymore! I... I have been *reborn*! Congratulations, me! Thank you, me! You’re too cool, me! *I LOVE YOU, ME!!!*”

I burst into gleeful laughter.

“What’s *with* him?!” said a voice from the Jewel.

“I’ve n-never seen a post-Growth state this bad before... Heh... Heh heh...”

“He’s a prodigy... You’re the first prodigy since the founding of House Walt, Lyle!”

“So, they didn’t call him the Walt Wonder Child for nothing. But this is... Pfft...”

“Lyle...you’re an incredible guy.”

“I didn’t think he’d be this gifted. He really had me concerned when he was out of it for so long...”

“He might be one of history’s greatest...” There was a dramatic pause. “Laughingstocks, I mean! Bwa ha ha ha!”

My ancestors are just as delighted with my Growth as I am! I thought, delighted. *I mean, listen to them! They can barely stop themselves from laughing alongside me!*

Some of them were holding back better than others. The founder was howling, slapping his hands against the table inside of the Jewel.

I laughed hysterically to myself some more, then looked up and caught sight of Novem. She was standing in the doorway to the hut, a petrified look on her face. Aria stood behind her with a pail of water, with Sophia lingering close by.

“Something wrong, girls?” I drawled, flaunting my exposed torso as I brushed aside a chunk of beautiful, blue hair.

“Wh-Wh-What do you think you’re doing?!” Sophia stammered, her entire face flushing the color of a tomato. “Go put on some clothes! Have some decency!”

“Come, my dear Sophie, don’t be daft.”

“Since when do you call me S-Sophie?! I mean, I don’t mind, but it feels a bit sudden...”

I smiled at her. “You know, Sophie, I don’t think we need any clothes getting between us.”

One second Sophie was in front of me, the next she’d gone sprinting out the door. Aria stepped into the spot she’d vacated, spilling a little water from her pail as she did so.

“Hey, what was that supposed to—?”

I leaned forward. “You’re looking as beautiful as ever, Aria. I’ve had such a delightful time with you since we met that fateful day. I hope you know I wouldn’t trade it for anything in the world.”

The pail dropped from Aria’s hand, sending water splashing everywhere.

She stared at me, mouth opening and closing wordlessly, before swiftly flailing her way back out of the hut.

“Hmm...” I mumbled contemplatively. “I was trying to compliment her, but maybe I went about it wrong...” My gaze flicked to Novem. “Oh, Novem, that reminds me—I love you. I’d embrace you this instant if you’d let me.”

The ancestors had kept quiet as I’d regaled the girls, but the founder evidently couldn’t hold himself back any longer.

“He really went and said it!” he shrieked. “All this time he was so wishy-washy, and now he just flat out said it!”

“Why is he trying to seduce all three of them at once?” the fourth head demanded, appalled. “Still, he’s, ah, how should I put it...? He’s a real straight shooter.”

Back in the hut, Novem cleared her throat and smiled at me. “I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that, milord. And—”

“Why’s that?” I asked, hand falling to my hip. “Oh, wait. I’ve got it. You want me to make you fall for me all over again.” I gave her a wink. “I’ll take it from the top.”

Novem retreated a step and forcefully slammed the hut door shut behind her.

Sounds started to filter in from outside the hut.

Hmm... I thought. Sounds almost like... Maybe a plank being dragged? Oh, and that sounds like nails being hammered into wood!

Whatever Novem was doing, she was moving as fast as the wind.

Incredible! Now that's the girl I fell for.

"Ah, looks like Lyle's been sealed in," the third head said, snapping me back to reality.

How could this be? To think Novem had wanted to monopolize me so badly for all this time... Why, she's even swiftly getting to work on the windows!

"My apologies, Lord Lyle," Novem's voice said from the other side of the wall. "But this is in your best interest. I will forget everything that happened today, so please don't worry about it."

"What?!" I shouted back at her. "You mean you want a redo? What didn't you like about my confession, Novem?! Do you want me to whisper new sweet nothings into your ear every day?!" I let out a booming laugh. "As you wish, my dear. This is the start of something great, mark my words!"

"How is he so optimistic?" the second head said, chuckling. "It's like he's a completely different person."

"At this rate, we'll have to come up with a new name for him," the third head said, sounding most serious. "He's not just any Lyle... Sir... No, Mr. Lyle might fit. But to think he had such talent in him... Heh... Heh heh... Hwa ha ha ha ha!"

Even from outside the Jewel, I could tell he was rolling in laughter.

"Lord Lyle..." Novem mumbled, sounding like she'd been driven into a corner. "I'm sorry. I'm so...!"

She let out a sob, no doubt moved to tears by my confession of love. She continued to cry as she ran away from the hut, though I thought I heard a bit of laughter before her voice faded entirely away.

My words have filled her with joy, no doubt.

I struck a dashing pose in the empty hut and said, "They just can't be honest

with themselves. But that's what's so cute about them."

My ancestors burst out laughing from within the Jewel, and they didn't stop for a long, long time.

"Just quit it already!" I moaned from where I cowered on the ground of the round-table room. I held my head in my hands, then thought better and settled my hands over my ears.

Around me, my ancestors grinned as they repeated the words I'd said from morning 'til noon.

"You said it was a refreshing morning, but...it was pretty cloudy today, wasn't it?"

"I liked the bit about soaring through the sky."

"We don't need any clothes getting between us...' I'm surprised you thought that one up on the fly."

"And naturally, you've got to follow through and whisper sweet nothings into Novem's ear every day from now on, right? I'd love to hear that."

"I just liked the redo part."

"Don't forget, 'You want me to make you fall for me all over again.'"

"And 'My heart screams for *FREEDOM!!!*'"

I glared at the seventh head as he held his stomach and shook with laughter.

"You all know I wasn't in my right mind!" I protested. "B-Back then, why did I...? Why did I say any of that...? Goddammit!"

I slammed my head against the floor several times, but alas, my dreadful memories were as vivid as ever. I couldn't help but feel a rush of hatred toward myself.

Why do I have to remember everything in such detail, even when I try to forget?

I'd heard that Growth would put me in an energized state, but I hadn't thought it would be *that* bad. I'd felt almost omnipotent. It was terrifying, in a

way.

“Well, you were really a sight to behold, Lyle,” the third head said, all smiles as he approached me. “That state you were in...it’s almost like you became a different person. Why don’t we call that alter ego of yours Mr. Lyle?” When only silence followed this question, he continued, “Your personality change was amazing enough, but I hope you know your Growth was incredible too.”

This information did not improve my mood in the slightest. I covered my face, deigning to focus on the second head’s words instead.

“Your mana reserve went up by a large margin,” he told me. “And have a look at the ceiling.”

I slowly lifted my head to gaze at the large orb in the ceiling, which was surrounded by a scattering of smaller orbs. There were twenty-one of the small orbs in total, of which eight were now glowing. There was only one place where three of the glowing orbs were consecutively alight.

That’s probably because I learned all of the founder’s Arts, I thought.

The third head placed a hand on my shoulder, pulling my attention from the orbs.

“You already know the name of your own Art, don’t you?” he asked.

That morning, I’d realized what my personal Art was while I’d been in my agitated state. The name had come into my head as if I’d been hit by a flash of inspiration.

“I do, but...” I smiled weakly. “How should I put it...? I think my Art’s the least of my worries right now.”

“I know, right?” the third head agreed, patting my shoulder several times. “I mean, those three...they were all bright red. Your party will be awkward for a while, I reckon.”

Must be nice, I thought resentfully, being able to just sit back and just enjoy the chaos like it doesn’t concern you at all.

The fourth head lightly pushed his glasses, letting the lenses catch the light. “Now then, everyone... Why don’t we move on to the main point. Lyle, look at

the round table.”

I’d already noticed the massive horse-slaying sword floating over the round table, though no one else had seemed to be paying it any mind. The sword resembled the one the founder had used to wield—to be clear, it was both taller than me and incredibly barbaric-looking—though this one was silver with blue lines running across its surface.

The founder was sitting on the round table, head tilted back as he looked up at the sword.

“I gotta say,” he said, still staring, “that one looks even sturdier and more convenient than mine was.”

All of a sudden a realization hit me—the blade was floating right over the spot where the founder had used to sit.

“Huh? Where did the founder’s chair go...?”

The fourth head chose not to address this question, continuing, “Honestly, there are plenty of things we still don’t understand about the Jewel. As far as I can tell, the appearance of that blade means it’s able to reproduce the weapons we used in our lifetime. I’m of the opinion that this might be the influence of the rarium the seventh head added around the Jewel as ornamentation.”

“Honestly, I don’t know what’s happening,” the seventh head said, folding his arms over his chest. “That rarium was given to me as a gift, and though I was the one to put in the order to have it added around the Jewel, I don’t know the specifics of what was done. But I have no other way to explain this—that effect has to be caused by the rarium.”

So it seems like I can use that weapon now, but no one knows why... I thought. It would be pretty convenient if I could use the other’s weapons too...

In the end, I just shrugged.

“Well regardless, I’m thankful to have more weapons at my disposal,” I told them. “Do you think it unlocked since I learned all the stages of the founder’s Art?”

It didn’t seem like I was going to get an answer—all of sudden, all of my

ancestors except the founder had risen to their feet.

“Lyle,” the fourth head said softly, his face somewhat mournful, “you should speak with the founder. We’ll leave you two alone.”

With that, they all went off toward their respective rooms.

The founder stepped down from his spot on the table and looked at me.

“All right, we should get going,” he said, leading me toward his room of memories.

His chair might have disappeared, but his door still remained.

Chapter 30: Goodbyes

Once we'd stepped into the founder's room, the scene that spread out before us was much the same as the one I'd seen the time before. Although...it did seem that some time had passed for the founder's settlement. It was still a quaint little village, but I couldn't shake the feeling that something was off about it.

Then, it hit me: "The fields are kind of a mess, aren't they?"

The land that had previously been covered by fields in an orderly, systematic shape seemed to have begun a slow degradation into a lopsided mishmash. The disorder had affected the canals as well—they ran crookedly through the mass of jumbled fields. But despite how disorganized the village appeared at first glance, it was clearly growing in size.

As the founder and I strode down one of the village's streets, he raised a hand to scratch at his head in embarrassment.

"I wanted everyone to eat their fill," he mumbled. "So I did my best to spread out the fields, but..."

The founder trailed off at the sight of Crassel—now a young man—storming down the road with a grim look on his face.

"Ah..." The founder let out a gusty sigh as Crassel slipped past us, his sights locked on the form of an elderly Basil Walt.

This Basil had hair that appeared to be growing increasingly white, and seemed to have wasted away some from his golden days. He was still heading out to the fields, though—he clutched a spade in one hand.

"Give it a rest already, old man!" Crassel snarled.

"Hmph..." Basil snorted. He didn't even try to listen to Crassel's grievances. "What does me working in the fields got to do with you?"

The scene ended, the surrounding scenery fading to gray. Gradually our view

shifted and changed, until at last it settled on a version of the village that looked around ten years older.

I could see Crassel from where I stood—he and his vassals appeared to be hard at work maintaining the village. From what I could tell, Crassel was attempting to impose some order over the haphazardly expanded fields so they could be placed under proper management.

Basil, now an old man, walked silently past his son where he worked; the aging man had a hoe hooked over one shoulder.

Crassel didn't spare his father a second glance—he just kept on working.

"I thought growing the fields was our ticket to happiness," the founder rumbled. "I really gave it my all, but in the end, it was a mistake. I caused some real trouble for the second..." He paused for a moment, then finally continued, "For Crassel."

As we watched Crassel work, we saw his own people begin to send cold looks in his direction, muttering harsh words under their breaths.

"The last head was never this fussy," mumbled one of them.

"He messes with our fields and has the gall to call it maintenance," snarled another.

A third shook their head. "Man, at least I felt safe when his father was in charge."

Crassel paid them no mind—he just kept working his heart out.

"At this point, we were beyond words," the founder told me. "Even if we ran into one another at the mansion, he wouldn't say a thing to me." He let out a rueful laugh. "Well, I was pretty stubborn too, so it was silence both ways. You know, when I woke up in your time and he insulted me... It actually made me kinda happy. Made me wish I'd talked to him more when he was alive."

"Wait, what?" I asked, incredulous. "You guys didn't talk, all the way to the end?"

The founder folded his arms and chuckled. "Our memories pretty much cut off at the time we handed the Jewel over to our next generation. Everything

beyond that is somewhere between vague and nonexistent. To tell ya the truth, I don't even remember how I died."

I looked back over at Crassel. Despite the cold eyes of the villagers, he continued his work—work he was doing for their sake.

"This is about the only thing I can teach you," the founder continued. "You can push yourself and do your best, and yet still leave someone cleaning up after your mess." He sighed. "Though maybe that only happened to me because I'm an idiot."

As the founder's words settled, the scenery shifted once again.

It was early morning now. The light of the rising sun refracted through all the dewdrops coating the blades of grass growing under our feet. The air was clear.

The villagers were gone, as was Crassel. The founder and I were alone.

"U-Um..." I stammered.

I have a terrible feeling about this.

The founder straightened his shoulders. "Lyle. I, well... I think you're amazing. I mean, I didn't even teach you the third stage of my Art, and you almost dragged it out on your own! And you're a lot smarter than me. I didn't think that the blood of someone like me could lead to a kid like you. I'm proud of you—you don't even know how much."

"D-Don't just say that out of nowhere..." I mumbled, embarrassed. "What's wrong with you today? You're acting strange."

The founder gave a sad chuckle. "Lyle, what are your thoughts on Aria? She'll be a fine woman someday."

"As I told you before, I'm not really—"

"I see..." the founder said softly.

The founder's usual loud voice and overflowing energy seemed to have vanished. There was an itching at the back of my head, like my worst inkling was about to hit the mark.

It feels like...he's getting weaker.

“Still, be nice to her, won’t you? Aria’s my unrequited first love’s descendant. I mean, she’s a bit too lively, but she’s adorable, isn’t she? I want her to be happy. And I want you to be happy too.”

“Me?”

He looked me up and down and asked, “Lyle...have you decided on a goal yet?”

I hung my head. “I haven’t.”

There was no point in lying. I’d become an adventurer—I was aiming to be the best one I could be. But there was still some part of my heart holding me back.

Something is still falling short for me.

“Don’t worry about it,” the founder said gently. “Who knows? Someday, you might end up doing something so amazing, the likes of me could never even imagine it. Don’t forget about Ceres, though. She’s dangerous.”

Ceres was my sister, who was—according to the founder—possessed by a Heretical God. Supposedly these entities appeared at turning points in history to sow chaos. My other ancestors took this theory with a grain of salt, but our founder remained wary of her.

His eyes were serious on mine when he said, “I think you’re the only one who can stop her. Lyle Walt...I know you can do it.”

My legs quivered as I remembered my battle with Ceres. When I thought of how tattered she’d left me, and how bitter the taste of such an overwhelming defeat had been... Fear quickly filled me, taking over my body.

“Are you scared?” the founder asked. “You know... No, that’s not for me to say. You decide your own path. You don’t have to challenge Ceres if you don’t want to. Just live the life you want. Just *live*. Keep your eyes looking toward the future and follow your own path. That’s all I wish for.”

When I lifted my head, he was smiling.

“Why are you saying that now?” I asked. “Are you going to disappear on me?”

He chuckled. “I’ve been dead from the start. It’s stranger for me to be here than not. But...I still wanted to watch you doing the best you could, just a little

longer. I still wanted to watch you, and Novem, and Aria overcome the problems set before you and toil onward, just a little longer. I wanted to teach you all sorts of things... But then I realized that I don't have anything left to teach you anymore. I mean, fishing's about all I have left."

"Teach me how to fish, then," I said, trying to be selfish for once. "I've never fished before."

"There's not...enough time. I'm already at my limit."

The founder gave me a troubled smile. His body was breaking down, bursting away in grains of blue light.

But still, he lifted one of his hands into the air. "Lyle! Raise your hand!"

"O-Okay!" I managed, raising my right hand.

The founder walked toward me, slapping our hands together in a powerful high-five as he passed.

"Have some confidence," he said firmly. "I'm proud to be your ancestor. And...that last punch you got on that orc was cool. As expected of my descendant!"

Those...were his final words.

By the time I realized what was happening, I was back in the round-table room, standing where the entrance to the founder's room of memories had once been. His chair had disappeared, and now his door was gone too. The only thing left to serve as a reminder of his presence within the Jewel was the greatsword floating over his spot at the table.

The only one of my ancestors in the room was the second head. He sat in his own chair, his head hung and arms folded.

"The founder...disappeared," I said.

He gave me a slight nod in return. "I see."

A bolt of comprehension hit me. "You knew? Then why did you...?" I trailed off, then sighed. "You could have at least tried to get along a bit better with

him.”

In that moment, I was full of things I wanted to say to the second head, but I couldn't process them all at once. I was suddenly overcome with a feeling of loneliness and confusion.

Why does it have to be this way?

“When he was dying...” the second head said in a gentle voice, “my dad apologized to me. Honestly, I thought it was a bit too late. But I couldn't exactly complain—I'd clung to the anger between us just as stubbornly as he had. It was nearly impossible for us to be honest with one another, you know. Must have something to do with us being family. Arguing with him once we'd gotten revived here wasn't too bad. Though all it really did was remind me we were torn from the same cloth.”

The second head let out a sad laugh and looked up at the founder's sword.

Tears began to build behind my eyes. They just kept building, and building, until...they came tumbling out.

“Lyle, become a man worthy of that sword. Become a splendid man like our first head—the founder of the provincial House Walt. He may have been an idiot, but he'll always be the old man I looked up to. The hero who slayed the dragon.”

The hero who slayed the dragon.

“I-I'll try... But, um...”

“Hmm?”

“How did you end up using a bow as your weapon? If you looked up to the founder, why didn't you choose a sword?”

The second head cracked a smile. “It just wasn't for me. For one, I couldn't swing that thing... But if I'm being honest, I just wanted some way of supporting him when he was rushing out on the front lines. So, I picked up a bow. But we burnt our bridges, and I never got to join him in battle, even up to the very end.”

Both of them...are such awkward people.

My tears weren't stopping.

Recently, the founder had trusted me more than any of my other ancestors. And just when he'd finally recognized me, he'd vanished, just like that. Yeah, he was a bit rough around the edges...but it also felt like he had the most human kindness out of any of us. He said whatever was on his mind and pressed forward no matter how much he was mocked by those around him.

I buried my face in my hands. "Ha ha ha, I can't do this—it's hopeless. My tears just won't stop... What is this, seriously...? He was so obnoxious and noisy, and now that he's gone... It feels so empty here."

"I bet that's just how things are supposed to play out with the Jewel," the second head said, looking up at the greatsword. "We're only here to entrust our Arts to our descendant, Lyle Walt. Just listen to the way we talk—we've been optimized to communicate in the way that is most useful for us to pass our teachings on to you."

He was right. Surely the second head was speaking in the words and syntax of his own era—it was strange that I could understand it without issue. Some of the words in his vocabulary would have fallen out of fashion, or changed meanings entirely. I shouldn't have been able to hold a normal conversation like this with someone who had lived over a hundred years ago.

In short, the second head was right—the Jewel must have adjusted the way my ancestors spoke to ensure that I would be able to understand them.

"That's just... What even *is* the Jewel?!"

It was almost like these memories of my ancestors were born purely for my own convenience, to be trashed once they fulfilled their role.

"It's fine, Lyle. We don't mind being used like this. And you should know that the founder..." He shook his head. "That my *old man* told us to look after you. I was going to do that even if he didn't say it. In fact, we all intend to do just that. So you don't have to worry yourself over it."

But even if he told me not to worry, this wasn't something I could just casually agree to. My ancestors were the first people I'd had a proper conversation with in five whole years. They were the people that had filled me up with so much of

what I didn't know about the world. They might insult me, yes, but they had always watched over me.

My heart ached. It hurt worse than it ever had before, like a hole had been torn right through my sternum. My hand clutched at my chest, as if trying to confirm that I still existed at all.

If this is the way it has to be, I'd have preferred it if he'd just kept insulting me to the very end.

I'd thought I'd experienced loneliness before...but this was far worse.

"I... I don't *want this*," I sobbed.

The second head didn't respond. He just watched me cry until I could cry no more.

Epilogue

The inter-house discussion with House Maini had been held inside House Pagan's manor. The matter of House Maini's retainer had ultimately been left rather ambiguous, for the presence of a dungeon made it hard to focus on anything else. The two lords had simply decided that Zappa's punishment should be entrusted to Lord Dale.

I hadn't left the manor with Lord Maini once the discussion ended, deciding instead to remain at the manor and assist Lord Dale in sorting through all the documents his late father had left behind in his study. The settlement's records had apparently accumulated here, only to be abandoned without ever being read.

It seems we're destined to spend today as two men in a dusty room... I thought.

I wasn't exactly thrilled to be whiling away my day in such a manner, but I figured it was probably best to have someone at Lord Dale's side just in case something happened.

"Lord Medard really was livid, wasn't he?" Lord Dale said with a bitter smile. "He really hit me where it hurts. Looks like he was right when he said there were plenty of ways to look into house matters, even if I didn't have my father spelling it out for me."

I didn't answer, continuing to read through the papers in front of me. They had been left behind by the previous head, and contained the details of why House Pagan had decided to march to war with their territory's most key members.

"It looks like the previous lord really did intend to cut open the forest," the second head said. He seemed to accept the explanations within the papers. "Once he had a road from Darion to House Pagan, and House Maini had a road to their benefactor, it seems he intended to run a wagon train route out of House Pagan territory."

Looking at the map, I could see that there were plenty of territories that would benefit from the route the previous lord had been planning on creating. If a wagon could make it to Darion, it could travel from there all the way to the capital of Central. Even better, House Pagan's settlement fell on a nearly straight line between the cities run by Lord Bentler and House Maini's benefactor, eliminating the need to take unnecessary detours.

"For a small settlement like this," the third head said, sounding rather intrigued, "a new major road would mean a lot of development. That's why Dale's father invested so much into persuading his neighbors. Then he took advantage of the war to show his reluctant supervisors the progress other villages and settlements experienced when they built major roads... His plan was a bit of a stretch, but if he'd succeeded, this settlement revenue would have gone soaring."

The previous lord and his eldest son hadn't intended to see any real combat in the war. They had gone more to fulfill their duty to Lord Bentler, and to use their proximity to their benefactor to discuss their future plans with him. The previous lord had also planned to use the trip to lay the groundwork for his proposal with Paula's father, who had been against all the investment it would require to maintain the road. Their travels would have allowed the previous lord to show Paula's father multiple successful precedents on their way to the battlefield.

The plan had included Lord Dale as well. There was a paper with both the previous lord's and his eldest son's signatures on it that entrusted Lord Dale with a settlement that had been scheduled for development. It showed that they had wanted to leave something behind to the hardworking boy.

"Lord Dale, would please read what's written here from this point on?" I asked.

"Huh?" He blinked, then looked down at the paper. "If you say so."

He seemed a bit out of sorts—in fact, he'd been acting strange ever since he'd given Paula and Pini his blessing to get married. Regardless of his personal feelings, though, he'd been putting on a strong front.

Apparently, Lord Dale was in love with Paula, but when he'd expressed his

feelings to her, she had told him quite plainly that she could not marry the lord of her house given her position.

“Your father seemed to be in quite a hurry,” I commented to Lord Dale. “It looks like he had something in mind when he marched off to war.”

As far as the records indicated, the deployment had been a ludicrous mess. But it seemed that the previous lord’s investors had been growing impatient, and he’d needed to persuade Lord Bentler to offer them additional funding. At the same time, House Maini had had to reach out to their benefactor for funding as well. It seemed the plans for the road had reached the stage where they were open for the first round of discussions.

“I never heard a word about any of this,” Lord Dale said, covering his head with his hands. “They could have told me.”

The second head sounded a bit prickly when he said, “Would you have accepted it if they did tell you?” He scoffed. “This guy thinks too much like a villager. There’s a high chance he would have been against their plans for the road. I reckon that’s probably why they went forward in silence. They didn’t tell their residents because their people didn’t have enough background knowledge to understand what the lords were trying to do.”

That background knowledge being that despite the amount of work required to maintain a wagon train route, the amount of profit you could make was substantial. To the residents of House Pagan, such profits were unimaginable.

The laborers of the settlement could earn their money from their work maintaining the road, while other residents could invest in building an inn and reap profits from the travelers who would be stopping within their territory.

Once Lord Dale finished reading through the papers, he gazed up at the ceiling with a pained look on his face.

“Zappa finally opened his mouth and told me, you know? About how he was the reason my dad and brother died. And about how he caused the incident with House Maini due to his thoughtless actions.” He rubbed a hand over his face. “What exactly am I supposed to do now? Paula’s marrying Pini, and I can’t let Zappa run free... Ha ha, I’m all alone.”

Now that Lord Dale had been left to handle Zappa's punishment, he was having to mull over what exactly he should do. Zappa would have to receive a harsh punishment if it was to satisfy both House Maini and House Pagan. There wasn't a soul pleading for Zappa's clemency—he'd put both houses in danger with his actions, after all.

On the other hand, there *were* those who were pleading for Pini's punishment to be reduced. Though perhaps that was just karma at work.

Regardless of whatever punishment he chose, though, Lord Dale would have to enact it. This fact pained him to no end.

"I have to punish someone I've known forever," Lord Dale whispered, voice tight. "And no matter what I do, in the end, someone's going to resent me, right...?"

The lord had plenty that he needed to think over before he settled on a decision. He'd have to ask himself what his people would think of his decision, and whether the punishment he'd chosen was appropriate for the crime.

"This is why a house's lord shouldn't get along too well with his people," the third head said in a sympathetic tone. "Tell that Pagan boy he should go get himself a wife already. A feudal lord needs a noble wife and all."

You want me to recommend marriage as a solution to someone who just had his heart broken?

He must have foreseen my reaction, since the fifth head immediately explained, "Romance, affection—they don't mean squat in noble marriages. He needs to leave an heir as soon as he can."

"Yep, take it from the guy who had all the mistresses," the third head teased.

"Oh, can it," the fifth head snarked back.

It doesn't seem like feudal lords live very free or plentiful lives, I thought. They seem destined to be resented or misunderstood. What a pain...

"Lord Dale...what do you plan on doing after this?"

The lord turned, focusing on me. "Well, let's see. First, I'll go around giving my apologies. Then, I want to make this settlement a better place to live. That'll

have to be a gradual change though. I'll have to start with Lord Medard."

"Come to think of it," I said, suddenly recalling something quite interesting, "Lord Medard was the one who knew the shortest way out of the forest when the orc ran away. He seemed awfully knowledgeable about House Pagan's territory. Seems like he's been on your land a few times before, hmm?"

"N-Now that you mention it," Dale pondered, "Why did he know...? Has he been to that area before? But that place has belonged to us since our founding..."

It seemed Lord Medard might have committed some crimes against House Pagan that he'd prefer not to talk about.

Being neighbors really is nothing but trouble. The grudges and misdeeds keep piling up one after the other.

I smiled. "You might be able to use that as a bargaining chip. After you've shown how sincere you are about working together, of course."

Lord Dale nodded. "Right... I'll check with him. You're leaving tomorrow, aren't you? You sure you don't want to be the first one in that dungeon?"

I heard the disappointed wails of my ancestors as I answered, "Unfortunately, I ruined most of my equipment fighting the orc. I'm sure that viscount who is House Maini's benefactor will have a subjugation force sent out before I've got my supplies in order, so I'll have to give up on it."

It wasn't just my sabers that had gotten ruined this time—Zelphy's equipment had gotten battered, and so had most everyone else's.

"Thank you, Lyle," Lord Dale told me. "I'm glad you came. I'm sorry that I tried to smack you. Granted, I still don't like the way you surround yourself with so many women. Lord Medard agrees with me on that one."

It seemed that my decision to take Sophia with me each time I'd gone into Lord Medard's territory had convinced him that the two of us were an item.

"I'd love to plead my case, but let me finish up here first," I grumbled, staring at the piles of House Pagan records that still awaited me.

The day after Lord Dale and I went through House Pagan's records, my party and I started our journey back to Darion. We couldn't make it there in a single day's travel, so we were camping for the night.

Our wagon was tethered by the side of the road, and since we'd already eaten, the only thing left to do was to sleep and take turns doing lookout duty.

I'd been assigned Sophia as my initial watch partner, but once her turn was up, Sophia stood up and left after only a short time.

"Looks like Aria is coming," she called over her shoulder. "I'll be on my way... Try not to catch a cold."

While Sophia had been with me, I'd completely failed at having a conversation with her. No matter what topic I brought up, she'd just responded with a clipped yes or no. I'd gotten absolutely nowhere with her.

I could hear the seventh head laughing from within the Jewel. "Ah, what innocence. You've gotten her all bashful."

"Is that what does it for you?" the sixth head said doubtfully. "It's just not interesting enough for me unless they've got a bit of baggage."

The fifth head sighed. "Sophia must be a good girl then, if you're not interested in her."

What exactly is that supposed to mean? I wondered as Aria came over.

Our surroundings were bright and quiet under the full moon, though I could hear the chirping of bugs. I kept watch on the area around our wagon with my Arts, but I couldn't sense any approaching enemies.

"I'm going to sit next to you," Aria said weakly.

"Go ahead," I replied.

My relationship with her had become awkward since my post-Growth state. We weren't at odds or anything, but her face would turn red whenever we talked. The reaction made it hard to have a substantial conversation, so lately we only spoke when Novem or Zelphy could provide a barrier between us.

"Th-The moon sure is bright today," Aria stammered.

The bonfire crackled. I prodded at it with a stick as I replied to her, but it didn't take very long before our conversation fell flat.

There was a long period of silence, and then finally I said, "You're avoiding me, aren't you?"

"Can you blame me?!" she snarled, glaring at me. "You went on about fate and whatnot! Ah, for crying out loud! It made me remember something stupid."

Something stupid? I was abruptly deeply curious.

In any case, it gave us something to talk about. "And what would that something stupid be?"

"It's an old Lockwood tale. The story of this red Gem, actually... Ever since one of my ancestors brought it with her when she married into House Lockwood, it's been passed down to the daughters for generations. Most times, the people who marry into our house are men. Apparently, our line just produces girls more often than not."

Aria's father married into House Lockwood too, come to think of it, I remembered.

"A red Gem would usually be better for a military family," Aria continued, "so why would the women of House Lockwood carry it? The official reason is that it's for the women to protect themselves when necessary... But as the story goes, this is a keepsake one of my ancestors could never give to the person she loved."

The person she loved, huh? I thought. The image of the founder's first love, Alice Lockwood, flashed across my mind.

"It happened a real long time ago. When the kingdom hadn't even been around for...a hundred years, I reckon. As the tale goes, my ancestor had a man she liked. He was a noble from a house with barely enough prestige to have a hereditary title, and he was the third son at that."

"Oh my," said the fourth head.

Aria went on, "She was a lively, strong-willed girl, but she always tried to look prim and proper around him. She tried her best to look the part of a noble

lady...and then one day, he volunteered for the pioneering corps. She knew she had to give him something before he was gone, and decided on a red Gem since they were popular at the time.”

“Good grief, she must have just missed him,” said the third head.

“But in the end, she never got the chance. She decided she wouldn’t get married, and that she’d wait for the day he finally returned to give it to him. But the years went by, and she got to the age where her house wouldn’t put up with her selfish desires. So she just kept the red Gem with her.”

“That sort of bad luck sounds just like him,” the second head chuckled. “How should I put this...? As his son, I feel a bit conflicted here.”

“She’d never even spoken to him before, you know. She made a right ruckus when she spotted him after she’d been forced to marry into House Lockwood... Well, that’s the story that’s been passed down, anyways. My family told me she wanted her descendants from then on to be honest and upfront about their feelings. That’s apparently the moral—don’t miss out on things because you’re afraid of voicing what you feel. Stupid, right?”

I shook my head.

When you consider the timing involved, and how similar the circumstances, there’s no way that story could have been about anyone else. In short, the founder was right, and—

“It was fate, your meeting Aria,” the third head said, sounding slightly apologetic. “There’s no mistaking it.”

“I don’t think your story is stupid at all,” I told Aria. “That man...he was my ancestor.”

“Huh?”

“Was your ancestor’s name Alice, by any chance? My ancestor’s name was Basil.”

She seemed taken aback. “Huh? Y-You knew about our ancestors? W-Wait, what?”

I was right, it seems.

"I think it was fate that brought us together," I said, looking up at the full moon. "Can we keep it at that?"

So the founder's feelings did actually manage to reach Alice, even though they'd never spoken to each other before. It wasn't an unrequited love after all.

Mentioning fate seemed to make Aria recall my post-Growth nonsense; her face turned red and she averted her eyes. I watched her reactions with a smile.

Still, when I turned my eyes back to the night sky, I felt a bit lonesome.

The founder wouldn't have been able to change anything, even if he did hear Aria's tale. But still...I wish he could have known. Though maybe he was better off, never realizing what he'd missed...

Perhaps the moment when Aria and I had met really had been born from the fate the founder had set in motion so long ago. As I sat there by her side, I felt sure that it was. The feeling robbed the loneliness from the sky, and turned the moon beautiful.

"The moon is beautiful, isn't it?" I asked Aria idly.

Suddenly, a burst of noise came rocketing out of the Jewel. Unfortunately, I wasn't quite sharp enough to catch onto why.

"Hey, is he serious?"

"No, I don't think he knows what he just said."

"But they're famous words, you know! Although I don't know who said them..."

"To say that now of all times... What a crazy coincidence."

"Good going, Lyle."

"The thing is...does he realize the dual meaning in what he said or not?"

There were only six voices.

One too few.

Meanwhile, Aria was opening and closing her mouth blankly. Her face had turned bright red. She replied haltingly, "I can d-die happy!" her eyes bleary with tears.

That...doesn't sound quite right, I mused.

I cocked my head and said, “No, I would rather you didn’t die... I need you to be happy, I mea—ow!”



A powerful *whap* echoed through the air.

Why did she...slap me...?

I was used to being on the receiving end of unreasonable violence, but what had I done to make Aria treat me that way?

In no time, the Jewel was filled with various sounds of lamentation.

“Ah, he’s still Lyle.”

“Yep, that’s the usual Lyle.”

“Terrible. Zero points.”

“I knew it...”

“Come on, Lyle, didn’t you like reading books or something?”

“You can’t blame her for that one. Just accept the slap.”

None of them are going to console me, even though I’m the victim of such senseless violence?! I wailed internally. What’s going on?

Aria silently stood, then sat back down farther away from me before resuming her lookout duties.

“Aria?” I asked, getting up and wandering a bit closer to her. “Uh... If I did something rude, I apologize.”

She just looked away. “It’s nothing! I do feel sorry for hitting you, but I just can’t deal with this right now! Please, just go away!”

My shoulders slumped as I returned to my original spot.

All I did was give my sincere impression on the moon, so why’d she react that way...? Did I do something wrong?

My ancestors were laughing now.

“You’re incredible, Lyle.”

“You got the timing down pat.”

“Well, you went from fate to the beautiful moon, after all.”

“You’ve got my honest respect, if you really said that unintentionally.”

“Same here. You’re really something, Lyle.”

“I have to agree, but...it was rude to do that to poor Aria.”

No matter how I asked, they refused to explain what I’d done.

They’re capricious jerks, the whole lot of them! But I wonder if...they’ll disappear too, someday...



**"I'm fine!
I'm made
for this
sort of
work!"**

Author
Yomu Mishima
Illustrator
Tomozo

Though she
was covered
in sweat,
she seemed
relatively
cheery.

SEVENTH



Novem, Aria,
and Sophia
had followed
Zelphy's lead,
and at the
moment
they were
all soaking
together
in a nice,
warm bath.

“I live for moments like this!”



It stood with its left hand clutching the hilt of a greatsword, the blade propped against its shoulder. The monster that had come to meet us was an orc, but it didn't look like any orc I had ever heard of.

"Hmm, that's rare," the fifth head exclaimed.

"Get back! That's a variant!"



**“Lyle!
Raise
your
hand!”**

“O-Okay!”

I managed, raising
my right hand.

The founder walked towards me,
slapping our hands together in a
powerful high-five as he passed.











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Seventh: Volume 2

by Yomu Mishima

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