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SEVENTH

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INTRODUCTION

After leaving **Aramthurst**, **Lyle**'s party arrives in **Central**. There, he finds himself invited to the estate of **House Circry**, the home of **Miranda** and **Shannon**. That's when a man appears—**Lionel Walt**, a member of the court noble branch of House Walt. The founder of House Walt, **Basil Walt**, had once set off to become independent; the descendants he'd left behind had elevated the provincial branch of House Walt all the way to an earldom. But originally, his roots traced back to the Walts who served the royal court as nobles. Naturally, this branch of House Walt had remained in Central, where the royal court was. But though Lionel and Lyle are close in years and share the same blue hair and eyes, they've had so little to do with each other that it doesn't even feel quite right to call them relatives. The fact that Lyle has been cast from his house has only added to the strange vagueness of their relationship. That said, Lionel is far from welcoming to Lyle, and to make things even worse, it's discovered that he's in a relationship with the middle daughter of House Circry, while Lyle is in a party with her older and younger sisters, **Miranda** and **Shannon**. It's in this dubious atmosphere that **Miranda** and **Shannon**'s dad offers the two boys a job. How will Lyle fare? And will he ever successfully **inherit** all the Arts of his ancestors?

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SEVENTH

First Head



Basil Walt

First Stage Full Over

Raises physical abilities from between 10% to 20%.

Second Stage Limit Burst

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

Third Stage Full Burst

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

Second Head



Crassel Walt

First Stage All

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

Second Stage Field

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

Third Stage ???

Third Head



Sley Walt

First Stage Mind

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

Second Stage ???

Third Stage ???

Fourth Head



Marcus Walt

First Stage Speed

Gives a stable boost to movement speed.

Second Stage ???

Third Stage ???

Arts of the Ages

Fifth Head



Fredriks Walt

First Stage

Map

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

Second Stage

???

Third Stage

???

Sixth Head



Fiennes Walt

First Stage

Search

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

Second Stage

???

Third Stage

???

Seventh Head



Brod Walt

First Stage

Box

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

Second Stage

???

Third Stage

???



Lyle Walt

First Stage

Experience

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

Second Stage

???

Third Stage

???

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Prologue

Our meeting came with no warning—with no rhyme or reason.

The blue Jewel hanging around my neck suddenly revived the memories of its previous owners—my ancestors—who all reached out to me. This should have been wonderful. After all, they had all accomplished great things, and these reliable old men were able to teach me their powerful Arts.

However... They all had their own sense of values, and they had all come from a different era. So, they chided me, scolded me, and laughed at me for being oblivious and unreliable.

The Jewel contained seven ancestors in total.

If I were to call the start of my journey—when I lost to my sister and was consequently driven from my own home—my lowest point, then my meeting with my ancestors had to be a brand-new low.

At first, I was certain the blue heirloom was cursed.

Whenever they raised a ruckus, it would drain away my mana, and before I'd undergone Growth, I'd all too quickly collapsed from mana deficiency, causing nothing but trouble for those around me.

Why did they have to be such a burden on me? Why couldn't they just listen to me? Why were they so noisy...?

To be blunt, I remember thinking they were nothing but trouble. But, at times, they could be reliable too. My ancestors would teach me various things. There were a few truths about the world that only they were privy to.

Knowing that the bridal precepts passed down through my home—House Walt—had all been some drunken nonsense from our founder, well... At this point, I could only laugh about it.

It was a surprise to know that one of my ancestors, who was hailed as a hero, had no intentions of becoming one, and was completely different from how he

was in the stories. Another one of them had been put on a pedestal for his proficiency in domestic affairs, but turned out to really just love money and had made a hobby of counting his own savings. Yet another one of them had lived a life surrounded by women, which made me think he'd be a playboy, but on the contrary, I'd found he was nothing of the sort. I'd had to doubt my own ears upon learning that the one who had expanded the territory more than anyone was a henpecked husband. And then there was my grandfather, who'd doted on me when I was younger. I'd heard many tales of his old troubles by now.

They were all so different from how the stories made them out to be, and they were all incredibly human.

There was a reason that these ancestors had been brought back within the Jewel. They were there to pass down the techniques they had manifested and polished over their lifetimes—their Arts. And since the ancestors existed for that purpose alone, they would disappear once they had fulfilled their roles.

Certainly, this was how things were supposed to be—at least from the Jewel's perspective. But even if the Jewel considered it right, I...

Heading out of the Academic City of Aramthurst, our party set off for the Royal Capital of Central. Regardless of where we planned to visit after that, it would be most convenient to drop by the capital first.

After all, it wasn't the kingdom's capital for nothing, and the roads to nearly every region were concentrated there. It was a major metropolis where goods would amass from all across the land and where information would accumulate alongside them.

Thus, it was a most convenient place to gather intel to make the call on our next destination among other things.

On top of this, Central was also the home of the Circry sisters, who had joined our party while we were in Aramthurst. Miranda had sent a letter and the reply she got back stated that we had to pay a visit.

We needed to visit the Circry estate.

"What's this I'm feeling? It's almost like you're supposed to go out and tell

him, ‘Please let me have your daughter!’” the third head exclaimed without a care in the world.

We were in the Jewel’s round table room. Whenever I sent my mind into the Jewel, this was a place where I could meet face-to-face with all of my ancestors.

The ceiling had a large blue gemstone at the center with numerous smaller gemstones stationed around it in a spiraling pattern. There were twenty-four of them in total. And of those twenty-four, eleven of them were letting off light. This signified the number of Arts I had acquired.

There were chairs around the table, and in each of them sat an ancestor. They all had a door behind them too.

These doors connected to their respective ancestor’s memories, and within them, they could recreate any powerful memories from their lives.

I had a chair to sit in, but there was no door behind me.

The seventh head laughed, evidently enjoying this situation. “Well, that’s not entirely wrong after all. From the perspective of the Head of House Circry, I’m sure he wants to see the face of the man who stole his daughter away. He’s acting quite stuck up for a rat of the court.”

He finished it off with some cynicism directed at the country’s court nobles. Sure, he was once the head of the mighty House Walt, but he was still human. The same went for the rest of them—my ancestors were certainly great, but as humans, they all had their good and bad sides.

“Why don’t you just rile him up while you’re at it?” The sixth head gave a hearty laugh. “Go tell him, ‘Miranda chose me!’”

The fifth looked a bit more cautious. “What is picking a fight going to do for you? If you don’t know his intentions, it’s best to test the waters first. You’re dealing with a court noble—you can never let your guard down around them.”

My ancestors were feudal nobles. In the Banseim Kingdom, nobles were roughly split into two varieties. There were the feudal nobles who owned and governed land, and the court nobles who received wages from the king and lived in the royal capital.

The king had conceded the right to own land to the feudal nobles, but in exchange, they had to swear their loyalty to him. Their money came from their own territories.

Meanwhile, the court noble lived on the king's land and received a guaranteed salary from the king.

It was mistaken to think that both sides had the same sense of values.

The fourth head nodded, seeming strangely irritated. "Yes, I understand. I understand completely. You can never let your guard down around them. When they're in trouble, they try to nestle up next to you, and as soon as the problem's solved, they go right back to their condescending ways. They fundamentally exist just to mock and belittle us."

Going off of that, he clearly did not have many fond memories concerning court nobles.

The second head was the same in that regard. "They piled on a lot of trouble back in my day. We were small-time lords, but we still had the main house back in Central."

The main house. This was the family that our founder Basil Walt was born into.

They were nearly at the very bottom of the royal court; in fact, if they were any lower, they would not have even been given the right to pass down their noble title to future generations. Ever since the branch house—the feudal House Walt—got much bigger than them, they'd cut off all relations.

But there was still some communication back in the second head's time, and recalling it seemed to make his head hurt.

He was pressing a hand against his brow.

"Fork over some money, send out your troops. They were noisy as could be. My old man got to where he was almost entirely with his own two hands, but it wasn't so easy to get rid of our connections. It was trouble, let me tell you."

"Were they that bad?" I asked, cocking my head.

The second head gave a powerless laugh. "They were the absolute worst in

my time, but... What about you guys? I heard you severed ties.”

He turned the topic toward the other ancestors.

“Back in my day, the world was subsumed in various wars, so I didn’t have the time to get involved with them,” said the third head.

The fourth head nodded. “Same for me. They tried to butter me up a few times, but that was it.”

“Once our status and scale greatly exceeded them, there was no value in associating with those Walts,” the seventh head explained. “Perhaps if we felt indebted to them in the slightest it would be different, but they were nothing but a nuisance to us, so we cut our ties. Although we all originated from the same household, the main house just irritates me.”

It was a one-sided relationship that had faded over time.

“We probably won’t ever be associated with them again,” the sixth head said. “But connections are a strange thing. Lyle, even if they try to start something with you, you’re better off ignoring it. Now, getting things back on track—second head.”

As all eyes gathered on the second head; the man seemed strangely bashful.

The second head, Crassel Walt, had the weakest presence among all of my ancestors. Although he did have a sharp look in his eyes and his characteristic hunter garb, during the second head’s time, House Walt only ran a small settlement.

In the history of House Walt, the serious and diligent second head did not do much to distinguish himself. The first head had set off to reclaim the wasteland and was known for his valor. The third head was ranked among Banseim’s greatest heroes.

Then, there was the second who was sandwiched in between them. To put it in a single word, he was *plain*. He was well aware of this himself.

“Well, you know. I was thinking it’s about time I taught you the next stage of my Art, Lyle.”

As soon as the second head brought it up, I felt a peculiar pain in my chest.

What is this feeling...?

“Huh? But your Art...”

I’d learned the second head’s Art up to its second stage. The third stage was all that remained. The last one.

“I had a good talk about it with the others, but this is the end for me. As you are now, I’m sure you can learn my measly Art like it’s nothing.”

Looking at his face, I could tell he had already made his resolve to leave.

“Don’t worry. Even if I’m gone, you still have them. And, I...never really had much to teach you in the first place. Lyle, you’re already splendid. A bit unreliable, maybe, but leagues better than when we first met. I know you’ll do just fine.”

Although his smile looked a little sad, he was also exuding an air that made it impossible to refuse.

“I-I could learn other Arts in the meantime...” My eyes shifted to the other ancestors.

But he shook his head at my feeble attempt to put it off. “No, you should learn mine first. That’s for the best. It’s going to be very useful from now on.”

His Art, perhaps as a reflection of his own personality, was very plain.

It allowed you to apply your Arts to other people. That was it.

But its secondary effect was incredible and it had saved my life several times before.

“You’re going to get stronger from here on out, and it’d be a real joy for me if my Art could help you out. Now come on. It’s important to keep the ball rolling when it comes to these things.”

At his urging, I made for his door of memories.

My chest...ached.

When I faintly cracked my eyes open, I was aboard Porter, bound for Central.

Novem called out to me as soon as she noticed I was up.

“Are you awake, Milord? You seem quite tired.”

The concerned look on her face put me at ease.

“Yeah, I guess I am a little tired.”

The armored tank proceeding down the highway—otherwise known as Porter—had a spacious interior. I looked around to see that Sophia was asleep as well.

Boinga, or rather Monica, was enthusiastically knitting something. The speed at which she progressed was downright inhuman.

Pausing, the automaton looked at me. “Oh my, the damn chicken has risen. Very well then. Allow me to look after—”

“I don’t really need anything right now.”

I’d just taken a nap and gotten up. I couldn’t see any reason she would need to look after me.

But, when I plainly turned her down, Monica’s shoulders dropped sorrowfully and she returned to her knitting. Just looking at her filled me with a sense of guilt.

“Is that...so? Well, please call me if anything happens. I, Monica—not Boinga, but Monica—will always be happy to look after my chicken.”

She was evidently overjoyed that her name (which she’d always been frustrated about) had finally been changed, and she would reiterate this fact time and again. When she was so eager to remind me just how much she hated it, I felt an urge to just go and rename her Boinga again.

I shifted my head to see how the other members were doing.

From the open hatch in the ceiling, I could hear Shannon and Aria who’d climbed onto the roof.

“I’m sick of it. No more traveling for me. I’m fine where I am!”

“Just put up with it. It would have originally taken a lot longer, you know.”

“No way. I want to take a bath already!”

“Don’t be selfish! We’ll have hot water to wash off at night. We have it good, all things considered.”

“Well, I want to be fully submerged in a bathtub. It’s cold. I want to sleep in a bed.”

“You really have a *nice* personality there. You wouldn’t normally get this much on the road.”

I heard Shannon’s selfish voice, coupled with Aria’s weary responses. They were presumably keeping watch. That meant that Miranda—whom I couldn’t see anywhere—was probably up front in the driver compartment with Clara.

There was hardly any shaking or rattling with Porter, and I sat up with little difficulty.

After pouring a cup of tea from her canteen, Novem handed it to me.

“Here, Milord.”

“Thank you.”

There was steam rising off of the cup... It was fine within Porter, but it was probably freezing outside. The seasons were already shifting to winter.

Novem was staring at my face.

“What is it?” I asked her.

“Well, how should I put this... Did something good happen, Lord Lyle?”

I chuckled a bit. “I couldn’t say.”

And with that, I brought the cup to my mouth.

I heard a voice from the Jewel—the second head’s voice.

“Hey... What’s the meaning of this?!”

“Well, you know...” The fourth head said, trailed off, struggling to figure out how to pacify him. “How about you just calm down for now?”

The second head raised his voice. Indeed, he had yet to disappear. “This is just absurd! What do you mean you failed?! That was totally the right mood for me to fade away! Now I just feel embarrassed!”

Thinking he was going to disappear, the second head had said all sorts of things to fit the mood. And while most of the other hands had offered their sympathy, the third head was instead cackling away.

“‘I know you’ll do just fine,’ he said. And then he came right back. That one was a shocker for me.”

“Don’t laugh! I always hated that about you!”

Sure enough, when he returned from the room of memories with me, the second head seemed truly embarrassed. The other ancestors were dumbfounded, and a rather peculiar mood enveloped the round table.

“This is your responsibility, Lyle! And wait, why can’t I transmit my Art?! It’s not even that difficult!”

No, it was more than difficult enough. Surely I simply wasn’t strong enough to learn it yet.

Seeing me slowly sip at my tea, Novem sent me quite a delightful smile.

“Did you have a good dream, perhaps?”

“Maybe.” I gave a slight nod.

In the first place, it was my ancestors’ fault for arbitrarily deciding that I was easily able to acquire their Arts. Why, they were making it sound almost like—like this mistake was entirely on me.

“Ah! I see it!” I heard Shannon’s cheerful voice from above.

Aria popped her head through the hatch and peered into the compartment. Her hair cascaded down from her upside-down face. It was a bit of an off-putting sight—but that was best kept to myself.

“Hey, we can see Central. Oh, Lyle, you’re awake?”

When I nodded, Aria directed her voice at Sophia.

“Sophia, wake up already. We’re almost there.”

A blanket wrapped around her, Sophia rubbed her eyes and rose.

“Already? That was quite fast,” Sophia mumbled, stifling a sigh. But when she turned her eyes to Aria, the girl was already gone.

I handed my cup back to Novem and popped my head out of the hatch.

It really was cold outside. My body quivered as I continued climbing until half of me was exposed to the chill.

In the distance, I could see the large walls that protected the City of Central.

“So we’re finally here.”

From the Jewel, I could still hear the second head yelling at me with embarrassment and irritation. I’d considered it annoying up to a short while ago... But now, this was the norm.

Yes, this was my normal life.

“Lyle! Listen to me!”



At Central's gate, I used the seventh head's Box Art to stow Porter away, completing all the necessary procedures with only the bare minimum baggage. We were quickly greeted by the sights of the largest city in Banseim.

I'd been here several times before, but with its massive scale, it gave off a completely different impression than Aramthurst. Aramthurst's idiosyncrasies had been striking, but Central was also a shocking sight now that I was seeing it after visiting so many other places.

It was just past noon when we arrived. A little early to settle down, but as we were tired from the journey, we decided to search for an inn.

This was Clara's first time leaving Aramthurst for a full-blown journey, and her eyes would frequently flit around to take in the sights. "It's quite different from Aramthurst. There are a lot of people."

"There are," Miranda explained with a smile, being a Central native herself. "Well, people flock here even when nothing's going on, and it is a very large place."

Since foul monsters roamed the land, whenever a city grew large in scale, it would need to start considering defensive walls. The high walls that surrounded Central enclosed a very vast space.

However, the population had only grown over the years, and everything within these walls now felt strangely cramped and constrained. This was partly because the buildings looked like they had been squished into one another, but mostly due to the sheer number of people.

This was also Aria's homeland, so she was knowledgeable about the city. "There's loads of people, and it's pretty dirty too," she explained. "The river's especially bad. I only noticed it after traveling a bit; I never realized how beautiful the rivers could be in places with fewer people."

Owing to all the people and wagons coming and going through the gate, it was terribly dusty and smelly. And, as we discussed hurrying off elsewhere, I suddenly noticed that someone was watching us.

They seemed more focused on Shannon and Miranda than on me.

Warily, I started walking to find an inn. After they confirmed that we were safely indoors, the presence left. I didn't feel any hostility, but it was quite curious.

A few hours after we'd entered the inn, our members went off their separate ways, presumably washing away the fatigue or lying down. The sunset came quickly these days, and it was already beginning to grow dark outside.

Around that time, the innkeeper told me that we had a guest.

The first floor contained a lounge area; each time someone opened the door, the cold air would rush in and lower the room's temperature. Although there was a fireplace, the moment it felt just a little warm, that door would open again and undo it all.

Because of this, there weren't many people who lingered around. They would either hastily make their way out or quickly make their way to their rooms.

After descending the stairs, I found Miranda conversing with the guest. She seemed to be acquainted with him—a white-haired elderly gentleman. He wore a suit, and had a coat and hat draped over one of his arms. His other hand held a cane, but he did not look like the sort of old man who would need a cane to walk. His back was straight, and even over his clothing, I could tell that his body was quite muscular.

He spoke to Miranda and Shannon with a smile: "It has been some time, Lady Miranda, Lady Shannon. My word, Miranda, you take after your great-grandmother more every day."

Judging by his tone, he seemed to be someone who served House Circry. Miranda seemed to treat him as though he was a servant too.

"It's been a while since you retired, right? You still look well enough."

"Well, I planned to live a nice retired life after leaving the work to my son, but I am here at the master's request."

Miranda sent him a troubled look. "Well, that certainly sounds like Father. I know it's pointless to complain to you about it. So, let's hear what you have to

say.”

I could hear the seventh’s voice from the Jewel.

“Is he, perhaps...the whelp who was with Auntie? He’s gotten a lot bigger...or rather older.”

Evidently, the seventh head knew him.

The old man who knew Miranda’s great-grandmother then noticed me. He turned his entire body toward me and offered a greeting.

“Lyle Walt, correct?” he said. “I am Renaldo, formerly a butler of House Circry. Today, I have come to deliver a message from the master.”

Although there was no hostility in his smile, he still gave off the sense of someone I had to be very careful around.

“A butler, huh? He’s quite skilled,” said the fifth head.

The seventh head laughed. “He was a little brat when I knew him. I remember him cowering as he hid behind Auntie Milleia. I never thought that whelp would grow up to be a butler.”

While the seventh head spoke nostalgically, the fifth head sounded quite wary. Perhaps he’d come to the same conclusion as me.

As I approached, Miranda shrugged with a troubled smile. “He looked after me when I was a child. Although I don’t know if Shannon remembers him.”

“I’m...sorry. I don’t remember,” Shannon said as she hid behind Miranda’s back. She seemed fearful of Renaldo, having presumably been too young at the time to recall him.

But Renaldo did remember Shannon. “Oh, Lady Shannon...do my eyes deceive me, or can you see?”

Shannon had been driven out of House Circry as she had been born blind. Naturally, a former butler would have known about this.

Miranda nodded. “Yes, she was treated in Aramthurst.”

She wasn’t lying, but it seemed she did not intend to tell the full truth. Granted, we didn’t know how her blindness was cured in the first place, so we

had no way of explaining it.

Renaldo smiled. "That's good. I'm sure the master will be delighted to hear that."

Again, I felt no ill intent, but it didn't seem like he was being honest either.

"You're lying," Miranda immediately said. "Father will feel nothing. So what is the message?"

"The way you talk is also the spitting image of her." Renaldo seemed overjoyed by her response. "You really do resemble your great-grandmother. Your appearance, your personality... It's as though she was reborn."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

Satisfied with this, Renaldo turned to me. His face grew as serious as could be.

"Lyle Walt, my Master has a message for you. 'Take my daughter with you and stop by the manor,' he says."

The seventh head was quite irritated to hear this. The mood had been gentle up to that point, but he suddenly flew into a rage. "Ordering Lyle around like that? This brat...and the head too, they're all pushing their luck. Do they know who they're dealing with?!"

To the seventh head, I was still the heir to an Earl House. However, I was nothing more than an adventurer.

"Well, in this case, he'd have to call for him, right?" the third wearily said. "I mean, Lyle has no status, and he's not skilled enough to catch a noble's interest. In the first place, we were going to go see him anyway, right? What's getting mad going to accomplish?"

I could hear the seventh's frustrated groans as he failed to come up with a response.

"I will definitely pay a visit," I replied. "Will tomorrow work?"

Renaldo nodded. "Yes, tomorrow at three. Well then, I shall be taking my leave."

With that, he bowed and he left. He was followed off by a few others who had

waited outside of the inn.

“So they’re the ones who were watching us...” I muttered.

“So you noticed?” said Miranda. “Well, that’s the sort of place it is. I know Renaldo might look like that now, but I hear he was amazing back when he was still in active service. His retirement was a lie, I take it. Perhaps he was training his successors behind the scenes.”

Judging by their tailing and surveillance, they were masters of their craft. House Circry was quite a fearsome place, having so many servants well-versed in violence.

“Incidentally,” Miranda said, smiling, “the one who trained *him* was my great-grandmother... The one who married in from House Walt.”

“Huh...?”

I found myself staring straight at Miranda’s face. I couldn’t believe it.

It seemed like the Jewel shared my sentiment, as the fifth head was flustered. “No way.”

But among them, the most agitated was the sixth head, who had doted on that woman—his own little sister. “Th-That can’t be. That cute and gentle Milleia trained such a dangerous bunch... I-It’s impossible!”

I felt a bit apologetic, honestly. Just knowing that those dangerous men had something to do with House Walt.

“Well, Aunt Milleia would at least do that much,” the seventh head muttered.

Ralph Circry was doing paperwork by the light of the lantern in his office at the Circry estate when he received his report from Renaldo. Holding numerous important posts within the Kingdom of Banseim, House Circry was a house with a long and respected history. The man carried himself boldly, but it also somewhat seemed like he was lacking in emotion.

“Did you tell Miranda and the Walt?”

Renaldo straightened his posture. “Yes. He seemed to be quite a promising

young man. Also, about Lady Shannon's eyes. It seems she has been treated, and has made a full recovery."

"I don't care about that," Ralph disinterestedly answered. "What's important is Miranda."

Ralph sighed to himself. *If Doris weren't being tricked by that pesky insect, I wouldn't have even needed to call Miranda back.*

House Circry had a bit of a situation. The second daughter, Doris Circry, had found herself a lover. Regrettably so.

And the man in question...

"Just how much trouble must those Walts bring us? They couldn't just be satisfied with what they've done to the royal capital; they fool Miranda, and they fool Doris too."

He came from the other House Walt. The heir, Lionel Walt.

Although he was certainly the heir, he was only set to inherit what was practically the lowest position in all the royal court. His lifestyle was far from what was expected of a noble, and the royal family had not granted him any position in government. He was the heir of a tiny, insignificant house that merely existed.

Turning his eyes to Renaldo, Ralph confirmed it. "So how is Miranda? She has a good appearance. Even if she gets up to a little trouble now, there should be no issue in marrying in a son later, yes?"

House Circry had no children save for the three Circry sisters. They needed a son to marry in and inherit the house. And with that in mind, Doris's lover Lionel was not worthy of the position.

The reason Ralph had called Miranda back to Central was simply because he needed a daughter whose marriage would get him a son.

Renaldo gave his impression, albeit with a fair bit of his personal sentiment mixed in. "She takes closely after Lady Milleia. Her appearance, her demeanor, all the way down to her tone. It is all so nostalgic to me. I see no issues with her at all."

Ralph, meanwhile, ignored a majority of it. The important part was that she could draw a groom.

“I see. She was always excellent. Doris is average. Shannon is out of the question. I really should take her back to the manor, then.”

He had tried to set Doris up with men besides Lionel, but given her strong opposition to the idea, Ralph had given up hope.

He lowered his eyes to one of the papers on his desk. It was a document pertaining to a hippogryph subjugation mission.

There was a small town on a small plot of land named Geony. This land was within the domain under the direct control of the king.

There was no feudal lord, and the royal family had sent a proxy to govern. But, with that said, Geony was barely large enough to even be a town and it was hardly of any importance to the crown.

This was his draft of the Geony rescue operation that Ralph had drawn up on orders from the palace. And, there was one more paper on his desk—a plan that was being pushed forward by the palace.

This one was a way to resolve the issue of the growing number of court nobles.

“Well, before that... Why don’t we get rid of a few pests? I did happen to get a request at this convenient time.”

As he listened to Ralph’s words, Renaldo quietly closed his eyes.

Chapter 67: The Two Walts

The manor of House Circry was massive.

We arrived just before three in the afternoon. I'd come bearing gifts, only to freeze up right before the splendid estate. I was joined by Miranda—and Shannon.

Monica had said she would tag along too, but it would be nothing but a pain to explain who she was, and so I'd had her wait on standby at the inn.

"It's kinda nerve-racking."

This was partially the third head's fault, though. "Oh, you're that afraid of meeting your father-in-law? Don't worry, you just need to be sincere and tell him, *please give me your daughter*. And if he refuses, just sweep her off her feet and run."

He wouldn't stop teasing me. The third head's marriage had been an arranged marriage, so he had never actually experienced these developments himself. He was simply having fun watching how it played out.

Miranda glanced at me with a troubled look on her face. "Don't be so nervous. You don't have to worry; there won't be any of the developments you're expecting."

From last night all the way to our arrival, I'd heard about her house's situation. Contrary to the third head, who was having fun with it, the sixth head flew into a rage.

"Those court nobles don't know when to give up. Distancing his own daughters for his own convenience, only to call them back now? Who does he think he is?! If it's for some nonsensical reason, we'll hammer the fear of House Walt into him—well, Lyle will!"

Since the ancestors existed as nothing more than memories, they could offer me advice, but could not directly intervene in anything. Yes, it didn't matter how tough they talked, they couldn't lift a finger.

Still, it seemed they all really hated court nobles. From my point of view, this house belonged to my distant relatives, since a woman from House Walt named Milleia had married the head long ago...

Shannon gripped Miranda's shirt, her head hung. For a while, she hadn't said a single word. When anyone called out to her, she would only respond with small, sullen noises.

She had some very deep-rooted feelings about the place.

"Shannon...it'll be okay."

"...Yeah."

That was a short conversation between the sisters.

There was surely a lot underlying it, and many feelings passing back and forth, but I was unable to pick up on the subtleties.

"All right. Let's go."

We walked forth to enter the estate.

Tea had already been prepared in the parlor we were led into. We waited there until we were greeted by Renaldo—and Ralph, the father of Miranda and Shannon.

Far from what I'd heard of him, Ralph was smiling.

"Miranda, it's a relief to know you're doing well for yourself. And Shannon, I hear your eyes have recovered. I couldn't be happier."

Just listening to them, you could mistake these words for something a father would say. But Miranda's expression did not change, and Shannon was clinging to her sister even harder.

Shannon had the ability to read the emotions of others, which meant...

The shameless man continued on with a smile. "Still, what a fortunate coincidence it is that you two came together," he said, addressing me. "My grandmother hailed from House Walt, you know. Did she tell you about this? There was actually a possibility of you and Miranda getting married."

If I hadn't known, I would have seen him as a kind man. However, the sixth head's Art painted him in red. This was the color of hostility. He was very hostile toward me, and yet he put on a superficial smile and feigned kindness.

I heard the second head sign. "It's amazing how he can hide his true intentions so well. This is why you can never trust a court noble."

Not that you can drop your guard around feudal nobles either. I provided ambiguous replies as I checked on the location of guards outside of the room. It didn't seem like they were going to launch an attack, but they were certainly on guard.

"Enough with the formalities. Can you tell me what you want already?" Miranda interrupted.

Sending her a somewhat condemning look, Relph answered, "Miranda, please calm down a bit. I've reflected on my actions. I'd like to apologize for sending you and your sister away."

I wasn't going to butt into her relationship with her father.

"Then what? Am I supposed to say, I'm sorry for not being quiet and obedient? Please don't try to make amends. It's too late."

Ralph hung his head a bit before looking at me. "My apologies. Our house has some circumstances. You may have already heard, but I have done something inexcusable to the two of them. I'm regretting it already."

The conversation wasn't getting anywhere so I decided to ask, "Umm, what did you call us for today?"

Ralph straightened his posture, his face turning serious as he turned his body toward me.

"From Miranda's letters, I know what sort of relationship you have with my daughters. As a parent, there are a few parts I don't agree with..."

What exactly did she write about me? I looked at Miranda, who simply smiled back.

"...not that I'm in any position to one-sidedly criticize you for it. However, as Miranda's father, I would like for her...and Shannon to return to the family

estate. What do you say?"

He'd probably already looked into me. From a parent's perspective, I couldn't blame him for thinking that a man who was being waited on by multiple women was trying to trick his daughter. I really couldn't, but the Jewel was already booing him.

"What's this guy on about? It's a bit late to act like a father, don't you think?"

"What a complete disappointment. He could at least shout, '*I'm never going to let you have my daughter!*' Where's the fun in this?"

"If he's calling her back after so long, there has to be some ulterior motive."

"I wonder what he's really plotting..."

"Aaaaaaah! I want to smack him! I want to give him a wallop this instant!"

"Don't make me laugh—is what I want to say. But the fourth is right. He must have some ulterior motives."

Not a single one of the six men trusted Ralph. Not that I personally trusted him either.

I looked at Miranda and Shannon and said, "I would have to refuse."

"Well said, Lyle!"

"Looking cool! Now rile him up some more."

"If he was this bold on a regular basis..."

"So...you *can* say it."

"You can be a bit more brazen, Lyle."

"In fact, why don't you just call him father-in-law? That should strike a nerve."

Why do they make it sound like I'm picking a fight?

I gave a plain and sensible refusal, yet Ralph seemed a little bit surprised. Was he really surprised, or was it more of his acting? I couldn't tell.

"Could I hear your reason?"

"I promised to protect both of them."

“This might not be the nicest way to put it, but Miranda and Shannon are young ladies. I do not want them to have any part in the adventurer industry. Is it so wrong for me to keep them at the mansion so they can find a normal life and happiness outside of that bloody world? Furthermore, you have many other women. Do you have any reason you are so fixated on them?”

I imagine he's trying to say he can't give his daughters to a man like me.

“Lyle, tell him you can see right through him!” the sixth head howled. “Tell him to drop that shameless attitude! Rile him up and get him to show his true colors!”

I rolled the Jewel on my fingertips to turn down the offer. *In the first place... What am I supposed to do about the consequences of getting on his bad side?*

“Well, that goes without saying,” the sixth head said. “You turn the tables on him and enjoy his suffering.”

His opinion seemed to win over all the others in the Jewel. I could imagine the fiendish looks on all of their faces. But, of all the members of the Jewel, only the fifth remained strangely calm.

“You are the one who abandoned them,” I said.

“I’m repenting for my actions. That’s precisely why I am talking to you like this. Won’t you please release them?”

Seriously. If I didn’t know the circumstances, perhaps my heart would have been moved. I’d think, *rather than having them follow me into danger*—and then, perhaps I’d be the one trying to persuade the sisters.

“Definitely not.”

“What do you want? I shall reward you for taking care of them. If you want to be reinstated as a noble, I will provide as much support as I can.”

“Lyle,” the seventh head cautioned me. “It’s more appealing than being an adventurer, but you mustn’t trust him. With his authority, he can create some positions at the very bottom rung of the court, but I doubt he intends to provide much support at all. Also...isn’t there someone else he should be talking to?”

Yes, that was what had been plaguing my mind.

“Why are you even asking me? Shouldn’t you be asking your daughters?”

Ralph made a slightly sorrowful face. “I am ashamed to admit that those two do not trust me. I’m sure your words will do much more to persuade them. If it’s women you’re looking for, I could introduce you to a woman you would be more than satisfied with.”

It irritated me. Did Ralph take me for an indiscriminate womanizer or something? In my irritation, I decided to follow through on the sixth head’s advice.

“Drop that shameless attitude. I can see right through you.”

The map of the Circry estate in my head displayed a few people stationed around the parlor. The color of their markers all changed from yellow to red.

“That’s quite an attitude you’re taking with me. Is that who you truly are?”

“This matter is for them to decide. Not me.”

I turned my gaze to the two girls, but Ralph’s eyes went only to Miranda.

“Miranda, come home.”

Miranda gave a slight laugh. She folded her arms and crossed her legs. This was no attitude to take with one’s father. Her answer had long since been decided.

“Unfortunately, I have no intentions of coming home.”

Shannon hung her head.

The second head muttered softly...and sadly, “It looks like he never even thought of Shannon...”

Ralph heaved a slight sigh. His eyes grew sharper, and his smile faded from his face. His voice turned cold. “That really is unfortunate. I thought you were smarter than that.”

Ralph reached his hand for his tea. That seemed to be the signal, as the guards were immediately on the move.

“They’re coming,” said the fifth head. “Lyle, brace yourself.”

I raised my hips from the chair and was about to take a stance when Renaldo—who was standing behind Ralph—struck the bottom of his cane against the ground. The sound echoed through the room, through the halls, bringing a halt to all the guards who were about to flood in.

Ralph continued to drink his tea as if nothing had happened at all.

“Hmm, he has a proper understanding of your strength,” the seventh head praised him. “Not bad for a whelp.”

Evidently, Ralph had tried to start something and Renaldo had put a stop to it.

With a smile, Renaldo nonchalantly said, “My apologies. I felt a touch of lightheadedness. It really is such an awful thing, to grow old.”

As I sat back down, he continued, “Master, why don’t you speak on the other matter as well?”

It was rude for a servant to intrude on a conversation with guests. Ralph lightly rebuked him on the matter, and Renaldo relented with a “Pardon me.” Then, placing his cup on the table, Ralph got to business.

“I already knew Miranda would decline,” he said. “However, I have no intention of conceding my daughter to an adventurer with no skill to speak of. And so. Why don’t you show your skill to me? I’d like to see if you’re really worthy of my daughter. I was just in a spot of trouble—the palace came to me with a rather bothersome request. Truth be told, a monster...”

Unlike before, he was quite blatantly looking down on me, but judging by the contents of the request, the job was well suited to adventurers. As I was listening to the details, the door to the parlor was forcefully thrown open.

“Father!”

All eyes turned toward the doorway, and Shannon’s face was colored with a bit of surprise.

“Is that what Doris looked like?” she muttered, staring closely at the face of her sister that she was seeing for the first time.

Miranda was also flustered by the attitude of her younger sister who had suddenly burst onto the scene.

Ralph was angry, or rather, he seemed fed up with her antics.

“Doris, stand down.”

The middle daughter of House Circry, Doris, did bear a resemblance to Miranda and Shannon. They were siblings after all. But, her appearance aside, it seemed her personality differed greatly.

“No, I will very much speak my mind! Why did you call those two to the mansion?! And even a man—”

Doris directed a loathsome look at her family, but as soon as she saw my face, her expression suddenly changed to shock. *What’s that supposed to mean?*

But, she quickly shook her head and went on. “Why did you call a man to the manor when we already have Lionel?! Didn’t we already decide that Lionel would marry into the house?”

Lionel? I looked to Miranda and Shannon, but both shook their heads.

“I have no idea. Well, judging by her tone, her fiancé, perhaps? Or maybe her lover.”

“Nope, never heard of him. I didn’t hear about anyone marrying in either.”

Neither of them knew him.

I heard a mean-spirited voice from the Jewel—the third head.

“Hmm, going off the middle daughter’s tone, Lionel is her suitor. But, for Miranda to be summoned back to the house with this timing...my best guess would be that Ralphy boy doesn’t recognize him as a worthy contender. Oh my, I’m starting to see an exploitable weakness.”

He sounded far too happy to find someone’s weakness. I certainly wouldn’t say he had a good personality.

“Then the reason he wants to tear Miranda from Lyle is to ensure that a groom he’s carefully picked out will succeed the house. Man, he went on about being a father and whatnot, but it’s all for the house, isn’t it? I get where he’s coming from, but we— No, it’s got nothing to do with Lyle.”

For nobles, having an heir to succeed the house was a very important issue.

But, it had nothing to do with me.

Doris was red in the face as she prattled on to Ralph, “Lionel is the heir! What are you trying to accomplish by calling Miranda and Shannon back at this point?! I heard all about it from the servants. Her man is nothing more than an adventurer, is he not?! Do you really want someone like *him* to take over House Circry?!”

Ralph winced. “I have not approved of that. Doris, it’s about time you...”

I was starting to see where this was going. The reason we were called here—had to do with this man named Lionel.

The man himself stumbled into the room a moment after Doris.

“Dor, wait for me!”

He looked to be around the same age as me. His blue hair and eyes seemed to be his defining features—he was about my height, but his clothes were higher class than mine. Although it seemed a bit like...he wasn’t used to wearing such expensive attire. Like someone else had treated him like a dress-up doll.

The Jewel was rowdy.

“Huh...? Didn’t we meet him before?”

“Come to think of it, he was part of that arrogant woman’s entourage...”

“You know what...? I was thinking it back then...”

“They really look alike.”

“He was dressed in rags back then, so I didn’t notice, but they certainly look alike.”

“Even that somewhat unreliable aura is just like him.”

My ancestors kept going on about how he looked alike—he resembled someone. *Hmm? Who are they talking about, exactly?*

No, the important part was that I had met this man before. It was the last time I’d stopped by the capital. A noble lass had tried to pick a fight with Aria, and that lass had brought three tagalongs with her. I recalled this man being one of them.

It had only been a few months ago, but it felt quite nostalgic to see him again.

“He kinda looks like Lyle. Especially his unreliable aura, and his pathetic and miserable vibe,” Shannon looked at me and laughed.

The pathetic man trying to hold Doris back as she lunged at her father...looked like me? *What sort of joke is that? Yes, it certainly isn't funny at all.*

As the parlor grew noisy, I pinched Shannon's cheeks to mete out the proper punishment.

We headed out into the mansion's courtyard. Renaldo had proposed a short break to calm everyone down, so we'd gone to take in some outside air.

But the courtyard was filled with a rather strange mood. After all, it wasn't just us three—Doris and Lionel had come along as well. And, with all five of us stuck together, the air was certainly anything but peaceful.

Miranda somehow managed to kick back and stretch out within the palpable tensions. She really had nerves of steel.

“I'm beat. Still, I didn't know you had the guts to talk like that, Lyle. I'm a bit surprised.”

“Really?”

“Yes, it made me happy when you replied without even hesitating. The way you riled him up was pretty nice too. It's been a while since I saw my father making that face.”

“I take it...he was angry?”

“Of course he was. Don't get cold feet now. You need to go for the kill.”

While Miranda seemed happy, Shannon, on the other hand, was quite discontent.

“What are you trying to do by making him angry?” she asked.

“No, I don't really have anything in mind...”

I mean, my ancestors told me to do it. Meanwhile my ancestors—the cause of

all this—seemed to be on cloud nine now that they had seen a chink in Ralph’s armor. Apparently, they were interested in Lionel, who they insisted resembled me.

Personally, I didn’t think I was anything like this unreliable-looking man.

“Doris, how about you calm down? I’m perfectly fine.”

“But *you’re* the heir, Lionel. And yet, if he brings back Miranda when she has her own man...”

“I-It’s okay. I’m not going to lose to an adventurer.”

He was taking on a rather servile attitude to get Doris back in a good mood. The nobles of Banseim did have a tendency to look down upon former nobles who had been forced to become adventurers. Well, it went further than that; adventurers as a whole were often looked down upon.

Lionel’s statement was justifiable, seeing as it came from the common sense of the nobility.

Doris locked Miranda in a sharp glare. “What are you trying to do here, sis?! Didn’t you say you weren’t going to leave Aramthurst?”

To this, Miranda wearily replied, “I don’t remember saying anything of the sort. But, getting to the crux of the matter, it was father who called me here. I did not barge my way in.”

“Then please leave already! Lionel and I will do something about House Circry’s problems.”

“I’m very glad to hear it. That’s less trouble for us. Putting that aside for now, I never did have the opportunity to introduce myself. I’m sure you’ve heard, but I’m Miranda. And this is the youngest sister, Shannon.”

Miranda introduced herself to Lionel.

Pressing one hand against the back of his head, Lionel returned the greeting with a feeble nod. “U-Umm, I’m Lionel... Lionel Walt.”

Umm... What?

Starting with Miranda, then Shannon, and finally me—we were all struck

speechless. How could I not be surprised?

The only voices I could hear belonged to my ancestors.

“No way...?”

“No wonder they look alike.”

“From the court noble House Walt, I’d imagine.”

“Well, that’s the most likely possibility.”

“Still, this patheticness... It reminds me of Lyle back when we first met him.”

“I was pretty sure the house still existed, but I never thought you’d meet them. It’s a small world we live in.”

Doris brushed her hair aside. She had a triumphant look on her face.

“Unlike that adventurer there, Lionel comes from a prestigious lineage. Sure, their status may be a little low, but the house has existed from the moment our very nation was founded. He is on another level from some adventurer.”

I thought it could have been a coincidence, but from Doris’s tone, that didn’t seem to be the case.

Shannon looked between me and Lionel.

“Walt? Lyle’s last name is Walt too, isn’t it? Huh? Are you related?”

With that, it was Doris’s turn to be surprised.

“Huh...?”

Thinking perhaps that Shannon would be of no help in elucidating the matter, she turned to her elder sister Miranda.

“Lyle Walt,” said Miranda. “Former eldest son of Earl Walt. Statuswise, his house is even greater than our own. Rather, we’re distant relatives.”

I went on to introduce myself, and Doris’s expression turned bitter. She seemed to know about me. And...the same could be said of Lionel.

He clasped a hand to his chest, glaring at me from behind Doris. I could feel an intense hatred from the furrow of his brow.

“You’re...from the feudal Walts, huh?”

His expression turned dark. He was directing hostility toward me.

A silence descended on the courtyard. It continued until finally, a servant came from the mansion to call us back.

Lionel and I were led not into the parlor, but into the office. This seemed to be where Ralph did his work for the most part, and unlike before, we were not offered any tea.

Sitting in a chair with his back pressed against the backrest, Ralph looked between us as we stepped in.

“Walts, each and every one of them. My daughters might share similar tastes.”

As I struggled to find a response, Ralph promptly got to business. He placed a sheet of paper on the desk.

“We were talking about it before we were interrupted—a request came from the palace. There’s a small town in a place named Geony, and a hippogryph appeared there. It’s leading a small army of monsters. The capital plans to send a team to take it down.”

The document certainly laid it out like that.

A hippogryph—a monster with the body of a horse, and the head and wings of an eagle. Its front limbs were also tipped with an eagle’s talons—or so I’d read in a book. It was quite intelligent, which made it a rather troublesome monster to deal with.

“This is a request from the palace, right?” I asked.

And, perhaps thinking I didn’t understand a thing, Lionel spoke up from beside me. “When putting together a subjugation force, it’s possible to recruit adventurers and civilians. Don’t you know that?”

What’s with him...? The way he spoke irritated me, and I felt like those last words were unnecessary.

The mood took a turn, but Ralph continued on.

“You get the picture. This time around, the party will mainly consist of houses without government posts, and volunteers from the public.”

The court nobles lived in the royal capital, but it wasn't like there was a job for every single one of them. The ones without work—the unemployed noble houses—were occasionally offered temporary work.

As for why there were unemployed houses to begin with, they were apparently kept around just in case anything happened. They were backups, so to speak. The members of these houses would take part in these jobs in the hopes of finding work and rising up in the world.

From my point of view...I couldn't help but think it would be better to just send the army to take care of it. But, if this was how the royal capital handled things, I was in no position to speak out against it.

“Will the town hold out until then?” I asked, just to make sure it hadn't already been destroyed.

But Ralph insisted that this wasn't the case. “This happens more often than you know. Going off the scale of the monsters, they should hold out for another month. In any case, the capital is in the middle of forming a subjugation team... And I would like you two to take part.”

What exactly is he thinking? I wondered. And Lionel seemed to take my moment of thought as hesitation.

“I'll do it. Please let me do it!”

Ralph nodded. “As expected of the man Doris chose. I have high hopes for you. Now then, how about you, Lyle?”

Why was Lionel so enthusiastic about it? As I tried to wrap my head around the matter, I heard my ancestors from the Jewel. It was the third and sixth heads.

“Oh, it's one of those things. Yes, perhaps Lyle doesn't understand the feeling.”

“My thoughts exactly. He's certainly unreliable, but he has always been quite talented.”

What are they talking about?

After hearing them all out, the fourth condensed their opinions and delivered them to me as though I myself had no say in the matter.

“Lyle, accept the job. There seem to be some ulterior motives at work, but ignoring that, we think this is something you should experience.”

I didn’t really get it, but I couldn’t ignore their opinions either. They probably thought it would help me in the long run.

“What’s in it for us...?” I naturally asked.

Lionel latched onto that point. “You little...! Are you really so vile and petty?! No, you must not understand the true meaning of this request.”

The true meaning? Yes, I certainly didn’t understand. Did Lionel notice something I hadn’t? If he did, that was a frustrating prospect to consider.

But, the second head assured me, “This guy seems to be misunderstanding something.”

I see, so Lionel doesn’t get it either. That’s a bit of a relief, I thought as I returned the conversation to Ralph.

“I’m an adventurer. I won’t move without a reward.”

“Yes, I’d imagine so. Given the scale of your party, I can arrange for ten gold coins, with a bonus for any significant contributions.”

He had an accurate grasp of my party’s size. Just as I thought, he’d been observing us and looking into us ever since we entered the capital.

“Ten gold isn’t enough.”

“If you were a renowned adventurer, I would offer more. But you lack the fame or reputation. Prove yourself before you speak.”

As the party’s leader, I wanted to turn down the request, and yet my ancestors were insisting that I take it. “We have preparations to make too,” I explained, “You’ll need to offer at least fifty gold, with a separate reward paid on completion.”

To be perfectly honest, I still had funds to spare. I didn’t like being ordered

around for cheap.

“You sound confident enough. Very well. I promise you one hundred gold coins upon your success. But, only for a successful venture. You will not get a single coin if you run before the job is done.”

After that, we received a more detailed explanation and left the room.

As we walked down the corridor, Lionel struck up a conversation with me. He took on a blatantly mocking attitude.

“You really don’t get it.”

“Get what?”

He seemed to detest my demeanor, or perhaps he detested me entirely.

“This is why those blokes raised above the clouds are no good. This is a trial to decide the successor to House Circry. A way to see who’s worthy of being the next head.”

Oh, is that what this is? I’m honestly not interested.

“Is marrying into the house that important to you?”

Lionel clenched his hand at these words.

“Someone born into an earl house wouldn’t understand. I’m sure you couldn’t even imagine my life—born to the lowest noble house, with no prospects, no positions to aspire to.”

Apparently, the life of a noble with no government posts was quite harrowing. From Lionel’s eyes, it seemed I was a young greenhorn who didn’t know any real trouble.

“I’m staking my life on this opportunity. Get in my way, and I’ll have no mercy for you.”

And after saying that, Lionel was off. As his back grew smaller and smaller, I cocked my head.

“Is it really that important? I think that the people suffering from the monsters are in a lot more trouble than you...”

I couldn't understand what was driving him.

Picking up on this, the ancestors—especially the second—seemed to be aghast with me.

“Well, Lyle's always done all right, or rather, he's generally talented. I guess he can't understand how the boy feels.”

“Too talented for his own good,” the fourth head concurred. “Lyle, do you perhaps think that if your life gets hard, you just have to work your way out of it?”

I sincerely nodded.

“That's not...wrong,” the fifth said, sounding rather troubled. “It's not, but...Lyle, the world isn't filled with people like you. That's what we want you to learn this time around.”

I headed off to the parlor to reunite with Miranda and Shannon.

Chapter 68: Preparations

There was a topic that often came up in conversations around Central these days. The palace was putting together a subjugation force to take down monsters.

The merchants were hard at work, stocking up on weapons and supplies that they hoped would sell.

Rather than renowned adventurers, it was more often jobless nobles and commoners who latched onto these topics.

Those who had heredity but no government posts, and the knights whose noble titles would only last for their lifetimes—who could not pass the prestige to their children—dreamed dreams of promotion. There were also the common folk who participated in the hopes of racking up merits and being knighted as a result. These aspirations were all too common in the royal capital.

Aria walked through the streets of Central—a nostalgic sight for her.

The stalls were open so early in the morning.

“Hmm, it’s a bit expensive,” she said as she looked at a few daily necessities.

“Miss, are you new here?” the shopkeeper asked. “Goods are expensive in Central. You see, we don’t make much ourselves, and there’s a fee to get it all transported. Well, I feel for you. Tell you what, I’ll cut down the prices, just the once.”

Aria could only send him a conflicted smile. He was actually giving her a good discount, so he was probably a kind person, but...

I was born and raised here!

He seemed convinced that she was an outsider. This was something she found hard to accept, but it was also proof that she had grown a lot burlier as an adventurer.

She was no longer a somewhat tomboyish little lady. She was an adventurer

great enough that her skills were clear in simply her appearance.

After making her purchase, Aria turned to return to the inn, only to run across a few housewives chatting in the middle of shopping.

This was a scene she was used to seeing in every town she'd ever been in.

She tried to pass by, but it wasn't long before her ears perked up.

"Did you hear? Apparently, the subjugation team is taking public volunteers this time."

"Oh, if only our good-for-nothings would give it a go."

"Maybe I should send our layabouts too."

The housewives sharing a laugh were all rather old, and by the sound of things, they had sons. They intended to send out the sons who weren't set to succeed their houses—either to earn some money or to rise up in the world.

Aria pretended she was perusing the merchandise in another stall as she listened in.

"It's a small place called Geony, right?"

"I've never heard of it before. Is it out in the country?"

"Who's leading it this time? I'd love to kick our boys right to it this instant."

The housewives were enthusiastic, but as soon as a certain name came up, their attitude took a turn.

"It's Norma. You know, Norma Arnette. The lady knight."

"Norma? Was she promoted?"

"I'm not so sure. Maybe they're finally trying to get rid of her. Hah, it's hopeless, then. And I thought this was a chance to get them promoted."

The housewives returned to their shopping.

Norma? I've never heard of her. Well, I was never too knowledgeable about those things.

Although Aria was born in Central, she had never heard of Norma before.

She tried to leave.

“Madame, have you decided on what you want yet?” A shopkeeper greeted her with a beaming smile.

Aria didn’t have it in her to say she was just window shopping. She purchased something random and headed off.

Once I was alone in my room at the inn, I sent my mind to the Jewel to converse with my ancestors.

I wanted to consult with them on the request, but...

“Choosing the heir? What is that boy on about? Does he really think Ralphy boy would use this nonsense to select his successor?” the Third head wearily said.

“No, but...you know...” I replied. “Lionel seemed very confident when he said it. I thought there might be some merit to it.”

“Nope. Absolutely not. Young Lionel might think so, but Ralphy didn’t say a single word about that. At most, he somewhat gave off that impression. But don’t take his hints at face value. In the first place...the successor he wants is not a knight who excels in brute strength. I’d imagine he’s looking for more of a civil desk worker.”

Considering the posts held by House Circry, an heir with only their strength going for them would certainly be unnecessary.

“Then what is the point of this request?”

“It’s just a measly hippogryph, right?” the third said, sounding largely uninterested. “Maybe there’s no deeper meaning. He really was just looking for someone to get rid of it.”

I thought a bit before asking, “That’s the part I don’t get. The kingdom has its knight orders and plenty of other soldiers too, right? Then couldn’t they have just sent aid and solved the matter quickly?”

“Lyle,” the seventh head said, entering the conversation. “There are times when the right decision isn’t what’s best. What you said is naturally correct, but at the same time, it is mistaken.” He explained slowly so I could understand.

“Do you know why there are unemployed houses with no governmental posts?”

“They’re spares, I believe.”

“That’s right. They’re spares. But it’s not a good thing to have too many spares, is it?”

The seventh head went on to explain that the number of nobles with heredity was always increasing. Of course, some houses did die out, but troublingly enough, the number of nobles was constantly going up.

The second and third sons of famed noble houses would branch off and raise houses of their own. In some cases, when a fighter performed well enough on the battlefield, they would be granted nobility and allowed to pass their title down to future generations.

Nobles continued to become more numerous with nothing to limit them.

And the burden for this was placed on the palace. They paid a yearly salary to the nobles who didn’t even do any work. The more nobles, the more money they had to pay. Then couldn’t they just stop adding more nobles? This apparently wasn’t the case. For what would happen to the second and third sons who had received a full education only to be left with no hopes and dreams?

They could become adventurers—and that would be all well and good. But there was also a chance of them turning to wrongdoing. Nobles were inherently able to use magic. The damage they could cause was far greater than that of the average person.

“It’s important to have balance in all things—they need to keep their numbers at a moderate level while also creating chances for promotion. Additionally, it costs money to send a knight order or trained soldiers.”

Apparently, the palace didn’t want to expend any of its precious knights or soldiers. And there just so happened to be a certain group they did want to expend—that being the unemployed nobility.

The fourth head pushed his glasses up a bit, adjusting them as he said, “It is also good to have an easy battlefield to learn from. Lyle, think of this subjugation force as a force in name alone. And have a good look at the people

around you. When you're surrounded by nonadventurers at work, I think you might just learn a few things."

"Right," the sixth head nodded. "Everyone around you has been far too talented. I won't say that's a bad thing... But I do think this is something you ought to learn."

It seemed I was still lacking in many ways. That aside...

"Come to think of it—and I do apologize for changing the topic—but why do you all hate court nobles so much? No, I know the reason... But despite that, you still marry your daughters to them and help them out in various ways..."

For instance, the House Walt allowed Milleia to marry into House Circry. Not that I wanted them to tear that couple apart; I simply couldn't understand their wishy-washy attitude toward them.

They spoke in turn, starting from the second head.

"Well, let's see. You need to do that stuff, or you won't have any relations with them. That's a big no-no."

"From the palace's perspective, they can't just let the feudal nobles run free, you see."

"I hate them, but you don't have an option of not interacting with them."

"If you cut off relations with them, worst case, you can get invaded."

"It's that, you know. Give and take."

"It is necessary. You need to associate with them whether you like it or not."

I cocked my head. "But... You hate them, right?"

"Can't stand them. They're the worst. I wanna use them for target practice!"

"I get an urge to punch them when I look at their faces. Rather, I did punch—just once. That was refreshing."

"I'd love to drive them into a corner. I want to see those tears in their eyes."

"If I could cut them down without consequences, I would have a mountain of corpses."

“They make me sick!”

“Hate is not a strong enough word... I feel murderous toward them.”

They evidently hated them even more than I thought. They all had scary looks on their faces. This didn't seem like the right time to ask what exactly happened to them in their lives to make them feel this way.

“But you still get along with them?”

The third head shrugged. “That's right. Well, you know what they say... This is this; that is that.”

Both sides hated one another, but they cooperated for their own self-interest... Nobles had it rough. *Personally, I prefer my current situation.*

Suddenly, the second head raised his hand. He looked embarrassed. “Incidentally... Can I borrow Lyle for a moment?”

The others had rather awkward looks on their faces.

“Yeah... Good luck.”

This time, the third head didn't tease him. He even cheered him on.

“Q-Quit it!” the second head stammered. “I'll definitely succeed this time! This time, I'll pass the Art and disappear! Just you watch!”

The second head...hadn't given up yet.

We were in the second head's room of memories. A scene of the land he once governed spread out around us. These were the sights of a tranquil, well-maintained village; and to the second, who had worked himself to the bone to get it all in order, this scenery seemed to be what he liked best.

It was like the orderly plots of land were a representation of his nature.

We walked through the village and made for the archery range. Well, even if I called it that, it was just a wide-open space littered with a few targets.

Standing before these well-used targets, the second head psyched himself up.

“All right!”

“Umm... We’re doing this again?”

“Now look here. Our role is to teach you Arts! Last time, I said all my goodbyes like that was the end for me—do you know how I felt when I returned with you? That was the most embarrassing moment of my life.”

I did feel like I’d done something bad, and I felt some responsibility that I failed to inherit his Art. But it was my ancestors who had arbitrarily convinced themselves that I could do it... That wasn’t my fault.

With newfound motivation, the second head explained, “The third stage is called Select. For its intended purpose—it just lets you keep track of the people you want to use your Arts on. But you can twist that a bit to your advantage.”

The second head pulled out his own bow from who knows where. This was a world of memories, after all. Be it weapons or anything else, he could easily summon it forth, and all wounds were immediately undone.

He held five arrows in his hand, knocked them all, and aimed them at a single target. But as he unleashed them, the arrows changed course midair and stuck into the other targets lined up. Five arrows hit the bull’s-eyes of five different targets.

I clapped my hands.

“It’s spectacular, no matter how many times I see it.”

“Isn’t it? That’s not exactly its intended use, but it is very convenient. Now then... Lyle, try it.”

I was handed the bow.

The second head’s bow was sturdy and well used; I could feel the weight of its history as I held it in my hand. He passed me three arrows.

As I pulled the bow, I concentrated on using the Art.

It was like I could see cross-shaped symbols floating over the exact spots I wanted to hit. A peculiar sensation came over me—that if I released the string, the arrows would naturally fly to those markers... And yet, when I unleashed them...

“Why?!”

The second held his head in his hands, clearly distressed that the arrows only flew in the direction they were initially aimed.

“That should have worked! Lyle, you’re not cutting corners, are you?”

My shoulders dropped. “I am completely serious about this. This is quite difficult.”

“Are you sure? You’re not lying to me?”

He suspected me, but as soon as he heard a rustling sound coming from the nearby grass, he snatched the bow from me and took his stance. I was entranced—I couldn’t take my eyes off of his flowing movements.

What emerged from the thicket was a horned rabbit. A monster that House Walt—especially the first through third generations—held a deep loathing for.

“Hrah!”

The next moment, the arrow had pierced straight through the rabbit’s heart.

“Got it!” He tucked the bow away.

“Why did a horned rabbit come out?” I asked.

He offered a vague reply. “Well, I’d imagine it’s because I have a strong hatred for them. More importantly. Why are you failing? I thought you could definitely pull it off.”

He just didn’t know when to give up.

Later the same night Lyle returned from House Circry, Clara was staring at a pile of ten books she had bought in the capital. She seemed to be mulling over which to read first, but before she could make her decision, she cast a question to the girl staying in the same inn room as her.

“About that request Lyle received from House Circry. Are you all right with it, Novem?”

Novem hardly ever went against Lyle’s decisions. At most, she would try to keep Lyle out of obvious danger.

“That is for Lord Lyle to decide. I have no objections.”

Considering the strength and number of the monsters, it was hard to imagine them losing. Certainly, this was a convenient request if they wanted to get their names out there.

“I have heard that the circumstances in the capital are different from Aramthurst,” said Clara. “That rather than adventurers, it is mostly nobles and civilians taking part. Will this really be all right?”

Their party had never experienced a request like this before. At the same time, the capital had its own circumstances and if they went at it with their usual mindset, she feared they might come to regret it.

After all, Clara’s time in Aramthurst had taught her just how troublesome it could be to deal with nobles.

There was also another point that bothered her. “Also, I heard that House Circry will not allow Miranda to join us on this request.”

There weren’t any adventurers who would accept such terms—to not take their comrades along. But the reasons were no mystery. House Circry was the place Miranda and Shannon had once called home, and these words could have been taken as words of concern for their well-being.

“They did not say anything about Shannon though,” Novem indifferently replied. “Going off what Milord said, it is just for their own convenience. I don’t think this is anything we have to be so mindful of.”

Clara didn’t intend to be overly worried about it either. Miranda had vehemently turned her house down on that matter, and Shannon had also proclaimed she would tag along. But...

Novem’s basis for making decisions is a little strange. I mean, I always knew that, but she’s even taking this attitude with nobles? Is she not scared of them?

She had lived her life partly in noble society, yet she was so loyal to Lyle that they did not even factor into her judgment. Looking at Lyle’s upbringing and his relationship with Novem, there were a few things that were understandable. But quite a few others that were simply unexplained. Perhaps he had originally been a noble, but Lyle was now just an ordinary adventurer.

Novem had a soft demeanor and a kindness to her. Clara did rate her quite

highly, but there were a few things she couldn't help but be curious about.

She's not stupid, and she should know that there's little to no chance that Lyle will be reinstated as a noble. So why does she feel so confident in ignoring their demands?

Whatever the reason was, Clara found the behavior strange. But regardless, the matter wasn't significant enough to argue with the party's dependable magician over.

Pushing thoughts of Novem from her mind, Clara reached for one of the books stacked in front of her.

The next day, Aria and Sophia had gathered in a room of the inn. They were accompanied by Shannon, who was keeping house.

Novem and Miranda had gone out, and Clara said she was going to make a tour of all the bookshops in the capital.

"Very good. Now let's begin the lesson," Monica said, acting out the part of a teacher.

Standing before the three seated girls, she held up a small whiteboard. On it was written the word "tsundere."

"Today's lesson will be on tsunderes. Are you all keeping your tsun at a moderate level? Balance is incredibly important when maintaining tsundere; in fact, this is where all the charm comes—"

Sophia put a halt to her explanation with a reservedly raised hand. "Umm... Monica?"

"Please call me Ms. Monica right now."

"M-Ms. Monica? What is a tsundere?"

This was a word that none of them knew.

Monica looked aghast as she answered, "It refers to someone who is cold toward the person they like while occasionally letting some kindness slip through the façade."

“What’s that? That just sounds like a pain to deal with,” Aria said, giving her honest impression.

To this, Monica had to put a hand on her face. She shook her head. “You just don’t get it. Listen well. The attitude you all take toward that useless chicken. It can be classified under various degrees of tsundere as well.”

Shannon, who had been eating sweets as she listened in, laughed with food all around her mouth. “That has nothing to do with me, then. I mean, I hate him.”

Miranda scoffed. “Yes, that is indeed the tsundere way, little girl!”

“Hey, what’s that supposed to mean?! More importantly, aren’t you being a bit mean to us?”

With a straight face, Monica replied, “Yes, I am. So? Anyways, let us resume the lesson.”

And, as she listened, Aria thought, *I tried to strike up a conversation with her because I was bored, but this is getting to be a pain.*

The three girls all had time on their hands, so they tried asking Monica about all the incomprehensible words she used. This led to an entire painstaking lesson.

The lesson went on.

“Tsundere is a double-edged sword, so to speak. One wrong step, and you will anger your target, rendering them unable to notice your affection. And so, you must stop your flawed tsundere attempts this instant. It is hopeless.”

Sophia looked depressed. “F-Flawed tsundere? Are we going about it wrong?”

Sophia—the earnest girl she was—seemed seriously depressed over the matter.

“Don’t worry too much about it,” Shannon consoled her. “I mean, it’s Monica we’re talking about. She’s broken.”

From their perspective, a maid who called her master a damn chicken had to be broken. There were no two ways about it. Despite that, they knew she wasn’t a bad person, so they still got along with her...

“How rude it is, to call someone broken. But very well. I, Monica, shall show you true tsundere at work. Oh, and what a convenient time too—the chicken has arrived.”

They could hear footsteps in the corridor, and evidently, Monica was able to tell from the sound.

She immediately tucked away her whiteboard—although it looked like she had simply stuffed it in the gap between her apron and her dress. It was always quite the mystery how she seemed to be able to store anything and everything in that gap.

With that said, Monica’s very existence was so strange and mysterious that no one really questioned her over the little details. Not that it wasn’t still very curious.

There was a knocking, and Monica responded. Soon, Lyle had joined them in the room.

“Oh? What’s everyone gotten together here for?”

Aria shrugged. “Just playing around to kill some time. So, did you need something?”

To be more precise, they were staying at the inn to guard their luggage—and to guard Shannon. Perhaps someone from House Circry would come to reclaim her. Miranda would have been able to run away, but Shannon, not so much.

“I thought we should go out to buy food supplies.”

Sophia cocked her head at that. “But I heard they would be providing food. Also, Novem and Miranda said they would arrange for emergency rations.”

“Well... Just in case, I guess?” Lyle said, gripping the Jewel hanging from his neck. “Could I borrow Monica for a bit?”

At times like these, it would be Monica that he would take with him. But Monica, in her attempt to demonstrate a tsundere in real life, brushed aside one of her blonde pigtails.

She took on a different attitude than usual. “How funny. You think you can order me around? I’ll have to decline. Well, if you really insist—”

But once she had said that much, Lyle easily relented. “You don’t want to? Then are you good to go, Sophia?”

Sophia nodded and was about to stand when Monica suddenly got down and clung to Lyle’s ankles.

“Wait! Please wait! I’m lying. It’s all a lie! I want to go shopping with you. Don’t leave me behind!”

“You’re being a real pain, you know.” Lyle pulled away a bit as Monica burst into tears. But, after apologizing to Sophia, he told her, “If you wanted to go, you should’ve just told me.”

“You have it all wrong, my damn chicken. I just wanted to make you think about me.”

Sighing at Monica, Lyle lent her a hand and helped her stand up. “What am I supposed to do with you?” he grumbled but smiled all the same. “I’ll head down to the lobby. Come meet me there when you’re ready.”

With that, Lyle left the room. As soon as he was gone, Monica turned to the other three.

“Did you see that? This is tsundere. Oh, I can’t waste any more time here. I must hurry to my chicken. And with that, fare thee well.”

Monica scurried off to Lyle, leaving them dumbfounded.

“Was that tsundere?” Sophia asked. “How to put this... That just looked like one of their normal conversations.”

“Any second you spend worrying about it is a second wasted,” Shannon nonchalantly replied.

And within that, Aria thought to herself. *Huh? Which one was supposed to be the tsundere there?*

Rather than Monica who so easily burst into tears, wasn’t it Lyle—who had thrust her away only to begrudgingly accept her, and ultimately show kindness in the end—who played the real tsundere?

And once she posed this question to Sophia and Shannon, the three of them got into a deep—well, deep as they saw it, but quite inconsequential to anyone

else—conversation about *tsunderes*.

Finally, they concluded: *tsundere is an abyss*. A conclusion that no one apart from them could understand. And once Clara returned, they heatedly discussed the matter with her.

This was, of course, quite bothersome to Clara who had never asked for all this to be dropped upon her.

After a bit of shopping, I looked down at the bags that occupied both my arms. Vegetables, fruits, cheese—we'd gone around purchasing various things. But, even after purchasing so much, considering the size of our party, this was barely enough.

I glanced back to see Monica carrying boxes and bags. From a third-party perspective, it must have looked like the man had taken the lighter bags and left everything else for the woman. And that really was the case, troublingly enough.

"Do you think that should do it for food?"

"Rest assured," Monica replied. "No matter what happens, I will do whatever it takes to scrounge up your chicken feed if nothing else. You can count on Monica to procure ingredients on-site."

She really can do anything, huh.

With that said...

"We're shopping so we don't have to do that. Wait, by that response, I'm guessing it isn't enough."

"Well to be honest with you, I am a little uncertain, considering the expected time we'll be out. Most pressingly, we don't even know how long we'll be stationed on-site."

Gathering food supplies had been my ancestors' suggestion. When Monica said she would procure ingredients on-site, she probably meant hunting wild animals and gathering wild plants, but the place we would be stationed—well, that would be Geony.

This meant that, potentially, the subjugation force sent to protect the town would be ultimately plundering the town's resources. We were buying food to avoid that.

Thankfully, the seventh head's Art allowed me to preserve perishables for as long as I wanted. It really was a convenient Art.

I entered a deserted alley to stuff all our supplies into that Art when I heard a familiar voice.

"Ah, this is the worst."

There was a woman sitting there—an elf. I thought I knew her from somewhere and, on closer inspection, it was Eva.

I'd met her before in another town; but to be reunited like this, with her sitting in a filthy, narrow alley... Well, it was hard to call it a touching reunion.

"Thanks a bunch, Lyle!" Eva thanked me as she continued eating.

The table was crammed with so much food it couldn't fit another dish, and Eva, who polished the plates off one after the next, was considerably hungry.

Eva had left her home forest to live as a performer. She was a rare elf who operated alone without joining a traveling troupe (although she would occasionally hitch a ride with them). While the elves lived as hunters in the forests, they were also very curious beings. Many would leave and travel the world, their caravans taking the form of traveling shows.

They loved songs and stories, and when one thought of street performers, they would often think of elves.

I'd met her before while tackling a dungeon. Back then, I'd given her a stage to perform on in exchange for her telling tales to my party members. Even though I wasn't well-versed in song or story, I had quite a fun time with her around; she was probably quite good at her craft.

Anyways, she was a very proactive elf who traveled across the lands in search of material for her songs. Her expression was quick to change, and she was practically an open book.

And now, that same Eva was scarfing down her meal with gusto.



Monica—who was sitting beside me—said, “What is with this woman who is destroying the image of elves? I thought that elves were more like fantasy beings, but look at how she packs it in.”

What image does she have of elves, anyway?

“Once I’m up on the stage, I’ll sell you as many dreams and fantasies as you’d like,” Eva refuted. “But that won’t fill my stomach! Lyle, can I order more?”

She pleaded in a sweet voice, and I glanced to see that she had already eaten every last morsel of food on the table.

Just how much are you going to eat?

I placed another order and decided to chat while we waited for the food.

“So, what brings you to the capital? Didn’t you say you were going to go on an adventure in the west?”

“Been there, done that. So, I decided I’d go to Central next. But, to my great misfortune, I couldn’t find a troupe to travel with. And once I got into the city alone, I soon found I was strapped for cash.”

According to her, it was a huge scramble in the larger towns and cities to secure spots for street performances. Since there were so many people, it only made sense to perform for them—and this was a common thought that occurred to most everyone. So, having suddenly stopped by without prior arrangements, it was difficult for her to unveil her craft.

“If I just start singing on my own, they go on about location fees and other stuff and take my money. The capital is a terrible place.”

Monica cocked her head. “So elves are entertainers who sing and dance? Well, those performers are a dime a dozen in these larger cities, so isn’t it your fault? You should talk to some bigwig to get your way.”

Eva couldn’t refute that.

Monica went on, “Still, you’re in the business of selling dreams? That’s surprisingly realistic and calculating. You must set out to be a more fantastical being.”

“Why do you have such strange preconceptions of elves?”

“I always imagined elves to be more fantastical, magical, noble, and high-handed. And feeble too.”

“What’s the use in being feeble when we live in the bloody woods?! Elves are natural-born hunters, just to let you know! We can use a bit of magic, but physical strength is important. And what’s high-handed supposed to mean? Are you picking a fight?”

“An elf so quick to throw hands. I thought they were more intellectual life-forms, but what a disappointment.”

“What are you supposed to be? The elf inquisition?”

As the food arrived, Eva got right back to eating.

I asked Eva about what she planned on doing from here. “Then are you going to talk to someone higher up the chain to get your spot to sing?”

“I considered it, but I’ll still need to pay the location fee. So, I need money for that.”

“Do you want me to lend you some?”

“Hmm, that does sound appealing, but no. I’ll manage somehow on my own.”

I was a bit impressed by her drive, but Monica was giggling.

“You were squatting in an alley, starving only for our chicken to treat you, and you’re going to make it on your own? The elves do know how to tell a joke, it seems. You should aim to be a comedian.”

No matter how you looked at it, she was mocking her.

Eva’s brow twitched. “I-I’ll pay you in some other way. I’ve got some new material in stock, so how about a song?”

Monica snorted. “Oh, we have no need for that. You do seem very confident... But we do not have the time, so we will refrain. Good grief, for my time alone with the chicken to be eaten up by this glutton of an elf.”

“Hey, cut it out already. Sorry, she’s a little broken.”

As I apologized, Eva stared at Monica curiously.

“Broken? Did she hit her head or something?”

“No, well... She’s like an ancient relic. An automaton, or how should I put this...”

As I explained, Eva’s eyes began to light up. *Ah that was a mistake*, I thought, but it was already too late by then.

“What’s that? Tell me more! Hey, tell me all about it. I’ll do anything. Anything you want!”

Eva shot forward, brimming with curiosity.

“We’re busy right now—it’ll have to wait until next time.”

“Busy?”

“Yes. Actually, we’re joining the subjugation force.”

I returned to the inn with Monica...and Eva.

“I’ll be joining in on that hippogryph hunt! A pleasure to work with you!”

Novem and Miranda, who had both been in the lobby, showed different reactions.

“It’s been a while, Eva.”

“An elf...? Will she even be useful?”

“Long time no see, Novem! And rude woman. I may not look it, but I’ve performed in traveling shows before. I’m used to traveling, and I can use a bow and magic. I won’t get in your way.”

Miranda and Eva got right into a quarrel with that.

Meanwhile, Novem came up to me. “Milord, are you allowing Eva to join us?”

“Yes, she said she had to pay me back for the meal. And she also wanted to tag along to stock up on material. Apparently, she wants to know what happened in Aramthurst.”

The curious elves would sometimes do crazy things in search of material—stories. I got the feeling she’d tag along even if I turned her down, so it felt a lot

safer to travel alongside her.

“Elves are all about leg strength, you know. It’s always good to have one around.”

“I guess so.”

It seemed she didn’t get along well with Miranda as they were still arguing.

“It would be troublesome if you tagged along for fun and couldn’t even keep up.”

“For fun?! I am very serious! I am seriously searching for material here!”

“Elves...are quite bothersome, aren’t they?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?!”

I wanted them to get along, but it seemed they had a terrible first impression. We were going to be joining the hippogryph subjugation with these members, but... Was it really going to be all right?

Chapter 69: The Anti-hippogryph Unit

Lionel had gathered his acquaintances in a storehouse on Circry property. They were fellow unemployed nobles, as well as second and third sons who were not set up to succeed their houses.

“Sorry for gathering you all here. I’ll come straight out and say it—you know that subjugation force that everyone’s talking about? Well, my future depends on it.”

Lionel was seriously aiming to marry into House Circry. The person he had coincidentally successfully hit on turned out to be the daughter of a viscount—Doris.

From what she’d told him, the eldest and youngest daughters had left the house, and she was the only one who remained. If things continued like this, then becoming the heir to a viscount house was not a dream.

“But even if I want to take part, it will be pretty harsh if I don’t have my own troops. So how about it? Do you want to take part as my subordinates?”

The five men he’d gathered didn’t look so content.

“Why do we have to work under you?”

They’d known him for a while, and they knew that Lionel was not fit to be a leader. Sure, they didn’t mind helping him, but they just knew this wouldn’t end well.

“Are you sure you should be saying that? If I’m formally accepted into House Circry, I’ll make sure you all have prestigious jobs lined up. And if you do well in this mission, you’ll be rewarded for that too,” Lionel said as he showed off the equipment he had gotten from Doris.

There weren’t any full suits of armor, but still, the protective gear all came from the same set. They didn’t look like shoddy mismatches. The swords and spears were also brand-new.

“Wow.”

“Are you sure we can have these?!”

“With these babies, even we can...”

As was the same for Lionel, none of these men had any money. They couldn't assemble their own gear, so they were unable to head out to fight monsters. Even if they wanted to take part in the subjugation force, those without equipment would be turned away at the gate.

The look in their eyes changed as they were presented with such proper weaponry.

As long as they had these, even they had a chance at promotion.

Lionel smiled to himself. *All right, they've taken the bait. Now to put them to work.*

“They're rentals, stupid. But if you do well enough, I wouldn't mind letting you keep them. Now do your best to make me the heir.”

Apart from his own equipment, Lionel had enough for ten other people.

“Hey, can I call up one of my friends?”

“Naturally. We'll need at least ten people to seriously make our mark.”

This subjugation force was shambled together out of odds and ends. Within this makeshift force, his troops would be just about the only ones capable of working together. As for the others, they were his rivals, all scrambling to snatch up the most achievements.

Ten is a considerable number. I don't know who's leading the force, but they won't be able to ignore me. I have Doris's support, and if I perform well here... I won't lose to that guy from the branch house.

The branch house—he was referring to Lyle. From the perspective of the court noble Walts, the feudal Walts were merely a branch house.

The thought would always cross Lionel's mind: *we're all Walts, so why am I broke, and why is he rolling in dough...? Isn't this unfair?* The discrepancy between his circumstances and Lyle's irritated him to no end.

What's more, Lyle had subsequently been driven from the house as he did not possess the qualities required of the heir. *I'm far more impressive than him. I'll marry into a viscount house, and then he'll see!*

His sense of rivalry toward Lyle blazed brightly.

It was time for the ceremony to formally appoint the hippogryph subjugation team. They'd rented out one of the pubs in the capital to host it, and though it hadn't been long, I already wanted to leave.

There were only a few days left before we set off, and the gathered members didn't look too reliable.

Standing at the podium was the knight who would lead the subjugation force, Decem-Knight Norma Arnette. She was a female knight with a stern look to her face who did not even attempt to conceal her disdain as she surveyed all who had gathered. She seemed to be in her mid to early twenties.

By her side, a middle-aged male knight named Maurice Asher tried to pacify her.

"Dame Norma, you have to stay calm."

"Maurice. Are you honestly telling me to lead these hoodlums into battle? I am a decem-knight of Banseim! I'm not going to say I want to command a knight order, but why can't we at least get some proper soldiers?"

"No, well, even if you ask me that..."

"This is why you'll always remain a rankless knight. I graciously chose you as my adjutant. Please take this seriously."

Those watching Maurice, a stout forty-year-old man with a slight beard, being scolded by his superior, a female knight who was quite a bit younger than him, couldn't help but feel sorry for the man.

"M-My apologies," Maurice stammered. "But I am a knight *captain*, for what it's worth."

"You're still lower rank than me!"

“Y-Yes, ma’am!”

All the folks who had gathered for this volunteer initiative had arbitrarily begun to drink the ale and eat the food set out, unprompted. There were quite a few volunteers, but they were an undisciplined mob. Their eyes were focused on the food and drink and on Norma, so I felt safe gripping the Jewel and talking directly to my ancestors.

“They seem a bit unreliable.”

“A decem-knight, huh?” the fifth head answered. “If it’s the same as in my era, she could be put in charge of a platoon or small company.”

The second head calmly scanned the gathered faces. “Since she’s a decem-knight, she should have ten standard knights reporting to her, including that unreliable knight captain. But it looks like they scraped the bottom of the barrel here. This is worse than I expected.”

It was so bad, in fact, that the sixth head could only laugh about it. “This is simply awful. Will this lot be able to protect a town?”

Numbers-wise, there were more than enough of them. Of all the participants, it was Lionel who had managed to gather the most comrades.

He was looking at me, triumphantly.

“Is it just me, or does this subjugation force look incredibly weak?” I asked.

The fourth head laughed. “Lyle, that’s about what you should expect. In the first place, if they were in any way skilled, they would have found work or gotten promoted ages ago.”

“Well, if you gather this many people, then there’s bound to be a few talented kids among them,” the third head refuted. “With that said, looking at these folks...it’s like they were just trying to make up the numbers.”

Participation in the subjugation force did have a prerequisite—all members needed to possess the bare minimum equipment. But even if this condition weren’t met, you could still apply as rear support, and not a single person would be turned away.

However, the people in this pub were only the ones who had been accepted

as soldiers, and there were over a hundred of us. Looking at numbers alone, we were a force to be reckoned with.

The second head seemed concerned about something. "There might be something dark underlying this expedition."

"Something dark?"

"Lyle, this isn't a game. There are some hefty expenses with mobilizing this many people. Not to mention the rear support is going to be paid too. Don't you think that's going to add up?"

The fourth began to calculate it out. "You might not want to hear it, but the town isn't worth enough to send this many people to save it. It would be best to narrow down the selection a bit and send them out ASAP. Under normal circumstances, at least."

"Just how many troops are they investing in a mere hippogryph?" the seventh head sighed. "It would be harder to believe there are no ulterior motives."

So under normal circumstances, this would be a huge mistake. I can't blame them for thinking something's going on up top.

"So what do you think they're trying to do by continuing to gather volunteers up to the very last second?"

"This entire force might be forsaken," the second head coldly replied.

Once the ceremony was over, I returned to the inn to find Miranda and Aria in the lobby. They both had serious looks on their faces.

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, you returned fast, Lyle."

Miranda seemed startled as she turned to me.

"Hey," said Aria. "Just to be sure, is the person leading the subjugation force a female knight named Norma?"

I nodded. "Do you know her?"

Aria shook her head. "No, I just heard a few rumors when I was out shopping.

Norma has a terrible reputation. Apparently, she'll do anything to get promoted."

Miranda seemed equally troubled. "I asked Renaldo about it, and she's apparently seen as a nuisance in the capital. Her colleagues similarly have a poor reputation."

As the party leader, I was certainly grateful that they were gathering information before our departure.

"Well, it definitely seemed like a problematic gathering."

"Really? Is it going to be all right, then?"

"Who knows?"

"Get a grip, Lyle. This is a job *you* accepted."

I couldn't deny that. I hadn't told anyone around me about the existence of my ancestors, and Aria was probably struggling to comprehend why I took on such a request.

"Lyle," Miranda apologetically said. "You don't need to push yourself too hard for our sake. If worse comes to worst, we can all just leave Central together. You don't need to take my house seriously."

I shook my head. "I have my own reasons. You don't need to feel responsible for this."

But as we carried on this exchange, the Jewel was being a bit strange.

"A bothersome knight," the third muttered. "And the folks they scraped together... Isn't it pretty much certain? I don't see any room for doubt."

The fifth head didn't seem as bothered. "It's just a hippogryph. Aren't you worrying too much?"

The sixth head seemed to share his opinion, but he sounded a bit more relaxed than usual. "Right. It's hardly an issue... Though it may be a harsh foe for those blockheads from the courts."

His words got a unanimous laugh from the Jewel.

But, after he'd finished laughing, the seventh head sighed. "Hah... I really

can't feel any motivation when we're only up against a hippogryph."

Hey, I'm the one doing the work here. In the first place, it was usually considered a troublesome opponent. I couldn't quite understand my ancestors who all seemed to feel it was insufficient.

At the Circry manor, Ralph was speaking with Renaldo in his office.

"So you failed to talk Miranda out of it, then?"

"Yes, my apologies. She seems quite smitten with the young man."

Ralph gazed out the window. He could hear the voices of Lionel and his men who had barged into the manor to hold an after-party.

His face scrunched up—this was clearly a nuisance to him.

"Then let her do as she wants. Worst case, there won't be an issue as long as Doris remains here. That Lionel whelp won't be returning."

Renaldo's eyes turned to the desk—to the real request form.

"Doris should finally snap out of it, after this incident. As for Miranda... It's honestly a pity."

Even from Ralph's perspective, Miranda was outstanding. Had she been born a man, he wouldn't have spent a second mulling over succession.

"She does take closely after Lady Milleia. It is in her nature."

"If she takes after my grandmother, then all the more so. She should have just kept quiet and devoted herself to the house."

"Master, are you really all right with this?" Renaldo asked Ralph.

"What is the issue?"

"Are you really all right with sending two of your daughters to their deaths? What would Lady Milleia, and your predecessors, and your late wife—"

"The dead have nothing to say. Yes, if they wish to speak out against me, then they can very well come out and speak. And I will gladly hear them out. That's right... The dead have nothing to say."

Ralph's mind was crossed by the face of his beloved wife. *If you would come out, I would welcome you with open arms. But if you can't—if we can never meet again... Then so be it. I shall think nothing and work for the sake of the house. That's all I can do.*

He heard the ear-grating voices of the youths, his eyes cold as ice.

"With this, the capital will be a bit cleaner."

The subjugation force had been sent out to near-certain death.

As the subjugation force mustered before the city walls, its numbers had reached four hundred strong. In addition to the rank and file, there were mounted knights and supply-laden wagons, making for quite a large-scale expedition.

Curiously, some of the people who had been at the appointment ceremony were not present... Apparently, they'd run away.

Unlike when I had participated in a dungeon subjugation as an adventurer, we were not joined by a sutler or a troupe of traveling performers. The reason being, our commander Norma despised their ilk. A few soldiers voiced their discontentment at this.

I looked at my own comrades. Currently, only Novem, Sophia, and Miranda were with me.

Sophia looked over the subjugation force and remarked, "This is...terrible."

Adventurers were, well...adventurers. They were completely uncoordinated, but they at least came properly equipped. And yet, this gathering before us really did only have the bare minimum.

We were being led by knights like Norma who rode horses and wore full plate armor, but at the bottom of the pack were normal civilians wearing tattered armor and carrying rusted blades... I couldn't imagine them fighting.

It was about time for us to get going, and yet this uncoordinated group continued to sluggishly lounge around and chat. That also deducted a few points for me.

The second sounded irritated. He evidently hated this sort of thing.

“Someone, anyone. Please, take charge.”

Carrying only the minimum supplies for ourselves, we spotted Lionel’s group, whose equipment was a far cry above anyone else in the unit. Lionel was talking to Norma.

“Captain! It’s a pleasure to be working with you!”

“I see you have proper armor and weapons. You even have your own wagon and supplies. Well, you’re on the decent side, compared to the rest of them.”

Norma looked just a little pleased, having seen the rest of the unit she was supposed to lead. Perhaps she thought that Lionel and his men—who were better equipped than the common soldier—would be at least a little useful.

The third head chuckled. “Oh, are you frustrated, Lyle? But...though I don’t know what means he used to get them, he’s got the numbers and the supplies. He’s not half bad, that Lionel fellow.”

Well, he didn’t look like he had that much money to go around, I thought when Miranda noted, “Doris prepared them for him. I’m more concerned that father permitted it, though.”

She seemed to know exactly where the equipment came from.

I watched Lionel pass something to Norma.

“Oh my,” Miranda chided. “He even went as far as to prepare a bribe.”

“Huh...”

I was flabbergasted, but the fourth head cautioned me.

“Lyle, on excursions like these, strong, harmonious human relations are essential. With that said, you really should do a better job of picking who to bribe, and your methods lack a bit of dignity. You should consider the location and the gift...”

By the fourth head’s estimate, Lyle was only going to ruin the decem-knight’s impression of him if he continued on as he was.

“You bastard, giving me something like this...” Norma muttered. “You know

me too well!”

“I’m glad you like it!”

Norma left in high spirits.

“H-Huh...?” the fourth was dumbfounded. And so was everyone else.

Decked out in the equipment he was so proud of, Lionel made his way toward me. He was grinning.

“My, the captain has a good set of eyes. She came over to greet me, but she didn’t even give you a second glance. But there’s not much we can do about that, is there? Not when there’s nothing but women around you. Do you plan to start a business or something?”

Business—he didn’t say it aloud, but he was trying to say I was dragging around prostitutes.

Miffed, Sophia tried to rebut him, but I reined her in.

“Matching armor, and even a wagon. I’m surprised you managed to prepare all of that.”

“Please don’t put me in the same boat as a fallen adventurer.”

Miranda crossed her arms, her eyes turning to Lionel. “You’ve grown some spine. That’s my sister’s money you’re handling, so please be careful with it.”

Unable to refute that, Lionel practically ran away.

“Since we last met him in the capital, he’s gotten a bit, umm...” Sophia muttered, looking at his back. She was stealing a few glances at me, so I had a good guess of what she wanted to say.

“He’s a complete stranger. This has nothing to do with main houses and branch houses. He really has nothing to do with me at this point.”

“Oh, I see.”

Miranda giggled. “Well, he looks a bit like you. But it’s amusing how different he is.”

Lionel...apparently resembled me.

I really don't see it, I thought.

It was at that moment that Novem intruded with a serious look on her face. She was a little...scary.

"He does not resemble you at all."

"You think so?" Miranda teased. "He's got the same hair and eyes, and his voice is also—"

"What part of it? Lord Lyle's hair is a very lovely blue. It doesn't have all sorts of strange colors mixed in. And that boy has no dignity. What's more, his attitude is completely unacceptable!"

Miranda backed down and I stepped in to stop Novem. After all, she had begun proclaiming, "Milord is simply wonderful!" in a rather loud voice.

"Novem, stop. Stop! Hey, how about we continue with our preparations? Clara should be here with the others soon, right?"

"No, I will have my say. I must explain just how amazing you are, Milord!"

It was rare to see Novem so excited... *But, I'm begging you, please don't brag about me so loudly.*

Miranda seemed utterly baffled.

"Ah...they're here," Sophia muttered.

Following her eyes, I saw that Clara had finished preparing on her end—Porter was headed toward us. As a clamor overtook our surroundings, Eva waved from the open hatch.

"This is amazing! It's incredible, Lyle."

We hadn't even set off yet, and I was letting out a tired sigh.

Generally speaking, an army march was not fast. We were spanning the distance by walking, after all. To top it all off, we had to stop to fight any monsters we met along the way.

Since we had so many people on the move, avoiding them wasn't really an option, and we had no choice but to fight. However...

“No. Don’t come this way!”

“Hey, get out there! Do something!”

“Don’t screw with me! You go!”

What is this travesty?

Before we’d set out, these folks were all rambling on and on. “I’ll take down more monsters than anyone else!” they’d proclaimed with braggadocio. But once combat actually began, they each scrambled to be the first to get away.

Our forces were four hundred strong. At most, we were encountering ten monsters at a time. Even now, we were up against a single orc, and we had dozens of men surrounding it, yet they all seemed completely helpless with their knees giving out on them.

“Oh, here he comes.”

I heard the beating of a horse’s hooves and glanced in the direction of the sound. It had come from Maurice, who’d rushed over and was now readying his crossbow from horseback. I watched from Porter’s rooftop as Norma followed behind him with a frustrated look on her face.

The bolt loosed from the crossbow pierced into the orc’s arm.

“Captain!” Maurice called out.

“Don’t make a ruckus over every little thing!”

Norma leaped from her horse—her sword already drawn and ready. It was a slender double-edged blade, a little long to be wielded in one hand. Nimble maneuvering it, she held it in a high stance and used her falling momentum to lower it on the orc.

The moment she swung, the blade was enveloped in flames, burning the severed orc to a crisp.

Aria and Eva were watching alongside me.

“That’s a pretty flashy move,” Aria said. “An Art, maybe?”

“Magic, I’d reckon,” Eva replied. “Knights sure love their gaudy techniques. But it does get people excited, so I like them too. I mean, doesn’t it get you

hyped, hearing about a lady knight who bends flames to her will?”

“Nope. I’m not feeling it. I mean, Maurice, was it? He’s a lot more skilled than her.”

“I’ll admit that... But no one’s going to notice.”

Hearing this, I inspected the reactions of those nearby. There were cheers of course, but Norma was the only one who was being praised. Maurice didn’t even enter the discussion.

“That lady knight is amazing.”

“We should be fine if she’s the one leading us.”

“At first, I was concerned when I heard it’d be Norma, but it’s a relief to know she’s this strong.”

Maurice was ignored, but he didn’t seem bothered by it.

“Good work,” he said to Norma.

“This was hardly worth my time. Next time, you lot need to learn to handle things on your own. Now hurry up.”

After seeing their exchange, Eva noted, “He’s the plain sort who knows how to do his job. Although he seems like a good person, he’s also the sort of guy who loses out because of it.”

Aria, however, could not comprehend everyone’s reaction.

“Why don’t they even mention Maurice? He’s probably decently strong.”

“Humans tend to only evaluate what’s easiest to see,” Eva said. “It’s the same in stories, isn’t it? Rather than those plain Janes who really should be getting acclaim, it’s the flashy ones—the real showstoppers—that they sing of.”

The men went on to extract the demonic stone from the orc. Maurice was giving out precise orders.

“Knights like him are important to have,” the second said, sounding a little happy.

The third added, “Yes, capable workers are very valuable. I’d imagine that flashy maneuver was Maurice’s suggestion.”

What do you mean by that? I wondered and gripped the Jewel.

“Look around,” the second head explained. “They’re all relieved now that they’ve seen Norma’s strength. It served to teach them that their commander is strong.”

But does a commander have to be strong?

From my point of view, I would much prefer to have a smart leader who could take decisive action. Yes, I understood it was better to have someone strong than weak... But as long as they were able to protect themselves, I didn’t see why it would be an issue.

“You don’t get it, Lyle. Just look at what it did to the morale. Do you think this ragtag group actually has enough discernment to see who’s actually capable?” the second head noted.

The third head sounded frustrated. “This is why they’re such a pain. Though you could also say it’s what makes them so easy to use... Now then, Lyle. It’s about time we start moving again. How about you handle the next battle with your party?”

With him prompting me to search for the next encounter, I focused; a map of my surroundings appeared in my head—and I could see all the yellow and blue dots spread out around us.

These were the Arts of the fifth and sixth heads at work.

For some strange reason, around me—no, not in my party, but outside of that—there were some members of the subjugation force directing hostility toward me. But why? Apart from that, everyone was mostly yellow.

In any case, I could see a cluster of red dots approaching our ununified, uncoordinated gathering, as though they were trying to hunt us down.

“Oh, those ones should do. There’s a decent number of them.”

There were less than twenty red dots, but that was more monsters than the subjugation force had encountered thus far. They were good enough to let us stand out.

Norma was frustrated. The march was slow, but more importantly, it was uncoordinated. To make matters worse, almost all of the participants had no combat experience to speak of.

Many were unemployed nobles and civilians. They at least knew how to hold weapons, but that really was it. Some of the members were complete deadweight. Sure, there were some exceptional members, but looking at the force as a whole, they were truly unreliable.

They're so far below proper knights or soldiers...

She had finally been entrusted with a mission after so long in limbo. If she succeeded, she would undoubtedly be promoted, and yet the riffraff that had gathered was dragging her down.

When her frustration made its way to her eyes and she started to inadvertently give stern looks, her subordinates stopped striking up conversations with her.

And within all of this, a soldier rushed over.

"Captain! We have company!"

"Again?! Why are there so many monsters so close to the capital?!"

The knights and national soldiers had taken care of all the monsters near the capital, but once they'd made it only a short distance away, the monsters immediately started to attack.

The man who reported seemed quite confused by Norma's ill temper, so Maurice stepped in.

"By company, do you mean monsters or bandits?"

"M-Monsters."

"How many?"

"Umm... I don't know. But certainly a lot of them."

The untrained volunteer soldier could not give a satisfactory report. This only served to exacerbate Norma's irritation.

"Come with me. We'll take them on. Good grief, useless, the lot of them," she

complained.

Norma could not permit any more delays, and so she headed out to take care of it personally.

“U-Umm. But...it might be all right.”

A vein rose on Norma’s forehead. The messenger turned pale.

“What are you even trying to say?!”

But just as Norma yelled at him, cheers broke out from somewhere not too far away.

“Wh-What? Hey, let’s go.”

She spurred her horse and rushed to find a group locked in combat with the monsters. They did not surround them and overwhelm them with numbers; they set forth with numerical inferiority, and they did so with determination.

In fact, they were the ones actively going after their opponents.

Maurice seemed a bit surprised as he looked through the register.
“They’re...adventurers, it seems.”

A great serpent large enough to swallow a human whole opened its great mouth to intimidate them. Its body was thicker than an adult man and over twenty meters long. As it slithered along the ground, its head towered so high you would have to crane your neck up to take it in. And before it stood a young man with blue hair. He sliced with a saber in each hand.

With a single stroke, the snake’s head was severed, and not a moment later, the monsters that went after him were assailed by magic. As a trained knight and a noble, as well as a bearer of magician’s blood, Dame Norma could fully understand just how powerful and accurate those spells had been, and she couldn’t hide her shock.

What... Who are they?!

A black-haired woman surrounded by orcs managed to mow them all down with a swing of her battle-axe.

A woman with red hair impaled the monsters who tried to circle behind the

group, and a woman with green hair exuded strings from her fingers to trip them up before finishing them off.

And perhaps provoked by all the noise, there were more monsters showing up one by one from the nearby forest.

Still, the adventurers were not deterred.

Norma confirmed it with Maurice. "There shouldn't have been any renowned adventurers taking part, right?"

"Y-Yes, correct. But they are young. Perhaps they're only starting to make a name for themselves."

As she heard Maurice's reply, Norma felt more impatient than reassured. *Those are adventurers? You've got to be kidding me. I am the one who should be taking center stage. If I don't get promoted here...*

By the time she realized it, the battle was over, and she was glaring at the boy as he sheathed away his sabers. *Hmm? That face... Is he the one who bribed me? No, his equipment is different.*

At first, she thought she recognized him, but by his different comrades and equipment, she concluded he had to be someone else.

They really look alike, Norma thought.

We'd just finished up, and as expected, Maurice came over to us. Stopping his horse by the decapitated snake, he called out.

"I watched your battle. That was quite impressive." Maurice sincerely praised me.

But Norma, who was watching from farther away, was quite blatantly on guard.

The third head burst into laughter from the Jewel. "You're being petty, Norma. Real petty there. He's working under you right now, so how about you praise him?"

Well, we already knew she was petty from the start, but I guess she can't

stand it if someone stands out more than her.

“Thank you.”

“It says here that you’re adventurers, but I haven’t heard anyone talking about you in the capital,” explained Maurice. “Did you come in from somewhere else?”

“We just got here from Aramthurst, and we’re only passing through the capital. But...we happened to take a request while we were here.”

“A request?”

“Yes, from the head of House Circry. Oh, I do have the paperwork here.”

It made me a bit curious that no one had informed the subjugation force about our participation. As I showed the written agreement, Maurice grew a bit fretful.

“You’re related to a viscount house?”

“Well...something like that.”

“Lyle, tell him he’s your father-in-law,” the third head said. “I’m sure you’ll get an interesting reaction.”

The second head sighed. “What’s fanning the flames going to accomplish?”

Maurice stole a few glances at Norma.

“Ah, err... I’ll go check in with the captain. Could you please continue collecting the demonic stones and materials?”

I nodded and Maurice hurried off to Norma with my contract in hand. There were many eyes on us. I looked around and saw among the cheering subjugation force—that Lionel was looking exceptionally frustrated.

Chapter 70: The Past

The subjugation force reached Geony two days later than the original plan.

Aria stared out at the town, dumbfounded.

“It’s already in tatters,” she exclaimed.

The outer wall of piled stone had all but crumbled away, with only a single portion of it remaining. As for the buildings, the wooden ones had burned down, while the stone and brick ones had collapsed.

The fields that surrounded the town had been trampled to ruin, and the town—or rather, the entire territory—looked like it had already been utterly devastated. But there were still people remaining. In the houses that just barely persisted, they glared at the force as it arrived. Quite clearly, we were not welcome here.

Sophia hung her head. “It looks like we took too much time. If only we’d rushed here sooner.”

Sophia was the daughter of a feudal lord. They were only vassals, but still managed a bit of land. Perhaps this sight caused her to recall her homeland.

“In the first place,” Aria said, livid, “what did we even expect when we took weeks to reach the place? That was the first mistake. Just look at where that got us.”

“Aria’s right. And there’s also an issue with the soldiers that got sent.”

The march had been delayed by nothing but the volunteer soldiers’ lack of competence.

I could hear the second head sighing. “Lyle, shut them up. The ones who are truly frustrated...are the townsfolk. They don’t want to hear it from them.” His voice grew gruff as he cautioned them.

“Hey, it’s best not to talk about that right now. It’s the townspeople who suffered the most. They don’t want to hear about our problems.”

As they quieted down, the fourth head assessed the situation.

“It seems they all took refuge in what was still standing.”

This town was the last place standing. The buildings outside of its walls had all been completely leveled and the fields made a complete mess of.

“This is different from what we were told,” the fifth head said, suspiciously. “Looks like...our predictions hit the mark.”

As the reinforcements arrived, someone—presumably someone in charge—darted out. An elderly man clung to one of the mounted knights.

“Dame Norma, why did you not get here sooner?!”

Norma shot him an irritated look and provided no answer. Instead, Maurice addressed him.

“Err, might I ask for your name?”

“It’s Pat. The governor ran away, and everyone else either followed him or fell in battle. I’m the only leader left.”

According to Pat, he was a town supervisor who was tasked with rallying the craftsmen. Of what little remained, there was a building that had once served as a shop, and a few buildings that had belonged to craftsmen.

The inn was still standing, but it didn’t seem nearly big enough to house four hundred new residents.

“Please don’t worry,” said Maurice. “Everything will be all right, now that we’re on the scene. Just look at our numbers. There’s no way we’ll ever lose to a hippogryph, so—”

The look on Pat’s face changed. “Wh-What are you talking about? The one leading the monsters is a gryphon! A gryphon who leads a force of a thousand monsters!”

At Pat’s cry, Norma, who had been completely uninterested to that point, finally reacted.

From atop her horse, she yelled, “That’s absurd! I was told that the enemy leader was a hippogryph!”

“Th-That can’t be. I know the governor himself saw the gryphon before he fled, and we certainly said it was a gryphon in our letter.”

They’d put lives on the line to desperately send a letter, and the relief that finally arrived seemed to have all the details completely wrong. I could understand why Pat would want to cry. And of course, the subjugation force, who had come expecting a hippogryph, wanted to cry as well. This came as a shock to all of us.

In the royal palace, Ralph and many of the other nobles who worked in the court had gathered. They all ranked from barons to viscounts and were elite bureaucrats with prestigious positions in government. Gathered in one of the palace’s many rooms, they discussed the true motives of the force dispatched to Geony.

“The perfect opportunity came just when we needed it,” a stout Baron started out, and those around him offered slight laughs, all looking very pleased with themselves.

“Yes, the monsters sure can be considerate, now and then.”

“With this, the capital should be a bit cleaner.”

“Yes, it was the perfect chance to cull the numbers.”

From the start, they were aware that it had been a gryphon and not a hippogryph that attacked Geony. They were aware of the governor’s report, and the request detailed in the letter that just barely made it out. They were fully aware, and they took advantage of it.

Ralph spoke up. “The subjugation force shall be annihilated, and once the town itself has been leveled to the ground, the actual knight order will be dispatched. If anyone here wants to become independent, I would recommend you take part. This is your chance to rack up achievements.”

They desired nothing more than the complete annihilation of the subjugation force. The reason being, it would lower the number of nobles on the bottom rung of the courts.

The baron nodded with a smile. “My second son wants to start a house of his own. I couldn’t ask for more.”

The annihilation of a subjugation force would bring shame to the name of Banseim, but the land that had been attacked was under the king’s direct jurisdiction. There were no feudal lords to complain about it, and so long as they sent out a proper order of knights to take care of it, there would not be an issue. As a matter of fact, it would raise the reputation of the knights by virtue of them slaying such a dangerous monster.

To all those gathered here, that was all the subjugation force and Geony were worth to them. There would be massive casualties, but it was not a significant loss. The kingdom’s land was vast. Losing Geony would register as little more than a statistical error.

“Do you think any will try to escape?”

“Perhaps they will, but I don’t think a gryphon will let them get away.”

“If they return to the capital, we can simply have them tried as deserters.”

The knights and soldiers they sent—and the volunteers too. They didn’t care if they disappeared.

Many noble houses would be wiped off the slate with this mission. And, in the gaps that formed, new noble houses would be born.

Ralph matched his surroundings and smiled. *And those troublesome brats will disappear too. Then, as long as I find Doris a groom, all my problems will be resolved.*

All unnecessary elements had been rounded up and sent to die. That was how they saw it.

After parking Porter beside a half-destroyed civilian house in Geony, we began preparing to camp out.

“Hey,” Shannon said to me. “Why was everyone so relieved with a hippogryph? And why are they now so depressed with a gryphon?”

For a moment, I was shocked that Shannon was even asking that. A

hippogryph was certainly troublesome, but it was still within the realm of what we could defeat. However, a gryphon was incredibly dangerous.

“You—what exactly do you think a gryphon is?”

“It’s like a hippogryph, right? I’ve seen pictures, so I know. They’re like relatives.”

They certainly did resemble one another. They both had the same eagle head and wings.

But a gryphon’s body was not a horse—it was a lion. It was far larger than a hippogryph too; it was smart and fierce, and dangerous. Defeating a gryphon was enough to have one paraded around as a hero.

That was simply how great the gap was between the two monsters, or rather... It was accurate to say that gryphons were superior forms of hippogryphs.

I tried to explain as best I could, but Shannon didn’t seem to get it.

“So they’re relatives after all.”

“I’m telling you, they’re similar but different. And wait, you just looked at the pictures and didn’t read the words. I’ll have to tell Miranda about this.”

“Wait. Don’t tell sis. I’ll give you sweets, so please wait!” she pleaded with teary eyes.

Since Shannon had been born blind, she was unable to read. She began learning after she’d regained her vision, and in short—she was slacking on her studies and deserved some comeuppance for it.

“No can do.”

“Urgh... Stupid Lyle!”

“I’m fine being called stupid. But you’re the one who’s going to get the scolding.”

When I sent her a triumphant smile, Shannon said, “That face—you look identical to Doris’s boyfriend. And he’s a gigolo too. You’re two peas in a pod.”

“Say what?!”

As I got worked up, Shannon promptly ran away.

I sighed.

Shannon was a problem, yes. But I had a mountain of other problems that took precedence over her.

The morale of the subjugation force had hit rock bottom. To make matters worse, the townspeople who saw their downtrodden rescuers seemed incredibly disappointed.

Norma definitely didn't help when she ordered an immediate retreat. Although some were on her side, Maurice somehow managed to contain them.

They were sure there was no way we could defeat a gryphon. Given the circumstances, running was not a complete mistake...but considering our position, it was a poor move. The palace was surely waiting for us to turn tail and run back to them.

It didn't matter if we were wiped out. It didn't matter if the town fell to pieces. It didn't matter if we ran back. If we did, they'd tack on some reason and have us executed regardless. Maurice seemed to catch on to quite a few things once he realized the intel from the palace had been wrong.

To put it bluntly, our situation was the absolute worst. However...

"A gryphon, huh? Lyle's finally going to be first-rate."

"They're pretty nice, aren't they? Gryphons?!"

"You need to get your hands on its materials and stones. They're worth a fortune."

"I didn't have many opportunities in my time. I only managed to kill two of them."

"If you're a man, you can't miss a gryphon hunt! Good for you, Lyle!"

"Stuff it. Mount it. My boy's first gryphon must be put on display!"

My ancestors were getting carried away. As House Walt rarely had any chances to hunt dragons, hunting a gryphon was apparently what separated the boys from the men.

Is that really how it should be? It shouldn't...right? Something's wrong here.

Going off of common sense, the moment a gryphon showed up was the same moment you should start getting your affairs in order and preparing for death.

"If Lyle was in charge, we'd be able to convince them to let him fight it one-on-one," the frustrated second head said. "But that'll be hard with Norma taking command."

The sixth head refuted this. "On the contrary, there's a chance they'll shove all the responsibility onto Lyle's party. They're fools who tried to run in this situation, so I'd actually say it's quite likely... Hmm?"

Suddenly, the sixth head's attitude changed.

"This scenery, haven't I seen it somewhere before... Right... Come to think of it, there was a small village in Geony, back in my day..."

"What's wrong? Have you been here before?" the fifth head called out.

And the sixth head only said, "Ah."

He seemed to recall something, but he suddenly fell into silence. My curious ancestors interrogated him, but he did not say a single word more.

Aria came over to me. "Lyle," she said. "I found someone to show us around."

"Thank you. It's always valuable to have the locals on your side."

Having a local guide could make a huge difference. In any case, we had no way to put up countermeasures if we did not know the current situation.

Aria scratched her head awkwardly. "No, well, I'm not sure how to tell you this, but... Hey, introduce yourself."

There was a rather small child hiding behind Aria. He looked to be around six or seven years old.

"Are you the guide, by chance?"

The child nervously nodded. He had straw-colored hair, and conspicuous scrape marks wherever his skin was exposed.

"Most of the men are gone... When I asked the kid, he said he's the son of a hunter. He heard all about the area from his dad, so he's pretty

knowledgeable.”

“Err...that’s...”

I didn’t quite know what to say. The Jewel had fallen silent too—surely they had finally understood how very harsh the situation was. At least, I hoped so.

The boy lowered his head. “N-Nice to meet you. My name is Luka. I’ll do my very best, so please hire me.”

I did intend to pay the guide, but I never thought Aria would come back with such a small child. As I mulled over the situation, the second and third heads sorrowfully muttered a name that was not Luka’s.

“Dewey...”

“Why is Dewey...?”

The boy’s name was Luka. His hunter father had passed away, and he had volunteered himself as a guide to earn whatever money he could. All the other able-bodied townsfolk had been gathered up by Norma, so Luka was the only one we could find.

Apparently, he bore a striking resemblance to the second head’s son, and the third head’s brother—Dewey.

But neither the second nor third seemed keen on talking about it. Thankfully for me, this meant that the Jewel was relatively quiet.

I trailed behind Luka.

“This way, Lyle, sir.”

“Sir... You can just call me Lyle.”

“I-I can’t. I need to do it properly if I’m getting money. That’s what mom told me.”

He was a commendable boy doing his best to protect his mother in the place of his late father. As I watched him, I felt a bit ashamed of myself. I didn’t have any memories from back when I was his age. It was all rather ambiguous.

And if you asked me if I was this reliable back then...I honestly wasn’t so

confident. To be blunt, he had a better grip on himself than I did, not too long ago. Indeed, he was most certainly, most definitely, more reliable than I was when I set off from home. He didn't just show me the way. He also told me in detail which walls had collapsed, and which ones were brittle and prone to collapsing next.

"We repair this one every time we get the chance, but it's in a pretty bad state."

"R-Right."

"The bridge here is weak. It's dangerous to have more than one adult crossing at a time."

"G-Got it."

"Over here—"

"Y-Yeah."

According to him, he'd gotten so knowledgeable from playing around the town and helping out his father. It was nice that he knew so many things, but I would end up comparing myself to him, and that would just leave me depressed. Perhaps he had a better grip on things than me—even as I was now.

Once he'd finished showing me around town, the sun was already beginning to set.

At first, I thought a silver coin would do it... But I was grateful that Luka had done his best, and I thought it would help supplement his life from here on. I passed over three silver.

"Are you sure I can have this much?"

"Yes, just take it. You need to...treasure your mom."

"Okay!"

He energetically waved his hand and left. And after I'd seen him off, I returned to my comrades.

At the town inn, the knights had gathered with all the town's men. Lionel was

there with them.

They were all dejected. The more they heard about the present situation, the more they learned of just how terrible it was, and the more their faces paled.

Lionel was feeling terribly panicked. *There's no way. This has to be some kind of joke. I mean, they said it was a hippogryph! I heard it would be completely safe with a decem-knight captain alongside us!*

But where had this discrepancy come about? Perhaps the townspeople were lying, or perhaps they were mistaken. He prayed for this to be the case time and again, but as he heard about the damage to the town and its surroundings, he found it harder and harder to imagine it was any mistake.

Norma simply remained silent with a pale face. Maurice was the one doing most of the talking.

“So to clarify, the gryphon has multiple hippogryphs following its orders?”

“That’s right! How many times do I have to say it?!”

The town’s residents took on quite a harsh attitude themselves. This was because the knights they thought would save them turned out to be so unreliable.

“How many hippogryphs?”

“How should I know? I’ve seen four of them at once, but there could be more. I can’t tell you an exact number...”

They were the town’s men, and the men who had taken refuge in the town. Those who fought valiantly had died, for the most part, and those who remained were the ones without the will to fight.

Just as Lionel was about to pose a question...

“I-It’s terrible! The gryphon’s here!”

They all rushed out in a hurry; the gryphon descended onto the town’s outer wall and watched them closely. Up in the sky, there were six hippogryph-shaped shadows backlit by the evening glow.

I-It’s huge...

Lionel was startled by the size of the gryphon. The surviving walls did not rise as high as the walls of the capital, but he still needed to crane his neck up to see the top. And when the gryphon perched atop them, it made those walls seem puny by comparison.

After opening its mouth in what was almost like a grin, the gryphon spread its massive wings and took to the sky. It led its hippogryphs off into the distance.

S-Scary...so that's a gryphon.

A monster straight out of fairy tales and fiction. Before a monster that would make a hero of anyone who slew it, Lionel stood frozen in fear. But the same could be said for Norma—she crumpled at the knees and held her head.

“I’ve heard of it before. A gryphon enjoys its hunt... It’s over. We are going to be killed as nothing more than its toys.”

As the commander lost her nerve, this fear quickly spread to the rest of the force.

“What are you saying, Captain?! We need to start making countermeasures at once, or we really will die!” Maurice reached out a hand to help her stand, but Norma brushed it aside.

“Are you an absolute fool?!” she screamed. “That’s a monster that only our most elite knights can take on! How are we supposed to intercept it in this tattered town with this mishmash of soldiers?!”

Norma held her head and burst into tears on the spot.

As he watched her, Lionel thought, *I need to run away. I can't die in a place like this. Not when I've finally gotten my chance. If I can run and live, I can search for my next opportunity to marry into House Circry.*

Lionel left the scene with unsteady steps.

That night, we sat around a bonfire and finished our meal.

The appearance of the gryphon had come as a shock to everyone. I had my ancestors to provide a bit of levity, so I managed to bear it to some degree.

“So our next opponent is a gryphon,” I muttered.

And Aria replied, “Why are you so calm?! We were practically cheated here!”

Her hot take was corrected by Clara. “No, not practically. We were in fact cheated. I heard that the governor managed to survive and report to the palace. The request the town sent out reached its destination too. The palace must have had a proper understanding of the situation.”

Yes, there was no doubt about that. It would explain quite a few things. Why someone with such a poor reputation was made the captain, and why the force consisted of such a disorganized mob of desperate nobles and volunteers.

Aria was dumbfounded. “Why do they have to do stuff like this...”

I was with her on that one. But this was evidently the policy of the crown. This was what they wanted.

“We do not have the right equipment to fight a gryphon,” Clara said, looking at me. “Lyle, are you considering a plan of retreat?”

She calmly offered an appropriate opinion for an adventurer.

But Aria stood. “Wait! Are you saying we have to abandon the people here?!”

“It would be ideal to save everyone... But you must understand that we lack the strength to do so.”

“But... That’s...”

The cups passed out after dinner were filled with hot drink. I could distinctly see the steam rising in the cold night air.

I took a sip.

“Sis,” Shannon nervously pleaded to Miranda. “Is there anything we can do?”

“It would be impossible to recover from this, I’d wager. And no one has the motivation to do so either.”

Eva sat and thought. “A gryphon, huh...? I don’t think we can handle that with our current members. Rather, wasn’t it your father who sent us on this request? Did he really do such foul play on his own daughter?”

Miranda crossed her legs and planted an elbow on her knee. She rested her

chin on her hand, looking a little frustrated as she answered Eva's question. "That's the sort of father he is. Now, I can see why the bastard tried to stop me from joining this mission. He intended to have Lyle die here... He really is beyond saving."

She was taking on a rather harsh tone with her own father... And no one could blame her for it. And in the silence, all eyes gathered on Shannon. Miranda was the *only* daughter he tried to keep... It was clear as day that Ralph put his house first and foremost, but this was just too cruel.

"Do you have any stories that might prove useful?" Sophia asked Eva. "Like the methods a hero used to kill a gryphon?"

"I don't think I'm the right person to ask. It would be different if I saw it all with my own eyes, but legends and songs tend to be exaggerated."

"I-I see," Sophia said, falling into a slump.

Monica was the same as usual. "If it was one-on-one," she proclaimed, "I think I could manage. But taking to the sky is unfair. I cannot fly without any upgrades."

She's...never really useful at the crucial moments.

Novem looked at me, awaiting my words. For a while now, the Jewel had been silent, and I was left to mull over what to do. Going off my ancestors' reactions, there was a way to fight it. But for now, they weren't saying anything.

Are they testing me?

"For now, let's rest. They say the gryphon only came to scout us out, and even if we want to run, it's too dangerous at night."

After we decided on the order we'd take watch, we went to bed and then I sent my mind into the Jewel.

The third head had a serious look on his face for once as he spoke to the second head. The other ancestors silently listened.

"They really look alike."

“I never even considered we would run into a kid identical to Dewey in a place like this.”

A little sad, but happy too—there was a conflicted look on the second head’s face as he said, “Well, I’m sure there are plenty of kids who look alike, but this has to be fate.”

The third nodded. “Isn’t that nice, then? If you went and faded when you wanted to, you would have never met young Luka. Lyle only ended up here by chance, but now he can save him.”

“Right, I’d love to save him.”

Evidently, young Dewey passed before he could succeed House Walt. And so, the second son Sley Walt became the head. There was never a guarantee that the firstborn child would be able to inherit a house without incident. That’s why more children were necessary.

However, sometimes these other children would feud over who really deserved the seat.

As luck would have it, House Walt never had any battles of succession. They would have never achieved their current glory had it happened. And as I had failed to carry on this glory, I had no right to say anything.

The second head looked at me. “You look perplexed.”

“Err... I am.”

I had a good guess of what had happened. Dewey had died, conceding his place to the third head—I mean, given the context even I could figure out that much. But I didn’t know any of the finer details.

“It would feel wrong to stay silent on it...” the second head said.

The third scratched his hair. “Right, we want Lyle to do his best, after all. It’s better if he knows the reason.”

The reason the second and third heads were so fixated on the boy named Dewey.

The third head straightened his posture. “It’s not like it’s anything complicated,” he said. “But I want you to know, Lyle. How we feel.”

“Lyle, follow me for a moment,” the second head said, then stood.

Only moments later, the two of us were in the second head’s room of memories. The weather was usually clear here, but today of all days, it was raining. It was a massive downpour that made for terrible visibility.

I held out a hand and found that I could only see the rain, and not touch it. The rain itself did not exist to me, and yet I could certainly feel the sensation of the muddy ground beneath my feet.

As I walked, the mud splattered all around, but it would not stain my clothing. This was a memory.

The second head walked ahead of me. If I spent even a moment hesitating over the intense sound of rain or the poor visibility, I would quickly lose sight of him.

“What happened?”

“You’ll know once you see it.”

Untalkative as ever, the second head continued to walk until he came to an abrupt stop.

“Looks like this isn’t just my memory,” he noted. “Sley—the third head’s memory is mixed in. I never saw this myself.”

The Jewel was a strange item indeed.

“That day, I made a promise with those two—with Dewey and Sley. I promised to watch over their bow training. But something suddenly came up and I had to leave the mansion. The weather was fine that morning, but it started to decline just past noon, and by the time I got back, it was raining like anything.”

It must have been an unforgettable day, as the second remembered it all down to the finer details. Feeling bad for his kids, he’d apparently brought some gifts back with him.

“When I got back, the people of the manor were in a panic, saying that the two hadn’t come home. They were noisily debating where they could have

gone, and everyone was going around looking for them. But I had my suspicions, so I ran out.”

I could hear voices mixed in with the downpour. I focused my eyes and saw the silhouettes of two children.

And...a horned rabbit, its head lowered, its rump raised as it readied itself to charge at them at any moment.

“Dewey!” a sopping-wet boy with blond hair cried out. He had to be the young third head.

The other was Luka—no, Dewey, who closely resembled him.

“Sley, get behind your big brother! I-It’ll be okay.”

A horned rabbit had made its way into the village. Perhaps this was a monster that any adult could handle with ease, but to two little kids, it was a formidable threat.

Dewey drew his practice bow.

“Y-You’re not laying a finger on my little brother!”

He seemed dependable for his age, but the horned rabbit was seething with murderous intent. *This is bad*, I thought. I was about to step out, but the second head reached the end of his patience even before me. He rushed in front of the rabbit, standing between it and the kids—but the horned rabbit passed through him like he wasn’t there at all. It launched at Dewey.

Its sharp horn pierced through the young child’s chest.

Sley loudly wept. Dewey writhed in agony. No matter what the second head did, he could not change what had happened. He could not interact with these events. He looked like he was about to cry.

The horned rabbit did not stop at that. It pulled its horn out, and this time pointed it at Sley.

The moment it leaped into the air to run him through, a sharp arrow whizzed through the rain and stabbed into its body. No, it wasn’t just one of them. Several stabbed through it at once. The force from the arrows shifted it from its trajectory, causing it to fall to the ground motionless. Looking in the direction

that the arrows had come from, I saw the second head—Crassel—holding a bow.

As Crassel raced over, Sley cried and pleaded, “Dewey... Dewey is...!”

Crassel held Dewey in his arms. The blood overflowing from his chest mixed with the rain as it poured to the ground below.

“Dewey! Hey, Dewey!”

He called out, but Dewey could barely move his small mouth with hollow eyes. Whatever he was saying, it was erased by the sound of the rain and the sound of Sley’s wailing.

Crassel pressed a hand to the boy’s chest to try and stop the bleeding, but it continued to pour through the gaps in his fingers.

“It’s all right. I’ll get you back to the mansion in no time. Mom is waiting for you. And grandma...and grandpa too.”

It was clear to see that this was a fatal wound. In a panic, Crassel continued to call out to Dewey, but there was no response. A small life had been extinguished in his arms.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t make it in time. It must have hurt. It must have been harsh... I’m really sorry.”

He held him strongly, and gently, and roared at the raining sky.



The second head seemed embarrassed of his own display.

“It really is pathetic, isn’t it...? I can’t stand to look at myself.”

“Th-That’s not—”

Before I could finish, the second head shook his head. “Failing to protect Dewey is my responsibility. I should have just honored my promise.”

The children had gone to practice their archery. Once the rain started to fall, they took shelter, but after they’d waited a bit and realized it wasn’t going to let up, they’d decided to return to the manor even if it meant getting soaked.

And as they ran through the rain, hardly able to see a thing, Sley bumped straight into a horned rabbit.

As I watched Crassel and Sley weeping, I could tell just how the two of them felt when they saw Luka who so closely resembled Dewey. And it was also clear why the first through third heads detested horned rabbits to such a degree. I’d always found it curious why they hated them so much, but now, I agreed with them.

Not one of them would ever elaborate on it—surely they didn’t want to remember the events of this day. They didn’t want to experience it again.

“Second head, I’m—”

“I’m changing the scenery,” the second head interrupted.

As the rain came to its end, the scenery faded to shades of gray, and slowly shifted to the sights of another locale. Once the color returned, we were in the archery range.

There, a smiling Crassel taught Dewey and Sley how to use the bow. He must have had someone fashion small bows for children.

Dewey’s arrow hit its mark. The target wasn’t so far away, and it shouldn’t have been that difficult to strike, but Crassel seemed overjoyed.

“Well done, Dewey!”

“Yay!”

Meanwhile, Sley wasn’t doing so well, and he looked to be on the verge of

tears. Noticing this, Crassel hurriedly raced over in a fluster.

“Sley, you need to take a proper stance. Yes, like that... I guess it doesn’t always work.”

Unable to pull it off, Sley looked at his brother Dewey and cried.

“Let’s try harder together, Sley.”

“Yeah...”

The second head watched with a sorrowful smile. “Sley was quiet and meek. You may not be able to imagine it now, but he was often following behind Dewey, and playing whatever games he played. Dewey was honest and kind. He would say that he was the big brother so he had to look after Sley. And I... I think that may have been the happiest period of my life.”

Crassel seemed to have fun teaching, and the kids were doing their best.

“I’m an awkward person. I didn’t know how to play with them. You know how my old man was, and I couldn’t even remember what he did for me as a kid.”

From my point of view, the first head—Basil—was also an awkward person. I didn’t know if he ever properly played with his son.

The second head turned to me. “Lyle...I don’t want to watch that child die. I know he’s not Dewey, but this is my request.”

He wanted me to protect Luke. Because Dewey resembled him—no, it was Luka who resembled Dewey.

He scratched his head in awkward embarrassment. “To be honest, I didn’t want you to see me like this.”

“Why did you show me, then?”

“Well...for various reasons. If I was asking for a favor, I thought it was only right to show you the circumstances.”

His face turned serious. “Hey, I know I’m changing the topic here, but... You can already use my final Art, can’t you?”

The moment he said that, I suddenly could no longer see the second head’s face. My eyes had probably drifted away.

“I’m not trying to condemn you for it. I know I got mad at you a few times, but...I got the feeling you were failing on purpose.”

“I couldn’t do it. That part is true.”

“Are you sure?”

As I stayed silent, he let out a slight chuckle. “You react the same way Sley does.”

When I raised my head, the surrounding sights had changed once more. This time, it seemed like a few years had gone by.

Sley had grown. But what he held in his hand was not a bow but a sword.

Crassel had a troubled look on his face. “Sley, do you hate the bow now?”

Sley hung his head, refusing to look Crassel in the eye. His eyes wandered. “I don’t...hate it. I’m just bad at it. I’m just practicing with the sword since that’s what I’m good at.”

Seeing him react the same way as me, I felt a little embarrassed.

Although Crassel would have preferred it if he practiced with a bow, Sley—a stubborn boy—continued to take practice swings with a sword.

“Thinking back on it now...” the second head said, looking at the scene, “maybe he was still dragging around what happened that day.”

If he had taken up a sword rather than a bow, would he have been able to protect his brother that day? I couldn’t tell what was going through his head at the time. But the reason Sley turned away from the bow seemed to have to do with the loss of his brother Dewey.

Chapter 71: The Worst Man

After opening my eyes, I got up and had a look at what was left of the town. It was just one step away from complete and total annihilation, and we would probably lose the next time the monsters invaded. No, there was no *probably* about it.

I looked up at the sky.

“Even with walls, there’s nothing we can do to defend against flying monsters.”

How would we fight against the army led by the gryphon? I gave it some thought, but it seemed impossible to defend the place with what we had.

Even if we managed to fend off the monsters, it would be completely pointless if the town were to fall apart after that. The victory we wanted involved three things—protecting the town, defeating the gryphon, and making a triumphant return to the capital in one piece. Otherwise, we wouldn’t be able to bring shame to those pesky schemers.

Ralph really sent his daughter to a place like this; no, well, I was the one who brought her here, and he was simply unable to stop her, but... Well, whatever. Anyway, I wanted to get back at the man who’d sent me here to die.

In which case, we needed the power of numbers.

“Last time, we managed to get the logistical support on our side, but this time around, it’s hopeless unless we make an ally of everyone. But that sounds pretty difficult.”

There were plenty of things to do. And as I mulled over what course of action to take, the scoundrels in the Jewel called out; they’d already regained that pep in their step.

“You look troubled, Lyle.”

“You need to rely on us at a time like this. This is our field of expertise.”

“He’s right. How about we work hard for that fame you’ll get by slaying a gryphon?”

“First, you’ll need manpower.”

“Ah! I just thought of something good! Lyle, leave it to me.”

“It’s almost time for a joyous hunt. How about you start preparing, Lyle?”

I was getting a headache. When everyone around me seemed to have fallen into despair, my ancestors tackled this situation with glee.

“Do you have any good suggestions? Just defeating the gryphon isn’t enough.”

“Of course I do,” the second said with renewed vigor. “And naturally, we’ll protect the town too.”

“But first, get some more people on board,” the sixth head amusedly advised. “A gryphon is an intelligent beast. Yesterday, it came to grasp the situation, but its kind has a bad habit of playing around.”

Perhaps playing wasn’t exactly the right word, but smart monsters like gryphons did toy with their prey from time to time. That was precisely what it was doing now.

It slowly drove the residents of the town into a corner, taking its sweet time tormenting them bit by bit. From what Pat had said, a town of this scale would have fallen overnight had our foes gone at it seriously from the start.

“Even if I start recruiting people, the participants of this expedition are quite dubious, to say the least. I don’t know if the remaining townsfolk can fight either.”

Most of the able-bodied men were gone. Morale was low, experience was practically nonexistent, and the town itself was in tatters.

It already seemed like we were at a loss.

“I don’t really want to say it, but—wouldn’t it be better if we just took Luka and his mother with us, and fled?”

“No can do,” the second head immediately refuted. “Are you going to look

after them for the rest of their lives? And one more thing... A mother and child like that. They're not going to make it if they start fresh somewhere else."

"Precisely," the sixth head concurred. "Also, I won't recommend escape. From the gryphon's point of view, a new batch of prey has arrived in droves. It won't let you escape. Those things are pretty persistent."

A short distance from the town, Lionel stood atop his wagon.

"Hurry up!" he called out to his comrades. "We need to get out of here ASAP!"

Fleeing toward Central with his comrades, Lionel fearfully took in his surroundings. His nervousness was shared by all the others, who were walking alongside the wagon. They'd left the town before daybreak, and it was almost noon already.

"You reckon we can beat them with these swords and spears?"

"Goddammit. Damn it all... This was supposed to be my big chance."

"Weren't we going to get promoted just by sticking around with you?!"

"Do you guys have a death wish or something?!" Lionel screamed. "Hurry and run!"

One of the young men rebutted, "Says the only guy riding the wagon! Why don't you get down and run, then? Lead by example!"

"Th-This is on loan from Doris. And if we discard the wagon, we've got no way to carry our supplies!"

It happened as his group began quarreling—when they had momentarily stopped in their tracks.

Suddenly, a great shadow cut off the light of the sun. As one of his comrades looked up, the spear in his hand fell to the ground.

"Hey, don't drop your weapons. Those are also on loan... Wh-What's wrong?"

Looking up, a shriek escaped Lionel's throat. The being that had cut off the sun was a hippogryph.

After looking down over Lionel and his men, it raised its head and let out a tremendous screech. The sound echoed far and wide, and it was loud enough to make Lionel's ears ring and ache.

"H-Hey!" One of them screamed.

Before they knew it, a horde of monsters had gathered around the party. They cut off the road forward and appeared from the left and right too.

The hippogryph proceeded to swoop down and crush one of his comrades underfoot with its landing. Its forelimbs were those of an eagle. It pressed down and clenched until the poor man was spitting blood.

"S-Save—"

The air was filled with the sound of flesh and bone being twisted and crushed. His comrades couldn't move a single finger. The lone horse pulling the wagon began thrashing violently in fear, only for the hippogryph to take a bite out of its neck with its eagle beak.

Lionel shrieked as he watched the scene from atop the wagon. He jumped down and ran as fast as his legs would take him.

His comrades were soon to follow, with the monsters hot on their tail. A swift doglike monster caught up, causing one poor soul to drop out of the race.

"Don't leave me here! Save me. Save—!"

Lionel cast off his armor as he ran. His comrades quickly took a page out of his book, throwing off their equipment as well.

They retraced every step they took, and once they had finally reached the town walls...their numbers had been cut down to five.

Someone had tried to desert. Lionel, apparently. When I heard about it, I ended up grumbling, "What does he think he's doing?"

But the third head immediately chided me. "What's that I hear? Oh Lyle, sweet Lyle. Didn't you just say something about fleeing too?"

There was ample cynicism in his voice.

That shut my mouth.

But the problem was twofold—the fact that someone had tried to run and the realization that they had been unable to run. This was horrible news for the townsfolk and the members of the subjugation force.

In the town square, Lionel and his men sat and cowered, having discarded their fancy new equipment to flee. Novem looked at them coldly.

“Novem, do you hate Lionel? I mean, not that I like him myself, but...”

“I do not hate him. But I do not like him either.”

She gave a rather ambiguous answer. Still, it was rare to see Novem so harsh toward any one individual.

“At this rate,” Maurice said to Norma, “we won’t be able to get away. Dame Norma, it’s time we gather our resolve to face what’s to come.”

“G-Gather our resolve? For what?! Like hell I’m going to...to die in a place like this! I’m against it! That’s right—Maurice, you lure them away! I’ll break through and inform the capital of the situation. Y-Yes, indeed. That is for the best. We won’t be deserters, then. And at least, I’ll live.”

Evidently, in a panic, Norma did not try to hide her desire to survive, even if it meant the death of everything else. It wasn’t hard to imagine what her subordinates thought about her.

“Should we kill her?” the fifth head muttered.

I gripped the Jewel, prompting the seventh head to explain, “Regardless of whatever you plan to do from here, as she is now, Norma will only get in the way. Know this, Lyle... On the battlefield, it is not uncommon to die from the deeds of your own allies. An incompetent commander will expose the entire army to danger. Don’t you think it’s better for such a commander to disappear?”

Looking at Norma in her dismay, it certainly seemed like she was in no state to give proper orders. Maurice forcefully dragged her off and adjourned the meeting.

The third head was calm. His voice was colder than usual. “It looks like

Maurice can't make the decisions either. He's indecisive—at this rate, you may be wiped out without offering any resistance at all. I doubt poor little Norma will just hand you the right to command... So killing her off really is the only option."

Come on, do we really have to be that extreme? I wondered.

The fourth head seemed to pick up on that. "Lyle, that is simply how vital the role of a commander is," he sternly told me. "At times, you must order your own men to die. When you take on such authority and receive such reward, it is completely unacceptable to be inept when push comes to shove. If you wish for promotion and pray for status, you must have the resolve. Promoting an incompetent who has none of that is a blight upon the army. Lyle, kindness is a virtue, but choosing not to kill is akin to telling everyone else here to die for the sake of Norma alone."

The fifth head was similarly strict. "It is Norma's fault for seeking status beyond her capabilities. Well, that's probably precisely why she was sent here in the first place. Lyle, she'll die, even if you're not the one to do it. Erase her for everyone's sake."

Norma probably wouldn't hand the reins to me. That was what my ancestors had determined. And, as long as Norma was around, it would be impossible to rally these soldiers.

I understood what they were saying. I did, but...

"Novem...I'm going to have a talk with Norma."

Novem nodded. "Yes, of course, Milord."

In the Jewel, everyone sighed and chided me for my lack of resolve.

Taking Novem along, I headed toward the inn where Norma was staying. Word of what happened to Lionel had spread, causing the mood of the residents and soldiers to dampen.

A young man squatting by the side of the road muttered to himself, "They said it was a hippogryph. I... I just wanted to rise up and get them a better

life...”

In another place, a group of volunteer soldiers formed a ring to complain.

“Did you hear? The palace knew it was a gryphon from the very start. We were sacrificial pawns.”

“Nothing new. They’ve always seen bottom-of-the-barrel jobless nobles as trash.”

“You can say that again.”

“Even if we die, those bastards at the palace will just have a good laugh about it over a cup of tea. If I knew it was going to be like this, I would’ve just slept the day away at those destitute row houses. This is what I get for trying to rise up in the world.”

“For me, my parents and brother kicked me out and told me not to come home until I’d achieved something. I knew something smelled fishy. Damn it! Those royal bastards, mom, dad, and that shit brother of mine, they should all drop dead!”

Nobles who just barely had the right to pass down their titles all gathered to complain. Meanwhile, the town’s residents showered them with jeers.

“Don’t screw with me! How do you think we felt as we held out, waiting for you guys to come?!”

“That’s right! Finally... When I thought help had finally come, you’re all cowards, the lot of you! Get out there and fight! Isn’t that your job?!”

“My husband desperately fought and died so you could get here! And yet, you’re all...”

“Yeah, so what?” a soldier flippantly replied. “In the end, me and you, we were all abandoned by the palace—the nation. What are we even supposed to do against a gryphon, huh?! We can’t even run away. We’re all going to be tormented to death here!”

At those words, the townsfolk turned pale. Farther away, I saw some people who had even gotten into a fistfight. The gap had widened between the residents and the subjugation force.

“If at least Ms. Norma maintained a level head,” Novem muttered.

I had to agree with her there. “Right. If she kept her cool... I wouldn’t have so much trouble.”

We were abandoned. The town was abandoned. The palace had cast aside the region known as Geony. From the palace’s point of view, the losses were probably inconsequential. But as the ones who had been cast aside, how could we possibly accept it?

“I’ll do it...and I’ll make them regret it.”

The town inn—barely still standing—was where the knights had set up their base. In one of its rooms, Maurice and Norma were having a very important discussion.

“I won’t. I don’t want to die. I’ll get promoted, and...”

Norma’s hair was disheveled, her face was pale, and seeing her like this, Maurice had to contain a sigh. *She may be skilled, but...*

She wasn’t incompetent, but she was so egotistical that she had earned the ire of most everyone who knew her. What’s more, she quite blatantly rejoiced in taking bribes and would occasionally demand them too.

She had a pretty face and had become a decem-knight as she was able to butter up one of her powerful superiors. However, there were many knights who despised Norma. There were knights whose achievements she’d claimed as her own and others she’d dragged down with lies.

Norma would do anything to advance her own career, and she had clearly taken it way too far.

If she just went at it normally, she’d probably be a centum-knight by now.

Despite everything, her skill with swords and spells wasn’t half bad. Norma actually had the competency to succeed on the battlefield, yet it was her personality that dragged her down every step of the way and barred her from any promotions.

“Dame Norma, we will be in danger if we don’t fight. Even if we do make it

back, you will be condemned by the palace.”

“Don’t be daft! They never knew about the gryphon. It is our duty to report back with all due haste. We must prepare to depart at—”

“Enough already!”

Finally, the usually gentle Maurice raised his voice. Norma was left dumbfounded, her mouth opening and closing in silence.

“You still don’t get it? We were forsaken by the palace. The townspeople reported on a gryphon from the very start. The governor also reported to the palace when he fled—he had a full grasp of the situation. Do you honestly believe that the palace didn’t know?”

Maurice was a knight captain. In Banseim, this was one rank above a common knight, and one rank below a decem-knight. A centum-knight was one rank above that, and it just kept going from there.

His path as a knight hadn’t been the most glamorous one, and it was hard to say he’d pulled a successful lot in life. But still, he had served for many long years.

After all the rumors he’d heard, he could roughly put together what the palace was plotting. *Lately, the higher-ups were going on about how there were too many jobless noble houses. That’s probably what this is about.*

Banseim intended to make use of this predicament. Once the shambled-together subjugation force lost, the actual army—the elites—would be thrown in, and the problem would be solved. In fact, the annihilation of the subjugation force could even be used as propaganda.

They would speak wildly of the vile monster that had wiped out the whole unit, and the capital would be ablaze with tales of the valiant elites who managed to finally take it down.

“Dame Norma, we are sacrificial pawns. Even if you return now, there is no fame or glory that awaits you.”

Norma shook her head. “You’re lying! I... I’ve never missed a chance to bribe the higher-ups! I’ve done everything in my power! Why must I go through

something like this?! I...”

She was hated by her peers—that was all there was to it. For her superiors, it was dangerous to give any special treatment to a knight as thoroughly despised as Norma. This would only breed discontentment among all their other subordinates.

In his heart, Maurice made his resolve. *It doesn't look like I'm going home. Well, the kids are all grown up. I'm sure they'll be fine.*

Maurice never even considered snatching the right to command from his superior. Instead, he thought of the family in the capital that he'd be leaving behind.

That was when there was a knock at the door.

I heard a scream before I could knock, and I could feel a sense of grim determination. The knight who'd led us there seemed somewhat unmotivated and had a bit of an attitude. Once he'd done his job, he simply left.

Novem stood behind me, a little to one side.

“Milord, I will respect your opinion no matter what decision you make.”

Her resolute gaze was painful to bear. Surely, she thought I would take command, even if I had to kill Norma to do it. Worst case, I would need to kill Maurice too. But...that was too much for me.

“I just came to talk. Don't misunderstand.”

“It seems I've said too much. My apologies.”

Novem was the daughter of a feudal noble. Perhaps her resolve was even stronger than mine.

I knocked and entered to see Norma sitting on the bed, quivering as she wrapped her arms around herself. Maurice was deathly pale.

“If you took this out of context, it would look like ol' Maurice was trying to do something lewd to her,” the third head said without a care.

Can't you be a bit more serious?

“Do you need something, Lyle? Sorry, but we are not in any state to discuss much at the moment. Could you please hold off until later?” Maurice apologetically addressed me.

But I looked past him to Norma. “If you’re not up to it, can you concede your command to me?”

“What are you going on about? A lowly adventurer like you?” Norma glared at me.

Being stared at by a pale-faced woman with disheveled hair was...kinda terrifying.

“A hippogryph wasn’t enough to motivate me. But a gryphon? That’s something else entirely. I can defeat the gryphon no problem, but at this rate, we won’t be able to defend the town.”

“You can beat the gryphon? Have you ever fought one before?”

“No, I have not.”

“Then keep your mouth shut. I’m not going to tag along with some kid’s dream of being a hero.”

It was no use talking to Norma.

When I turned my eyes to Maurice, he looked back at me, pleadingly. “Do you intend...to win against the gryphon?”

“I *will* win. But the town will be overrun in the process. Personally, I consider my request to include both the gryphon and the town. It will be quite a predicament if one leads to the downfall of the other.”

I could beat the gryphon—or at least I’d proclaimed so, but honestly, I wasn’t entirely sure. With that said, I had to say it, and I had to say it confidently.

“Good going,” the sixth head egged me on. “Once you get them to believe, it’s smooth sailing from there! I’d like to get Maurice on our side. But Norma is no good!”

I continued, “Currently, we have the subjugation force, and though the townsfolk have mostly perished, there are still five hundred of them. If we start moving now, we can counteract the monsters.”

Of the five hundred remaining residents, most were women, children, and the elderly who could not fight. Even so, five hundred was a large number. A number great enough to make it seem like we could manage against a thousand monsters.

“But you saw the soldiers we’ve brought with us. I doubt they’ll be able to fight properly.”

“That depends on how you go about it. In my hands, they’ll definitely win.”

“Do you have any experience with defensive battles?”

“I don’t.”

“In that case—”

I gave an indomitable smile. “My name is Lyle. Lyle Walt—eldest son of Earl Walt. Don’t worry, I’ve at least learned all the ins and outs of defensive warfare.”

“N-No, just because you’ve learned them... There’s no telling what could happen in a real battle. Textbook knowledge isn’t enough.”

Unfortunately, my Jewel had a collection of scoundrels who were all brimming with experience. It was crammed with the very history of House Walt.

“Then will you be able to win?” I asked him.

“N-No, I didn’t say that.”

“I know a method that will lead to victory. If we don’t win—if we don’t protect the town, we will get no reward.”

“But...handing over full command will be quite problematic. Would it be possible to get your cooperation as a trusted advisor?”

“No can do. I need command. If I have to...” I cut myself off and stared straight at him. A bead of sweat crossed his cheek—he seemed to understand what I wanted to say. “What’s more... Are you really all right with this?”

“Huh?”

“Tricked by the palace and sent to die. Even if you flee, only punishment awaits you. Fight as you may, you cannot win. All that’s left is an unsightly end.

Are you really all right with that?”

“Of course I’m not. But how exactly...”

“Leave it to me. I’ll show you what I can do.”

The Jewel was perfectly silent. So was the room. It was as though they were waiting for my words.

Norma said nothing.

“A gryphon hunt, a town defense. If we can’t pull off both, then neither I nor you have any future. Do you understand?” I explained.

I was pretty sure I’d be able to get away, but it felt wrong to escape with just my party. In the first place...my ancestors wouldn’t allow it.

“I have a way to turn this situation around. We’ll protect the town and defeat the gryphon. And then, we’ll make our triumphant return to the capital. Let’s smile as we report our victory to those assholes at the capital. We—the ones they sent to die—shall return as conquering heroes! Isn’t that the finest payback? Let us just take in their frustrated faces!”

I wanted to say it to Ralph—no, that bastard Ralph. *Man, it was so surprising when a gryphon came out.* I wanted to smash through his schemes.

Maurice swallowed his breath.

“And for that, I’d like to take command. If you leave it to me, I’ll make you all heroes. You can look forward to rewards and promotions. After all, it’s a gryphon hunt. The capital will welcome us with open arms.”

There was no way they wouldn’t welcome an army that had exterminated a gryphon. If the knights were to learn that there was no reward for slaying a gryphon, they would never be motivated to do anything. In fact, it would put the entire nation’s dignity at risk.

Even if they hated the lot of us, they would have to begrudgingly receive us. I’d have my fill by looking at their fake smiles. That would be the finest revenge.

As I awaited Maurice’s response...I heard a voice come from behind him.

“H-Hey, you’re being serious, right?”

Norma stood. “You’re really going to make us heroes, right?”

I nodded, a bit surprised. “Y-Yes, certainly. However, I will take the gryphon’s body. It will sell for quite a bit. In exchange, I swear that the achievement of killing the gryphon will be yours...”

“Okay! That does it! You’re the commander now!”

Maurice’s mouth widened like his jaw had become unhinged. “Captain?! What are you saying?!”

“Oh, shut it! If he says he’ll do it, then what’s the harm? He does the work, and I get the glory! And he’s the one offering it! How could I let such a sweet deal slip by?!”

I did not expect that development. I thought I’d be convincing Maurice and having him help with winning Norma over.

With a dubious look on her face, Novem asked, “Are you not afraid of handing over the right to command?”

To this, Norma scoffed. “Not when it’s far more likely that I’m going to die here. What’s more, looking after those idiots is the last thing I want to do. In fact, I get the feeling they’ll complain and attack me if I try giving them orders. Even if I maintain command, I don’t have any subordinates who’ll follow me! Yes, now that I think about it, isn’t this just the best? I mean, you’re just an adventurer. Once everything’s said and done, the soldiers will have to return to me anyway. Honestly, I don’t even need all those folks who aren’t part of the standing army. You can take them with you if you want.”

“No... I’m good.”

Maurice buried his head in his hands. “Captain, you really are...”

The ancestors in the Jewel were dumbfounded.

“Is she actually a big shot? Does she not think you’ll kill her now that you have her soldiers?”

“Well, it’s certainly possible in this situation. But if she’s not causing trouble, then it’s none of our business.”

“Certainly, I doubt any of the soldiers would follow her anyway. I guess

Lionel's your only rival now."

"No one's going to listen to someone who tried to run away."

"Hmm, Norma... Maybe she could have become a proper knight if she were trained."

"I think she just doesn't have what it takes to be a leader. But more importantly, the gryphon."

Well... Anyways.

Luckily, I didn't have to kill Norma.

I asked Norma and Maurice to persuade their subordinates as Novem and I headed to Pat, the mediator of the townsfolk. I needed to inform him that I had taken command.

He had a dark look on his face. When I informed him of the change, he simply said, "I see."

"I want to protect this town," I said. "Will you cooperate?"

"We hardly have any men left, and everyone's exhausted. What more do you want us to do? And say we do defeat this gryphon. This town has no hopes of ever making a comeback."

The second head spoke up. "Well, for us, it's over as soon as we win. But the townspeople have to live with the aftermath. After they're this beaten up, I doubt they'll have any motivation."

That was where a special medicine came into play. I reached into my bag, pulled out a gold coin, and placed it on the table.

The look in Pat's eyes changed.

"Wh-What is this?"

"Payment for your cooperation. Of course, I'll pay a bonus to any townspeople who assist as well. It would be better to have money than not—especially for the rebuilding."

"Y-Yes! Thank you! I'll gather the residents up at once and convince them."

“Also, I have a bit of a request.”

“What is it?”

I asked him if I could borrow Luka as a helper.

“And one more little thing. I’ll pay a separate reward for it.”

“There’s something else?”

I made one final request, and my preparations were over.

The members of the subjugation force and the townsfolk were gathered in the town square. They were joined by those from the surrounding area who’d managed to flee to the town for safe haven.

The place was jam-packed. However, I suspected less than two hundred of the people gathered could actually put up a fight.

This meant we were outnumbered, roughly five to one. It would be close to impossible to defend a town whose walls were already falling apart.

I’d prepared a platform so I could look over the crowd.

“I am Lyle Walt—the man who’s going to be taking command from now on.”

As the square fell silent, there were still plenty of people who were doubtful of me. Putting aside the townspeople whom I’d paid already, the subjugation force had been suddenly informed of a change of leadership. They weren’t about to trust me that easily.

Although they’d seen me fight once before, that didn’t give them enough reassurance when a gryphon was involved.

“I’ll come out and say it...I love status and fame. I love money and women!”

They seemed flabbergasted. They couldn’t comprehend what I was trying to say.

This audience had gathered to hear precisely how I would be defeating the gryphon. Now, they were taken aback.

Atop the platform where everyone could see, Monica tipped over a box of

gold coins, forming a mountainous stack. Their eyes were all fixed on this mound of gold.

Following that, I was joined onstage by Eva and Miranda, who both wore quite provocative outfits. Eva was in the clothes she used for her performances, while Miranda had borrowed a set from her.

They were highly revealing, and to be blunt, far too stimulating. Upon rising to the stage, they took their positions on either side of me, and I grabbed their shoulders and pulled them close. As they clung to me, they twisted lovingly, acting oh-so welcoming of the gesture. Their arms entangled around mine.

“As you can see, I’ve obtained money and women. Now all that’s left is status and fame! I shall hunt down this gryphon and seize glory for myself! If you follow me, I’ll make it worth your while.”

The crowd grew rowdy.

Why wasn’t I giving a serious address? That was simple... Given my age and my demeanor, it was self-evident that no one would trust me if I actually put in an earnest effort.

They’d all be far happier to see an experienced veteran in his forties or fifties in my position. Unfortunately, I did not carry the air of a seasoned general.

Even if their abilities fell short of mine, a crowd who didn’t know anything would choose an experienced-looking man to be their commander over me.

In short, I was too young to inspire any confidence. Thus, I had to take them by surprise.

A voice rose—Lionel’s voice. He really was nothing but a nuisance. “That has to be a lie. No doubt about it. There’s no way you could ever beat a gryphon!”

“That’s right! That’s right!” I could hear smaller voices chime in.

“Then cower and hide. Just make sure you don’t get in the way. Anyone who follows me will have the honor of slaying a legendary beast.”

Some of their eyes lit up at the prospects.

The stack of gold was far more than a few hundred coins. After all, I’d sold Porter’s blueprints before we left Aramthurst. With Damian putting in a few

good words, I'd come into possession of quite a fortune.

"But that's not enough for you, is it? I'm sure you want it...this pile of gold."

Someone gulped. I heard their spit go down.

With this much, they could live their entire life without any inconvenience. That was how much money it was.

"You can have it... Follow me, and I'll give you your reward. One gold coin per monster. If you manage to take down a hippogryph, I'll give you fifty gold for that. Oh, but the gryphon is mine. Keep your hands off."

These were extraordinary terms—a gold coin for any monster, no matter what monster it was.

"Y-You'll really pay me that much?" someone asked.

"Yes, I will. If it's money, I can simply earn it again. It's a cheap price to pay for the honor of slaying a gryphon."

Gradually the young men, and surprisingly the middle-aged, the elderly, and even the women, began to sprout an eager look in their eyes. Their desire was acting up with this pile of gold before them.

But there was still someone who opposed it.

"You're just trying to cheat us!" Lionel shouted. "You're growing desperate because you can't win!"

He was quite the contrarian.

My composed smile did not crumble. It shifted to a brazen, nasty, and mischievous one.

"Desperate? Not exactly. I do have a chance of victory—this gold itself is proof of my abilities. For I am an adventurer. A former heir to an earl house, I'll give you that. But I was driven out and earned all this as an adventurer. These are the assets I earned from the monsters I've defeated! As an adventurer, I've cut down countless foes before!"

There was a clamoring from the volunteer soldiers.

"N-Now that you mention it, he did defeat that giant snake."

“His comrades were really strong too.”

“Maybe he can actually win?”

For an adventurer, power meant money, and money meant power. And I just happened to have a lot of money.

“Do you want money?”

“I-I do!” someone loudly replied.

“Then fight! And obtain it all! Obtain glory. Obtain status. Obtain money. Obtain women! Once we beat that gryphon, we’ll be heroes! Our honor will last an eternity!”

“I can do it. I can do it!”

“Me too. No time to shake in my boots!”

“I-I’m joining too!”

One by one, the voices rose as the square was enveloped in heated enthusiasm.

My preparations—the paid shills had served their purpose well.

Indeed, it was all a bluff. Fundamentally so.

The money had come from selling Porter’s blueprints.

The women I’d just asked to play the part. Eva was well-accustomed to performances, and Miranda could naturally do this much without breaking a sweat.

It would have been impossible for Clara. If Aria or Sophia tried, I could imagine their awkward smiles. Perhaps they wouldn’t even attempt it. Monica refused to take off her maid uniform, while Shannon was out of the question. As for Novem, I’d entrusted her with other work.

I could only count on those two.

“Aha! What an easy crowd!” the third head cheered. “How about you start dividing up the work? Fighting an army of monsters... Oh, how exhilarating!”

He was usually so deliberate, so why did he sound so unhinged at a time like

this? I struggled to comprehend him.

The sixth was in similarly high spirits. “Now, Lyle—this is where the fun begins!”

Chapter 72: Contract

Novem had prepared a large stack of papers. On top of this, she had set out a table with chairs, where Aria and Sophia sat side by side. Their hands were both stained with ink.

With a weary face, Sophia said, “This takes some getting used to. Writing up these papers.”

Novem was making contracts; each paper detailed the terms under which the volunteers would be employed by Lyle.

“I can’t do it anymore,” Aria grumbled. “This is precisely the sort of thing I hate. You could have just had Monica do it. And Clara went off to who knows where...”

Novem let out a slight sigh. “Clara is terrible at talking to people. We will have to deal with them on our own. Additionally, I think you two ought to learn how to do this work. Now then, they should start coming soon.”

Shannon was standing nearby, holding up a sign.

“Everyone who wants to fight, please line up here,” she called out.

As soon as Lyle’s address was over, the wave of people immediately made their way over. The first one to arrive was a knight in full plate armor.

“Hey. Knights are eligible, right? Please tell me I can get paid!”

Novem smiled. “Yes. You will get one gold coin for any monster you defeat.”

“All right! I’m on board!”

“Then please sign this document saying you’ll follow Milord’s orders.”

“I shall. Right away. It’s far better than working under Norma, at least!”

A middle-aged aunty came to Aria. “Hey, you have some money to spare for an old lady, don’t you?”

“Umm... We do have work. If you want to help out, we can offer—”

“I’ll do it. Wait, what about my son and daughter? They’re already ten years old, so they can at least help out.”

“Y-Yes, in that case.”

There was a huge succession of people coming to Sophia too.

“P-Please hold on. Umm, in that case—”

“Hurry it up, lady!”

“No, I can’t just...”

“You’re keeping us waiting!”

For the people who were illiterate, she made sure to explain everything verbally before she let them sign. She was unaccustomed to the work, but she was still giving it her all.

Lionel and his men had gathered some distance from the square.

As it turned out, Lyle was going to take charge of the army. And ever since they were informed of this, Lionel had been in quite a mood. He couldn’t bear it.

“Why is it that guy? Why...”

From the moment he saw Lyle defeat monsters during the army’s march, Lionel had been instilled with a sense of impatience. Lyle was stronger than him. His comrades were more capable too.

It was also frustrating to see him surrounded by his beautiful companions. He rode a vehicle that Lionel had never heard of before and had become the center of attention. Again, a frustrating sight.

Lyle seemed to possess everything he didn’t. As for Lionel himself, he had lost most of his dear comrades, the rest of them left hanging their heads in despair.

Within this somber mood, one of them stood. “I’m really sorry. But I’m going to join.”

“Huh? You’re seriously gonna fight under that guy? He’s not a noble, you know.”

“What’s that got to do with it...?”

Lionel was dumbfounded.

“It doesn’t matter who I work under,” his friend declared, giving his honest opinion. “As long as I can survive and get paid, that’s enough for me. Sticking around you doesn’t get me any money.”

“H-Hey. Think about it...”

“I can’t stand it.”

“Huh...?”

“I know those bastards at the palace only see us as sacrificial pawns. But still, why do we have to suffer like this? It’s frustrating.”

“W-Well!”

“In the first place... It’s not fun hanging out with you anymore.”

“What?!”

“I mean, you’re the only one here who gets to marry a viscount’s daughter at the end of this. No matter how hard we work, it’ll all be counted as your achievements. I can’t stand how you’re the only one who has it all laid out. In that case, I’m better off going with the guy who pays better,” he said.

Once the first had left, he was soon followed by another. By the time he realized it, Lionel was sitting there alone.

With the address out of the way, I immediately proceeded to the next step—distributing food. Well, honestly, I wanted to get to the real work right away. But there’s a saying... Something, something... Empty stomach... Well, you get the idea.

As expected, the food provided by the subjugation force was bland and tasteless. The townsfolk, having spent their days in anxiety and dread, hadn’t eaten much for the past few days either. Anyways, food was essential.

Monica got together with the town’s grannies to cook. However...

“You’re wearing quite a strange outfit there.”

“A maid uniform is strange?! I can only question your common sense.”

“And if you wear something so frilly, you’re going to get it dirty.”

“I will not! My outfit is fitted with the latest innovations in—”

“Ah, it’s boiling.”

“Listen to me!”

Seeing her led around like that made me realize that old ladies were incredible.

“You were so cool back there, Lyle. If only you were that bold on a regular basis.”

Miranda’s voice came without warning. I turned toward her, only to immediately place a hand over my eyes. Miranda was still wearing one of Eva’s costumes.

“Please change out of that. I don’t know where I’m allowed to look.”

“You were perfectly calm a moment ago.”

“It’s called acting.”

“Aww, I thought you liked what you saw. Putting that aside, what do we do next?”

Her voice turned serious, so with my eyes still turned away from her, I continued the conversation.

“We split our forces into work teams and training teams. Then, we’ll start making weapons.”

Reinforcing the wall, and weapon production. If all else failed, we needed arrows at the very least. We could also train our troops up to the bare minimum permissible level, but before then, I needed to think up our formation. No, before all of that...

“I’ll have Aria and Eva go scouting.”

“Aria and Eva?”

Outside of the town, Aria and Eva dismounted their horse and looked around. In Aria's hand was a map that indicated where the monsters were lurking.

Although they could travel partway on horse, with stealth in mind, it was best to continue on foot. They found a destroyed house and tethered the beast there. Eva prepared some water for it.

Looking at Eva, Aria remarked, "You seem pretty used to this."

"I've journeyed alongside traveling shows. Stick around long enough, and you pick up the skills whether you like it or not."

"You're pretty good at riding too. Do you have experience?"

"I most certainly do. When I was a little elf, I'd climb atop horses, pretending I was a valiant hero. For my acting practice, of course."

Elves were apparently quite a hardy race. Eva had been asked to scout owing to her knowledge of forests and how to navigate them.

"I just don't get it," Aria said with a shrug. "If I were in your shoes, I'd turn down such a dangerous job."

Eva grinned. "Oh, but it's such a valuable experience. And If I can watch a gryphon hunt with my own eyes, this much is nothing."

It was for her songs—for a story that only she could tell. But even as Eva spelled out her reasons for cooperating as clearly as she could, Aria still struggled to comprehend.

"Elves are strange beings."

"How rude. You humans are far stranger. More importantly, we should get going soon."

Aria nodded, taking two grimy brown robes from her bag. They were rather large robes outfitted with hoods. She tossed one to Eva and put on the other.

Eva pulled on her own without complaining, and soon the two were proceeding through the forest.

What impressed Aria was the strength of Eva's legs. *That's an elf for you, I guess. The forest doesn't slow her down at all.*

They didn't converse. This was already a den of monsters.

Spotting a certain tree, Eva motioned for Aria to stop. Aria's eyes followed Eva's outstretched pointer finger to a point high on the tree carved with deep gashes.

The ground beneath was gouged out too.

Are those a gryphon's claw markings?

They proceeded with caution and came across monsters who seemed to be on patrol.

Eva frowned as they took cover.

This wasn't the right place for words. They continued their scouting and came across a great clearing that had been constructed by violently knocking down all the trees in the vicinity. From large ogres and orcs to tiny goblins, they were all gathered there.

At the center was the gryphon with the hippogryphs stationed around it. It almost looked like the monsters were holding a banquet with all the food they had gathered.

The duo slowly slipped away.

There were a number of smaller groups in the forest. They did not have an accurate count of how many monsters there were in total, but the forest had certainly been devastated.

Together, they made their way outside, returning to the house where the horse was tethered. There, they discussed their findings.

"It's the worst. I didn't see any animals at all. They must have eaten the lot of them."

"Now that you mention it, I didn't see them either."

"The forest was in a terrible state. A right mess. Still, we should be fine for a while."

"You can tell? I mean, I figured they wouldn't be moving for a while, but..."

"Well, I'm just going off experience here. If they were going to march on us,

they would have been a bit more bloodthirsty than that.”

It was a good decision to bring Eva, Aria thought. But I'll be... She's got me beat when it comes to recon.

After Aria had worked so hard to polish her skills as a scout in Aramthurst, it was frustrating to lose to an elf who was just a traveling singer.

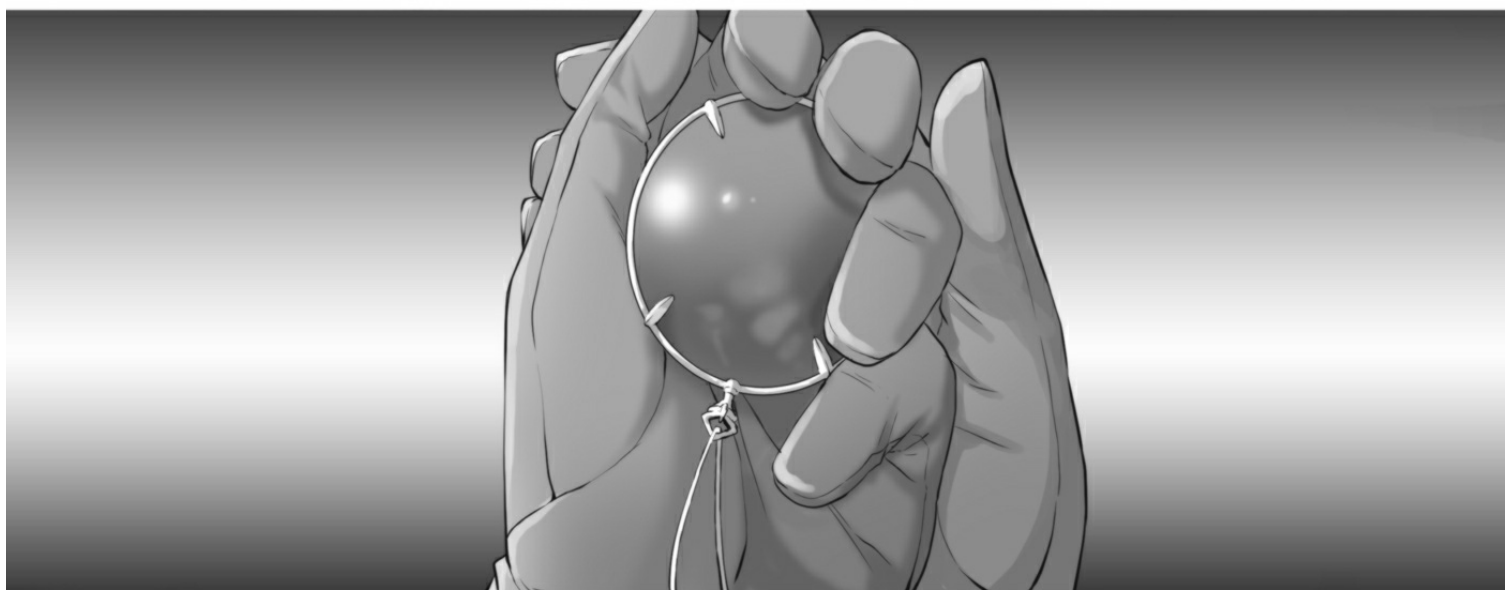
“You don’t look convinced,” Eva continued. “But trust me, they really will leave us be for a while. Gryphons tend to play around—though there’s no fun to be had for their prey. I don’t think it’s been very long since that gryphon was born. It seemed like quite a young one.”

It seemed Eva could even tell the gryphon’s age. When she said it was born, that did not mean it had any parents. Monsters were peculiar beings that manifested from nothingness in their fully grown forms. Since it had been recently born, it was far more curious than it was wary, and so it had a strong desire to *play*.

“I’ve got nothing against you. You’ve got a lot more knowledge than me, is all. Nothing wrong with that.”

Eva put a hand on her hip and peered into Aria’s face. “Then what is it?”

“I’m ashamed of my own inadequacy,” Aria said as she held up her necklace—the red Gem. This red Gem, an heirloom of House Lockwood, did not teach Aria its Arts like Lyle’s Jewel could.



“That’s a Gem, right?” asked Eva, who was staring at it, intrigued.

“I can’t use it. I get the feeling it doesn’t accept me.”

Aria hopped aboard the horse, making it clear that she wanted to leave as soon as possible.

“Strong emotions have power,” Eva called out to her. “Why don’t you try pleading to it strongly?”

Aria gave a slight self-deprecating chuckle at that. “Already tried that.”

Eva shrugged and got on the horse behind her. Making sure she was steady, Aria started the beast on its course back to the town.

So this is all we’ve got.

The supplies had been laid out in wooden boxes near the wagon that had brought them in. I carefully inspected the tools that were set out above the boxes. Crossbows and bows.

“We don’t have too many...”

Maurice had come with me to go over the supplies. Norma was also nearby, but she didn’t personally have any grasp on what the expedition had brought along, so she was not very useful.

When I asked her how she planned to defeat a hippogryph, she simply said, “Cut it down when it descends.”

“We originally planned to have the captain take on the hippogryph after our archers had shot it out of the sky,” Maurice explained. “I, as well as the other knights, can use a bit of magic too, so I thought we wouldn’t need too many.”

“Then what were the plans for the other monsters?”

“For that, I thought we could make do with our numbers. At the time, we didn’t think that the threat level was that high; in fact, I thought our numbers were even a bit excessive.”

Apparently, Maurice initially thought we could manage with this much equipment. He only had the incorrect info provided by the palace to go off of,

after all.

“You’re lacking in almost everything,” I heard the fourth head say. “You’ll need to train people for the bows, and the crossbows will take time to load. Now what to do about this?”

Although the things he said could have given the impression he was bothered by it, the tone of his voice made it clear that he was having fun.

“Can we really manage with this equipment?” Norma anxiously asked. “Wouldn’t we be better off riding that iron box of yours out of here?”

Iron box. She had to be talking about Porter.

“We can’t carry everyone, and we risk getting surrounded. Apparently, they have monsters stationed around the perimeter to prevent us from running away.”

“That’s bothersome.” Maurice pressed a hand to his brow. “Otherwise, we could break through while protecting the townsfolk.”

The enemy was a gryphon. A flying monster. It would catch up to us no matter what we did, and there would certainly be casualties if it attacked while we were on the run. But even if we didn’t take that into consideration, running away was not an option for us.

“Even if we do make it, the palace will have our heads.”

“I’ll bet.” Maurice understood that.

Although the town wall wasn’t in the prettiest state, it still barely maintained a square shape. There was a gate on each of its four sides, and we would need to station people at each.

Who would we place where? That was another issue to consider.

“Your lack of combatants is a problem,” the second head pensively said. “The crossbows won’t see that much use given the time it takes to load them. You don’t have enough of them to compensate for that issue.”

The third head spoke out to the contrary. “Do you think so? With this many people, you can have the noncombatants load the bolts and pass the crossbows to the shooters. Switch out bows after every shot, and theoretically, you can

have a constant rate of fire.”

“It would be a lot simpler if you had guns,” the seventh head listlessly said. “Why did they never catch on?”

The seventh head loved guns and gunpowder. He was an expert in tactics that made use of them. But, turning that around, he fell short of my other ancestors when his beloved explosives weren’t available.

Well...

“All I can do is think up a few traps,” the seventh head continued. “Lyle, why don’t you get some bombs from Miranda? The flashy ones.”

I wouldn’t call him useless, though.

“C-Can we win?” Maurice asked as he inspected my complexion.

“We *will* win,” I definitively declared. “We’ll win and protect the town.”

Clara was inspecting the town. Ever since Lyle’s address, the place had been filled with energy as everyone moved this way and that in haste. The subjugation force and the townspeople who had been at odds with one another now took on work and training on rotation.

Nearby, she saw Sophia standing anxiously.

“What’s wrong, Sophia?”

“Lyle told me to lead people into battle. I don’t even have any experience.”

Her anxiety came from the fact that she would have knights, soldiers, townsfolk, and volunteers working under her. In order to protect the four gates, each would need its own commanding officer. The job was divided between Maurice, Miranda, Aria, and Sophia. Lyle was at the top, commanding the army as a whole.

“He should have left it to Ms. Norma,” Sophia complained. She was clearly flustered by the fact that she had suddenly been given a commanding role.

“Norma conceded command to Lyle. Perhaps he thought it would make things confusing if she came out.”

“Even so, she’d do a better job than me. He even has Novem.”

“Novem will be providing support from the rear with me. She can use healing magic, so she is an indispensable asset.”

Clara was Porter’s driver, while Novem was the designated healer. They would both be providing support, alongside Monica and Shannon.

Lyle had considered sending Monica out on the front lines. However, it was quite difficult to prepare the food and other necessities required to mobilize so many people. Since Monica was essentially the only one capable of doing it, she had to be placed on support.

“I know we don’t have many options, but how am I supposed to lead people?”

As Sophia held her head, Clara tried to help her out. “Sophia, do you think Lyle deployed you because he had no other option?”

“Probably... I’m a far cry from the others, after all.”

“I am far weaker than you, Sophia.”

“You can drive Porter. That’s something I can’t do.”

“We all have our roles. You should have some confidence. I’m sure Lyle assigned it to you because he knew you could do it.”

Sophia lifted her face. “Do you really think so?”

“Yes, there’s no doubt about it.”

She hadn’t heard it from Lyle directly. But had it been up to Clara, she would have stationed the combat specialist Sophia in the same position he had. She was quite a bit stronger than the average knight.

“Th-Then... I’ll try my best.”

“I am sure you can do it.”

If this reaches a point that even Sophia can’t handle, then we’ve already lost the battle, Clara thought. Still, Lyle’s planned this out well. He swiftly took command, and he’s thought about our deployment too. I honestly can’t tell why someone so capable was kicked out of his house.

Lyle moved almost like he was an experienced veteran, and Clara couldn't help but find it curious.

"Prioritize repairing the wall. I'd also advise digging a moat around it."

I listened to the second head's remarks as I looked over the map.

We were at the inn. All the appointed leaders had gathered, and I was explaining our course of action. But this group was quite a mishmash without any expertise to speak of. Everything needed to be laid out simply and clearly.

"We will repair the outer wall, and dig a moat as we do it. That will help somewhat with the monsters who will cling to the wall."

Maurice and the knights, Pat and his town representatives. They all nodded.

The town was situated on the open plains. The location made it very visible with no obstacles in any direction. It was not a very defensible point.

"Set traps in front of the gates. When the enemy has gained momentum, you can lure them into the traps," said the second head.

I relayed this: "Then, we ready our traps inside the town. When the enemy has gained momentum, we'll lure them in, and use our preparations to fight back."

There weren't too many tasks to do. Going off the info from Aria and Eva, the gryphon was not going to move soon. However, we likely didn't have more than a week.

One of the knights pointed at the map. "Then we should start building more traps. Set up a tower here for the archers to shoot from, and another one here. If we tear down this building—"

The town residents were immediately opposed to the idea. "We can't have you putting anything there! That part of town has remained relatively unscathed. If you start destroying buildings, how are we supposed to live?!"

"There are enemies closing in on us! Is this really the time for that?!"

"Our livelihood is on the line!"

As things were growing dicey, I clapped my hands together to gather attention.

“Lyle, resources and labor are limited. Tell them we’re at our limit. Anyone can speak of an ideal situation. But you have to make do with what you have.”

“We don’t have the resources to do any more. There’s a limit on time and manpower too. I’ve determined that we have reached our capacity.”

The knight shut his mouth. I mean, I wanted to fortify our defenses as much as possible too. I wanted us to be so well armed that I didn’t have to worry about it. But what we had just wouldn’t allow it.

“Umm...” a man from the town asked, “Won’t digging the moat take time too?”

“It doesn’t have to be deep. Just do what you can. Also, I have a skilled magician on my side. She will help.”

I would have to rely on Novem.

One of the knights muttered, “I know this isn’t the *Magician’s Village*, but... Is this really going to be all right?”

“Do you honestly believe in that fairy tale?” his comrade said with a mocking laugh.

There were some quarrels along the way, but the meeting ended without any major incident.

Shannon was with Luka. There wasn’t much she could do, so she had no choice but to lie low. It would be a while longer before her role came into play.

Shannon was reading a picture book with Luka almost like he was her little brother.

“Shannon, ma’am, what’s the *Magician’s Village*?”

“Oh dear, you don’t even know that? Very well then. I’ll graciously teach you.”

Feeling a sense of superiority that she was dealing with someone younger than her, Shannon told Luke an old tale.

Hee hee, big sis read the picture book to me, so I know it. Good going, me!

She praised her past self for properly listening to Miranda.

“Once upon a time, there was a small village. The village was poor; there wasn’t much food, and every day was a struggle. Then one day, a magician came to the village. And oh, what an amazing magician he was. As soon as he came, he built houses and raised fields with his magic. All the poor villagers now had large houses and large fields.”

“So he was a kind person!”

Seeing Luka so overjoyed, Shannon gave a triumphant grin.

“Yes, at first the magician was delighted to see so many smiling faces. He worked harder and harder for the village. The village grew larger and became very abundant.”

“That’s wonderful.”

“But as time went on, the villagers started to make more and more requests of the magician. I want a bigger house. I want more fields, I want servants. Now that they learned luxury, the villagers stopped working. The magician would grant every wish, and this made them soft.”

“S-So what happened then?”

“The magician died. Perhaps he was already an old man when he arrived? But the villagers did not even mourn him. Instead, they searched for the next person to rely on.”

“That’s terrible.”

“It is. They were terrible, so they were punished. The village had grown so large with magic, that it attracted the attention of an evil god, who came and destroyed everything. The villagers that remained hadn’t worked for a long time, so they struggled to till the land. They had learned luxury, so they lamented their harsh lives even more than they had before. And ultimately, the village ended up even poorer than before the magician had come. That is the *Magician’s Village*.”

Luka looked fearful. “An evil god will come? Mr. Lyle said that we’d be digging

the moat with magic. Will he come here too?"

Such youthful innocence. Shannon couldn't help but tease him a bit. "Oh, he's come. And when he does, Luka, he might just eat you up."

Shannon looked to be having the time of her life, but that was when Novem arrived.

With a smile, she told Luka, "It's all right."

"Ah, Ms. Novem!"

Luka rejoiced at Novem's arrival, and Shannon sulked. It felt like her little brother had just been taken away.

"The reason the evil god destroyed the village the magician made," Novem explained, "was because the villagers were arrogant. He would never come to someone like Lord Lyle, who is simply doing his best to protect this town."

"Really?"

"Yes, so it's going to be all right. Additionally, I'm sure the *Magician's Village* would have been destroyed even if the evil god hadn't come at all."

Shannon cocked her head. "Really?"

Novem nodded. "After all, that story is a cautionary tale. If you rely on magic for everything, you won't be able to do anything when push comes to shove."

So that's what it was about? Shannon thought, nodding to herself.

But then she realized, "Huh...? Then was the evil god even necessary?"

"I guess not," Novem giggled. "But... Sometimes these old stories are based in reality. Perhaps there really was a country destroyed by an *evil god* long ago."

Luka was cowering again, and again Novem reassured him that it would be all right. Novem was always kind, but with Luka, she was even kinder than she was with the other children.

As she watched, Shannon felt that something was off. *Novem is strangely kind to Luka. Still, why did she say a country rather than a village? It's the Magician's Village, right... I don't get her... But, whatever.*

Shannon felt it strange that she would dote on anyone apart from Lyle, but

she was never too good at thinking about things. It wasn't long before all this became completely inconsequential to her.

Only a day after the meeting, the town had started to move. In order to take charge, I watched from the roof of a building. It was certainly a small town, but now that I had to consider defending all of it, it seemed like quite a vast place.

I was starting to grow anxious over whether or not we'd be able to protect it.

"Lyle, the workers are down with stomachache after drinking my water," Clara reported.

I looked at her. Then, I held my head.

"I told them not to drink magically produced water, didn't I?! I'm very sure I said that!"

"Apparently, they thought it would be all right. 'We're made of tougher stuff,' they said before chugging it down. Please send Novem to look after them."

I had Clara make hot water for cleaning purposes among other things. The workers were very sternly warned that magic water would make them terribly ill, yet they did it anyway.

I couldn't help but cry out in frustration.

Next, it was Aria who climbed onto the roof. "Lyle, a fight broke out. Someone's beaten up pretty badly."

"What was it this time?!"

"Well, he said something about skipping out before the job was done, and being lazy with work."

I buried my face in my hand. "Why are all the reports like this?"

I was honestly growing anxious. Seriously, it was nothing but this, again and again.

"Novem's working right now. Tell them to wait a little longer."

Novem was using her magic to dig the moat, and that was our priority. If no one was on the brink of death, then they would have to wait.

Clara shot me a troubled look. “Then I’ll administer first aid, but it will take longer for them to come back. Our work efficiency will drop.”

What am I even supposed to do about that?

As I mulled over it, I heard my ancestors’ voices.

“Ah, this takes me back. I guess nothing has changed.”

“It’s a laugh. A right laugh to watch it from an outside perspective! Although I wasn’t laughing at all when it was me in that seat.”

“They do it even if you tell them not to. I had my share of trouble.”

“If it were me... I think I would have yelled at them.”

“Yes, anyone would be angry about that. But when it’s not me... What fun!”

“It’s better than a bad comedy. Even more so since I can understand exactly how he feels.”

Since they were only advisors, they were able to have a laugh about it. I was not.

“Now that it’s come to this, should I go out and work on the moat?” I suggested.

Clara put a stop to that. “Then how can I find you when I need to report? If possible, I want you to stay here.”

“Sophia’s having trouble too,” Aria added. “I’m pretty busy, so could you go have a look at her for me? You know, she’s pretty earnest, so she’ll push herself to get things done on her own.”

I wanted to. I very much did. But the reports just kept coming in. Rather, there were so many problems breaking out that I couldn’t move.

“Monica’s busy, and I need Novem to do her best. All we’ve got left is... No, we only have that useless Shannon.”

I held my head as I gave the two of them some orders and had them return to their stations. I sat on the spot.

“Why isn’t it working out...?”

“Did you learn something?” the third head cheerfully said. “Aren’t you glad you had such talented kids around you?”

Is he trying to say that this is the reality my ancestors wanted to teach me? Is this why they told me to take this request?

The fourth head laughed. “It’s a good thing you made a contract with each of them individually. If you simply transferred leadership, then there would be some who would complain and refuse to work. This is the mighty power of money.”

The main reason we went out of our way to have them sign contracts individually was to have them all clearly aware of who they would be following. I had to make sure they were conscious of the fact that they would be rewarded if they listened to me.

“More importantly, this is quite an expense. Is this going to be all right?”

“It shouldn’t be an issue. If this is what it takes to get the fame of slaying a gryphon, this is a bargain—well, not exactly, but there is a way to recoup your losses.”

I just knew he had a nasty look on his face. The fourth head was rather scary when he let out that ominous laugh.

Just as I stood and started to consider what to do next, Eva climbed up to the roof with a weary look on her face.

“Lyyyle, a craftsman got mad and put his work on hold.”

Just give me a break...

Chapter 73: The Line

A few days later, Novem was using her magic to help out with the construction of the moat. She held her staff high, shifting the dirt to form a deep pit just beyond the outer wall. Then, the laborers would enter the pit and use their tools to smack against the sides and harden it.

In just a few days, the reinforcement of the wall had progressed considerably, and the moat was nearly finished. This was partly due to the work being divided between different teams, which had instilled a sense of rivalry.

The team that did best would be rewarded with food and drink from the supplies that Lyle's party had purchased beforehand.

Not that these refreshments were terribly plentiful, but they were enough to make the workers conscious of their competition and improve the rate of their work.

There were demi-humans among all the people hard at work. A small-built gnome and a dwarf who—although also small—was wider across, and a lot more muscular. These were demi-humans who had lived in the town and had worked as craftsmen there.

Novem took a break.

It was forbidden for her to keep using magic for long stretches of time. If someone got injured, she was the only one who could heal them. And so, she needed to preserve her mana.

However, there were some who didn't take kindly to this.

A spindly man with shaggy hair approached her. "Hey, woman! Why the hell ain't you workin'?!"

Wearily, Novem replied, "Using magic is actually quite tiring. Please let me rest a little longer." She did not let her emotions reach her face.

"Like I care! If we don't get this done, we don't get any booze! It's all I've got

to look forward to!”

Looks like I've gotten wrapped up in some trouble, she thought as the dwarf and the gnome drew closer to her.

The demi-humans cautioned the man, “Hey, you worthless lout. Don’t start complaining to someone who’s doing their best.”

“Wh-What’s your deal, runt?! You rebellin’ against us humans, eh?!”

No doubt this man was a good-for-nothing, and he had been one for a long time.

The dwarf glared at him, “Shut up and get back to work. The reason our team never gets to drink is ’cuz you’re dragging us down. You want to get jumped or something?”

The man looked around and saw his fellow workers staring at him sternly. His shoulders dropping, he returned to his job.

“Sorry ma’am,” the gnome apologized to Novem. “That man’s a layabout who drinks and doesn’t work. Don’t need to be concerned about him.”

The dwarf looked at her apologetically. He was a fussy dwarf and he could be awkward at times, but with Novem, he tried to be as kind as possible. “For starters, I’ll give him a good smacking. So could you let him off this once?”

“N-No, you don’t have to go that far. I’ll have more work to do, then,” she insisted.

The preparations for the battle were coming together nicely. Repair of the outer wall progressed steadily, while the traps were nearly complete.

“Looking at the result, I guess it was a good thing we got them to compete.”

The competition did run through some of our precious supplies, but right now, speed was the most important factor.

“Stoke the flames of rivalry, and you can get things done a bit faster. It’s not a long-term solution, mind you. Well, it would be quite nice if they fostered a bit of camaraderie along the way,” the third head said. It had been his proposal.

As the veil of night lifted, I surveyed the town. The sight of the place had only made us anxious when we arrived, but with the walls revived and the town in a far more defensible state, these sights now provided a bit of reassurance to the townsfolk and the members of the subjugation force.

As I gazed out from the rooftop, I heard a voice calling from below.

“Insolent Chicken! Breakfast is ready! Made by yours truly, by the way! Your Monica has packed it full of love, so please eat!”

She’s quite cheerful, so early in the morning.

However, there was someone who staged a protest against her. It was Norma.

“You little...! My breakfast was only bread and soup! Why is his meal so extravagant?! Get me one of those!”

“Tsk.”

Monica looked disgusted as she clicked her tongue.

“Hey, I saw that!”

“Yes, I’m sure you did. This was cooked using the supplies we brought ourselves. As for you, you should be happy getting the same meals as everyone else.”

“I am a knight! A decem-knight!”

“Okay... So?”

They were getting into a tussle at this hour... On that note, Norma’s shamelessness was to such a degree I was almost impressed.

But then, the shrill cry of a bird broke through the fine morning air.

“Looks like they’re coming, Lyle.”

I gripped the Jewel at the second head’s warning.

A map of the surrounding area surfaced in my head, allowing me to confirm the enemy.

“Not too many of them. There’s less than a hundred.”

“Another scouting trip? Or does the head honcho want to measure out the strength of its new prey? The way it plays these games is certainly very gryphon-like.”

In the distance, I could see a hippogryph flapping its wings.

I sounded the bell stationed beside me.

The bell sounded early in the morning. Lionel awoke to its irritating, reverberating chimes. The other members of his labor team were lying around nearby.

“So loud... What is it now?” he grumbled, rubbing his eyes and sitting up.

In the end, Lionel had submitted to working under Lyle. All of the comrades he brought along had gone to Lyle—that was part of the reason. But he also had to consider that it was Lyle providing the food. If he was going to starve otherwise, he had no choice but to work for him.

He could hear the flurried feet of many people moving all around.

The team leader was a knight who had served under Norma. “What are you doing?! Hurry and prepare for battle!” he barked.

In addition to volunteer soldiers, the team included men from the town as well. They all had weapons shoved into their hands as they headed to their station.

Teetering back and forth, Lionel kept pace with his comrades, his mind slowly waking up along the way.

The bell continued to sound.

“The enemy’s here?”

The moment he muttered this, his drowsiness dissipated all at once, and he snapped back to reality. Disregarding the winter cold, he burst into a cold sweat; he could feel his heart hammering away in his chest.

“Listen up!” the knight shouted. “No matter what happens, don’t leave your station! You just need to move exactly how we practiced!”

The others seemed anxious as they heard this.

“Practice... We hardly did any of that.”

“Can we win like this?”

“Ah, this is nerve-racking.”

So many worried faces. No matter how much the leader ensured their victory, and no matter how much they were paid, that didn't mean they could simply forget their fear.

Lionel was shaking too. But eventually, he noticed something. *Hmm? They're not attacking?*

He thought the enemy would be upon them at once, but he had yet to even feel their presence.

“You think this is some sorta misunderstanding?” someone said to the knight.

But the knight would not hear him out. “No chatter!”

The other teams were similarly mustering. Then suddenly, a lone girl touched down among them. With a great jump, she had soared through the air and landed as though she had fallen straight from the sky.

Her red hair trailing behind her, Aria was clad in armor that closely followed the lines of her body and held a spear in hand. She looked practically sublime in the morning sun. Sure, there was a little bed head still in her hair, and for some reason, she was rubbing her mouth, but that was trivial in comparison.

“Sorry, I was late.”

“No, there is still time,” the knight replied.

“I'll have a meal out for all of you right away. Get ready in the meantime.”

Lionel's cheeks flushed. He couldn't take his eyes off of Aria as she spoke with the knight.

She's beautiful.

With his eyes stolen away, it felt like someone had his heart in a vice grip.

There was a hippogryph leading the charge. Its forces numbered around a hundred.

“I would have liked a bit more time to prepare.”

The fifth head laughed off my complaint. “Nothing ever goes as planned. You should come to expect that. You’re lucky you managed to prepare this much. As a bonus, they only threw a handful of troops at you. You should be thanking that gryphon.”

Yes, I’ll admit this is better than if they suddenly came at us with an all-out assault.

I hurriedly finished breakfast and looked out from the rooftop.

After the bell had rung a predetermined number of times, I heard the chimes of other bells coming from the walls. After I ensured I’d gotten a response from all four sides, I rang the center bell again.

From below, I heard a voice. It was Clara, sticking her head out of Porter’s hatch.

“Lyle, we’re good to go.”

She usually didn’t raise her voice. This seemed to be the loudest voice she could muster, but it was still faint.

“Head over to Miranda. That is where they’re attacking from.”

“Got it.”

I watched her off, the air filled with the rumble of Porter’s engines. I myself had to stay where I was.

“Should I...do something?”

“You fool. Now that you’ve sent out orders, stay put. It’s going to get busy whether you like it or not. Still, they went straight to Miranda, huh... Send reinforcements.”

The fifth head immediately showed favoritism toward Miranda, only for the second head to stop him.

“He already sent Porter. That should be enough.”

“B-But on the off chance...”

The two of them began to quarrel. It wasn't long before the sixth head joined the mix, making it even noisier in the Jewel.

After taking her post, Miranda stretched out her back. By her demeanor, it was hard to imagine she was nervous at all. Two knights—her subordinates—straightened their backs and reported.

“Captain, everyone's ready to go!”

“Awaiting orders!”

Moving quite a bit more briskly than any of the other teams, Miranda's team was undoubtedly the best trained of all their forces.

“No need to be so nervous. There are only a hundred monsters. For starters, have all our ranged units attack from the walls. And, if they decide to charge at us, open the gates and let them in.”

“Understood!”

“Leave it to us!”

Seeing the knights head off to their men, Miranda began some calisthenics. As she warmed up, she thought to herself, *They've decided to come to me, have they... What luck.*

She was delighted to have been given a rehearsal before the full-scale attack. *It really makes things a lot easier when you can prepare for them beforehand.*

As she waited, Porter rolled up to her. Shannon popped her head out from the ceiling, looking down at Miranda worriedly.

Good grief, she should be a bit more tense. This is a battlefield, Miranda thought as though it didn't concern her. But once she heard the sounds of monsters, she gestured for Shannon to return inside the chassis.

“Captain, they're here!”

Miranda issued orders.

“Let’s give them a warm reception, then.”

The archers fired arrows from atop the walls. With that said, a large majority of them couldn’t properly handle their bows. They were only there in the hopes that their presence might get the enemy to falter.

The monsters seemed to hesitate somewhat as they saw the moat, the walls, and the archers that hadn’t been there before. There had been a path graciously prepared for them, all the way up to the gate.

However, as they tread down it...

“Fire!”

The second they were on that path, the archers released their bowstrings. Arrows pierced in one after the next, causing several monsters to fall.

The few people who actually knew their way around bows had been stationed closest to the gate, effectively shooting down monsters from their position.

Watching from the sky, the hippogryph screeched; in response, a group of goblins in robes took to the forefront. These goblins held up their staves and chanted in unintelligible words. In the next instant, balls of flame manifested, flying over the walls and crashing down into the town.

As soon as those fireballs entered Miranda’s line of sight, she held out her right hand and swung it to the side. A faintly glowing barrier, which appeared to be a magic shield, was deployed over a wide area, the flames bursting and dissipating once they made contact.

“Sorry to say we prepared for that.”

Seeing that they couldn’t do any damage from afar, the hippogryph let out a bigger cry from on high. It was like it had told them to charge. All at once, the horde of monsters flooded toward the gate.

“Captain!” the knight shouted.

Inferring what he was trying to say, Miranda raised a hand. The moment she heard the drumming sounds of monsters smacking the gate, she lowered it.

And then, the gates were thrown open, and the monsters poured in.

“Yes, good work.”

One after the other, the monsters fell straight into the pitfall that had been dug just beyond the gate. The hole was lined with stakes—sharpened lumber salvaged from the destroyed houses—impaling many a beast. Even if they wanted to turn back, they were pushed forward by their own allies from behind and were thus fated to fall regardless.

There were, of course, monsters who tread over their own impaled comrades to crawl their way out, yet these ones were met with the spears of knights and soldiers, quickly breathing their last breath.

“He’s mine. That’s my prey!”

“My gold coin!”

“Where’s the next one?! Who’s next?!”

Their eyes were on nothing but gold as these armed warriors pierced through monster after monster. They had such momentum that the monsters began to falter and flee, only to be stabbed in the back.

Miranda looked to the sky. “What shall we do next, then?”

The hippogryph stared her down, and with an ear-rending screech, it swooped down toward her.

“Oh, you’re making this surprisingly easy.”

It spread its front talons wide, closing in to capture her. Miranda drew the dagger from her hip; she jumped to one side and threw it, the blade sinking into the hippogryph’s flesh.

The monster was about the size of a horse. It turned and flew at Miranda as if to say such a small blade was useless against it. Miranda drew a fresh dagger, this time taking a slash at it as it passed by.



She landed a clean hit, but her foe would not falter from such a shallow wound. Underestimating Miranda's offensive power, it dropped all pretenses. There was no need to be wary of her attacks. This time, it would get her for sure—or so it thought, but just as it was about to charge again, its movements were thrown off.

It was like its whole body had grown numb. The daggers had been slathered with poison.

"Do you understand how scary humans can be, now? But...how unfortunate for you. You won't get another chance."

A knight raced over to Miranda, a large axe in his hand.

"I brought it, captain!"

The knights worked with reverence, as though Miranda had always been their commanding officer.

Miranda smiled. "Thank you... I'll leave it to you, then."

The knight approached the paralyzed hippogryph. He raised the large axe high and swung down with all his might. One time wasn't enough. Again and again, he struck the beast's neck, and soon enough, the hippogryph's head had been severed.

Most of the monsters had been defeated. The gate had been defended. Although there were plenty of injuries around, the damages had been kept surprisingly low.

"It's going to get busy, isn't it," Miranda muttered as she stared at the gryphon watching from the distance. A moment later, the gryphon flapped its wings and left.

After confirming Miranda's victory, I checked to make sure no one was around before talking to the Jewel.

"We won," I said, simply.

The sixth head sounded quite satisfied. "That's a good start. But oh, how

robust Miranda is. I thought she was a bit more girly than that. You know, she's Milleia's great-granddaughter, after all."

"You think so?" the second head curiously chimed in. "Her movements were pretty good, and I think talent plays a bit of a part. I'm a bit scared about how she'll be down the line. More importantly, Lyle, you should make sure they take down the monsters outside the gates too. Order them to pursue."

I was about to relay those orders, but before that, I glanced in a direction that had been bothering me for a while now. The gryphon had taken along a few hippogryphs to observe the battle.

"They never ended up attacking."

"They just came to watch. That's all there is to it. They definitely see this town as their pantry. They'll definitely come again."

The gryphon and its followers left. I never wanted to see them again, but that didn't mean I wanted them to find another town to make a mess of. The casualties would only grow if we didn't take it down here.

"Hey, send out the orders already," the second head urged me.

I quickly summoned a messenger.

There were no movements after that. Before long, we'd returned to our regular work.

As for me, I was sitting across a table from the soldiers who'd made it out of the battle. It was time to pay their fees.

I never thought I'd be stuck doing paperwork right after a battle.

"And I'm telling you, I took down five of them. No, seven."

Some of them exaggerated their achievements to try to haggle more out of me.

I looked down at the list. "That doesn't match up with the number of demonic stones turned in. If you really did defeat them, then someone sent in a false report."

Once I'd said that, there were jeers from the rest of the line.

"You liar!"

"You didn't even go to the front line!"

"Trying to steal our prizes, huh?!"

Yet, even so, the man continued to insist he'd defeated them.

"Did too. I defeated them, I did! Give me my money. Eight gold coins!"

It's even higher than before...

With a slight sigh, I grabbed the man's head and activated the third head's Art.

"Let me ask you one more time. Did you really defeat any monsters?"

"Huh... Yeah, I'm sure I put down the finishing blow on one injured monster," he honestly informed me with hollowed eyes. I promptly passed over a single gold coin.

Seeing as everyone was looking rather confused, I grinned. "Lies don't work here. That's the sort of Art it is. The next time someone lies, they won't get any reward at all. So be careful."

Those who were similarly plotting to inflate their claims averted their eyes from me. *Still, why do I have to pay them immediately?*

As I grumpily continued my work, the fourth head cautioned me, "Lyle, do not let your discontent show. Are you listening? Use this chance to show them that they will properly get paid their dues, and everyone will work even harder in the next battle."

And so it went, on and on. I'd finally paid the last one and was left alone.

Wearily, I rolled my shoulders. "On another note, my money's disappearing like crazy. War must be quite an expensive affair."

"Huh? You usually don't pay this much, you know," the third head replied as if it were only natural.

"But—"

“This time’s special. In the first place, I’d never choose this method if this was my own land.”

“Never?”

“Yes, never. Not in a million years. People always compare things to how they had it in the best of times, right? This time you threw around money like it was nothing, but you can’t keep that up forever. So, if you tell them they’ll just be paid normally starting next time, they’ll lose all their motivation. I guarantee it. ‘Even though I got so much money last time,’ they’ll say.”

“Isn’t that pretty bad, then?”

“Oh, it’s fine. Totally fine. I mean, this isn’t our land; it’s the king’s problem now. After all, this place is under the crown’s direct control.”

So providing too much reward is also a problem.

“Is it really going to be okay?”

“I guess so? The townsfolk need money to live, and it’s better to have them work for it than to get it for doing nothing. You want to slay the gryphon, and the townsfolk want funds to restore the town. See? It’s a win-win.”

Then what about the subjugation force? There didn’t seem to be much point in thinking about it, so I stood from my seat.

“When are they going to attack next? I hope it’s not too soon.”

“Who knows? Sure, it may be smart, but it’s still a monster. It doesn’t think like we humans do. Honestly...” he teasingly said, “humans are the scarier ones, more often than not.”

They were certainly scary.

When the people of their own city became a nuisance, they spread false information to send them to their deaths. The gryphon was almost cute by comparison...well no, no cute. I couldn’t stand to look at it either.

Aiming for the moment I finished up work, Luka entered the room.

“Lyle, sir. I brought tea for you.”

“Thanks. Could you leave it over there?”

Like this, Luka had begun to help out with odd jobs. There wasn't much he could do, and putting him to work with the laborers felt cruel.

Luka glanced at the weapons that had been left around the room. The swords, spears, and bows that had been allotted to the subjugation force.

"Are you interested in them?"

"I was just wondering...what it would be like if I could fight."

I didn't quite know what to tell him. Did he want to get revenge for what happened to his father?

The second head sounded concerned. "Come to think of it, he's a hunter's son. Has he been taught the basics?"

Since Luka resembled his own son, the second head was so concerned for him he barely knew what to do with himself.

"Sir, please let me fight. My dad did teach me a little about how to use a bow. I'll definitely be useful!"

The third head was similarly concerned. He sounded uncharacteristically bothered. "I appreciate the sentiment, but you certainly can't put him on the battlefield. He might not be happy with that, but..."

The two of them were both incredibly soft on the boy.

I puzzled over what to do—when I heard a knocking at the door. Someone who seemed to be Luka's mother entered. She looked a little worn out, but she was a woman in her twenties with a slender build. I remembered Pat saying she was one of Geony's few beauties or— "Ah!"

The sixth let out a bit of a farcical sound.

"What's wrong?" the seventh head asked. "Do you know that woman? She seems to be Luka's mother..."

I was meeting her for the first time. From what I could tell, she'd come to see if Luka was doing his job right.

"Luka, you shouldn't bother Mr. Lyle too much. I'm so sorry. I'm Luka's mother. I felt like I should check up on him..."

"I-I mean," Luka hung his head.

Seeing his mother remonstrate him, the sixth head muttered, "Geony... I see, Geony Village! That's right. So that's what it is!"

He seemed to come to some realization, but I was none the wiser...

In the first place, this is a town, not a village.

"Lyle, Luka's a Walt."

Err... What?

In order to clear things up immediately, I took a break and sent my mind to the Jewel. Once I was in the round table room, I found the sixth head apologetically kneeling with the other five surrounding him.

They were all lording over him with cold eyes.

"So to summarize, Luka's one of us?" asked the second head.

"I thought he bore a striking resemblance, but he turned out to be a blood relative?" added the third. "That explains it. That explains a lot, actually."

"A kid you went and made when you ran away from home... What do you think you're doing?" the fourth head said with a sigh.

"Are you stupid? I said it, didn't I?! I asked if you had any kids outside!" the fifth head demanded.

Finally, the seventh head looked at him with complete disappointment. "I'm quite sure you told me...I did not have any siblings I didn't know about."

The sixth head curled up his hulking build as he hung his head and kneeled. "Err, when I said that, I meant any siblings you had to worry about. A-And, I did leave them with money!"

Come to think of it, they did talk about this before.

The second head coldly interrogated him. "So you had a kid with the girl, then you left money and didn't look after them in any other way?"

"N-No, well, you know. My wives were a bit..."

“Because of your wives, you abandoned a child you had elsewhere?”

“I-I made sure they had plenty of money.”

“And you didn’t do anything else?”

“Umm... Correct.”

I couldn’t tell how scared he was, but the sixth was looking a bit pathetic. Rather, he looked like he was just...the worst. Putting things together, it seemed that Luka carried Walt blood in his veins.

Before the sixth head became the head of House Walt, there was a period of time when he ran away from home, and a child he had during the time he was in Geony.

Looking at Luka’s mother, he seemingly realized she bore quite a resemblance to the woman he had gotten with. That also explained why Luka resembled Dewey. Being related by blood would certainly increase the likelihood of looking alike.

“What do we do?” I asked, and everyone fell silent.

The second head ruffled up his hair. “That’s even more reason not to abandon him. Lyle, I’m real sorry about this, but it’s now a Walt Problem... Can you go clean up after the sixth head’s mess?”

There was even more reason not to cast aside Luka, his mother, or the town. As I nodded, the seventh head hoisted the sixth up by the lapels.

“You rotten fiend!”

But, irritated by the fact that it was his son giving it to him, the sixth head argued, “Sometimes, a village will offer you their women when you pass through as a conquering hero! You’re not gonna tell me you never laid hands on a single one of them!”

“It’s a different story when you’re the one who went after her, and you’re the one who abandoned her after that!”

As I failed to keep up with the conversation, the third head shrugged.

“Lyle...” he said to me, apologetically. “Could you teach Luka how to use a

bow?”

An archery range had been set up in the town square for training. It was just an open area with some simple targets placed around, and that was where I taught Luka archery.

With that said, I was mostly just relaying the second head’s words.

He unleashed an arrow but failed to hit the target.

“Sorry...I missed again.”

As he fell into a slump, I tried to console him.

“I don’t expect you to be perfect from the start. How about we practice the basics?”

Luka looked at the saber hanging at my hip.

“Lyle, sir. I want you to teach me how to use a sword.”

“A sword?”

Luka nodded. “I’d prefer a sword to a bow. I could take out a lot more monsters like that.”

“No, you’re supposed to be a hunter’s son!” the second head shrieked.

The third head chuckled. “Well, he’s a boy, so I’m sure he’s got his eyes on swords and spears. But we don’t know if this kid will ever need a sword in the future. It might be better if he learned how to use a bow,” he advised.

“But *you* chose the sword,” the second grumbled.

“Because that was best for me. Now look here, I was a noble. A feudal lord. It was no good for me to use a bow.”

A bow was not often seen as a knight’s weapon. It was swords and spears that helped one exude the air of a commander leading the charge.

“A bow’s far more practical, though.”

“It’s not a matter of practicality. It’s about keeping up appearances.”

Faintly listening in on their quarrel, I spoke to Luka. “If you want to carry on

your father's role of being a hunter, I think a bow might be best for you."

"Knowing how to use a bow isn't enough to be a hunter. And I'd rather become an adventurer like you."

This is troublesome. Things are starting to go in a strange direction.

The second head quickly threw together a resolution. "Got it. Hunting knives, then. They're very convenient when you know how to use them!"

He settled on hunting knives, but it seemed like the second head was desperate to teach him archery.

I patted Luka's head. "Got it. I'll teach you the basics. But you'll have to practice archery too—that's the condition for me teaching you."

"Got it!"

Bright and cheerful, Luka returned to his archery practice.

The sixth head seemed to be on board too, now. After all, Luka was most likely his descendant.

"My, what a good kid he is."

The seventh head clicked his tongue. "My thoughts exactly. When you think of who he came from, it's almost a miracle. Although he might start *playing around* when he gets older."

"Do you really hate me that much?"

"Are you asking me to like a father who threw his son into that carnage? I do not trust you in any way, shape, or form on any matter that has anything to do with women."

"Now you're taking it a bit far!"

Seriously, what did the sixth head do?

The second and third heads chatted as they watched Luka draw his bow.

"They really are identical."

"That kindness and that earnestness... He really is just like Dewey."

"I hope there's some way...for him to find happiness," the second head

muttered. “For his sake too.”

I couldn’t say anything. I couldn’t possibly comprehend what they were feeling. And so, I did as much as I could for Luka.

“Looking good. Once we’re done here, I’ll show you how to hold a sword.”

“Really?!”

Seeing Luka so happy, I had to wonder. *Is this what it’s like to have a little brother?*

Chapter 74: Various Battles

The next day, Lionel struck up a conversation with Aria. It was on a break from work, and Aria was wiping away her sweat with a towel.

“Do you have a moment?” Lionel asked.

“Sure, be my guest. Something happen?”

“No, not exactly. Well, how do I put this... I was just wondering why you’re following someone like Lyle.”

Lionel’s question had Aria cock her head quizzically. “Because Lyle’s the leader. I ought to follow his orders, right?”

“That’s...not what I meant.”

Whatever he was trying to say, it clearly hadn’t gotten across to Aria. And so, he decided to be more blunt about it.

“I want to know why you became his comrade. I mean, no matter how you look at him, he’s pretty hopeless. He surrounds himself with women and proclaims he wants status and fame. He’s got no greater cause, right? Isn’t that the worst?”

Why is a girl like Aria with Lyle? Over the past few days, Lionel had worked under her and watched her. And all the while, he pondered over the question.

She was bright and cheerful, and would always take the initiative to help out with work. What’s more, she was strong and pretty. There were quite a few men interested in her. But, seeing as she was Lyle’s comrade, none of the others had actually called out to her.

Aria gave a rather conflicted face. “No, that back there was just... Well, he’s usually a lot more down-to-earth. He’s not a bad guy, you know; he’s helped me out quite a bit. I’d say that’s my reason for becoming his comrade in arms.”

“I’ve actually heard a few things about you. You originally hailed from a baron house, right? And since you’re from the capital, that makes you a court noble.

That guy's a feudal noble. They're brutes."

From the eyes of court nobles, feudal nobles were violent ruffians. They were only allowed to possess land by the grace of the palace—the king. And yet, they acted so high and mighty, as though they were in any way better than their court counterparts. The court nobles despised the feudal nobles, and this feeling was mutual.

A miserable look crossed Aria's face. "I'm not a noble anymore."

"Y-You're a splendid noble. With your bloodline, you could marry any noble at the capital, and you'll be back up there in no time. You can go back to a life of luxury."

Lionel pushed the point, but Aria still didn't seem to get it.

"What's the use in returning now? And my current life isn't too bad."

"Adventurers are savages. That's not a job for a girl like you."

"Well, you've got to work if you want to put food on the table. I do what I can."

They seemed to be talking past one another.

Lionel mustered his resolve. "Wh-Why don't you come over to my place? We're court nobles. We have heredity, and we receive money from the palace every year. You won't have to struggle to make ends meet."

Aria was aghast. "What are you talking about?" she asked. "Aren't you going out with Miranda's little sister?"

"We're...not fit for one another. Her status far outweighs mine. And at this point, I'm sure Lyle's going to succeed House Circry. Once that happens, I'll say goodbye to Doris. If that's what you want, at least."

"No, you're not making sense. Even if you don't inherit the house, you can still love her and marry her. Also you seem to be misunderstanding something, but Lyle is most certainly not trying to inherit House Circry."

"Huh?"

As Lionel reeled back at those words, Porter arrived. Right now, the metallic

marvel was serving as something of a meal cart.

Monica and Shannon climbed out.

“We’ve brought the food!” Monica proclaimed. “Now get in line.”

“Yeah! Get in line!” Shannon exclaimed right after.

Monica was clearly lacking motivation, and Shannon was trying to imitate her. And as soon as she noticed them, Aria placed a hand on her stomach.

“Oh right, I *am* hungry. You should get a bite to eat too.”

As he watched Aria leave, Lionel clasped at his chest. He gripped his shirt, his expression warping in frustration.

Three days had passed since the first battle. I climbed onto the roof at the crack of dawn and stared at the distant forest. On the map in my head, I could see a horde of squirming red points of light, just on the cusp of surging out of the tree line.

“They’re here. It looks like they’re taking it seriously this time.”

My ancestors were delighted to hear that.

“Took them long enough.”

“Now then, it’s finally time for our target to take the stage. How exciting.”

“Yes, it’s certainly a thrill.”

“It’s a gryphon, after all.”

“I’d like to bring it to one-on-one if possible.”

“Lyle, you’re finally going to be first-rate.”

They never change... If the first head were here, would he have reacted the same way?

I rang the bell to inform everyone that the enemies had arrived.

“It was a trifling request,” the third enthusiastically said, “but what outrageous rewards. I just wanted Lyle to take it to see what it was like directing regular people... But to think he could hunt a gryphon on top of that!

This is the best! Lyle, why not have some fun with it?!”

I’m not having fun at all.

As Luka jumped up to the sound of the bell, his mother called out to him.

“Luka. Let’s hurry and evacuate.”

“Y-Yeah.”

If things went his way, he would have liked to fight too, but all noncombatants were supposed to evacuate. He quickly changed clothes and went out to find a large number of people ahead of him.

It was a small town. It didn’t take long to reach the evacuation point.

They took shelter in the largest and sturdiest building still standing. But large as it might be, it still felt cramped with a few hundred people packed inside.

A woman in a red, frilly dress—Monica—was watching over all the evacuees. According to what Luka had heard from the town’s ladies, she had a somewhat strange way of speaking, but she was a hard worker with a good head on her shoulders.

“Oh, you’re here. That makes everyone.”

Apparently, Luka and his mothers had been the last ones to arrive.

“Wait, do you mean to say you remember everyone’s faces?” said his mother, seemingly shocked by Monica’s swift verdict.

“That much is nothing to me—to Monica!” Monica proudly said. “To secure everyone’s safety and tend to their needs: that is the job my damn chicken tasked me with, and I will do precisely that!”

His mother seemed a bit put off as Monica burst into laughter.

For what it was worth, they had Norma to guard them as well. Although for her, she’d simply been shoved into the position, as having her on the front lines would have thrown off the chain of command.

Luka watched as the door to the building was shut behind them.

Will Lyle...will everyone be all right? he wondered with concern.

The monsters led by the gryphon assailed the town from all four sides. Meanwhile, the gryphon watched things pan out from the sky, showing no intent to descend.

The battlefield left to Sophia had fallen into chaos.

“How did monsters come up with this?”

The orcs and ogres tossed the smaller monsters over the walls and into the town. Countless monsters were thrown in, wreaking havoc all across the streets.

Although Sophia continually dispatched them with her axe, her comrades were panicking.

The knights were raising their voices.

“Pay them no mind! Continue attacking the forces outside the walls!”

“It’s impossible not to worry about the enemies right behind us, fool!”

In some places, she could hear them discussing matters in a far less cordial way, and in the midst of it, Sophia was doing whatever she could.

“Miranda was able to handle it without a problem.”

Once she heard about how Miranda’s unit had fared, Sophia had grown impatient. She ended up comparing herself to Miranda—who had defended her gate without any reinforcements.

Fireballs were cast from outside the wall, and goblins and other small to midsize monsters went flying alongside them. The soldiers who’d been set alight by the fireballs desperately rolled on the ground to put themselves out.

“Hot! Hot!”

“Hey, get a hold of yourself!”

One of the soldiers carelessly exposed his back and a goblin, seizing on this opportunity, plunged its knife in from behind.

“Save me!”

“Ugh!”

With a swing of her battle-axe, Sophia split the goblin in twain. The monster erupted in blood as it fell.

“We need to get you treated...”

She tried to save the soldier, but her surroundings were a mess.

Sophia panicked. *What do I do? What can I...*

That was when Porter charged in, trampling down monsters along the way. The back hatch flew open, and a fair few soldiers burst out. The arrival of reinforcements got a few cheers.

“Our allies are here!”

Sophia was relieved.

With added soldiers, they surrounded the monsters and relied on numbers to reliably take them down.

“Thank the goddesses... Ah.”

But next, a massive volley of fireballs was sent raining down upon them.

Before she knew it, Shannon was sitting on the roof of Porter.

“Fufu, it’s finally my time to shine! This is nothing before me!”

Shannon was usually completely useless, but she did possess incredible talent when it came to magic. Focusing her eyes—eyes that could perceive mana—Shannon spread her arms out. And not a moment later, the fireballs all dissipated.

She had deployed targeted magic shields exactly where they were needed. Sophia could do it too, but unlike Shannon, it would have been impossible for her to block all of them.

“Incredible.”

Clara stepped out of Porter and approached Sophia.

“I’ll take the injured.”

“Th-Thank you.”

I really am pathetic. If I were stronger...

Just as things were beginning to settle down, the monsters busted through the gate.

The monsters had done quite a bit more planning when compared to their previous attack. Throwing their own comrades? That was a downright insane idea.

“What are they thinking?”

“Well, they don’t really care if their allies are injured or killed,” the second head said. “It’s pointless to think about it. Still, Sophia and Aria sure are working hard.”

He sounded a bit happy.

“Are you sure? I just sent them reinforcements because things were getting dicey.”

In fact, Miranda and Maurice were the ones who were handling themselves far better. Maurice had Eva with him.

“Even so,” said the second head. “Those two idiots have done a bit of growing up. I can’t wait to see how they’ll improve from here on out.”

Though he would always berate them as idiots, it seemed he’d taken quite a liking to them.

Looking to the sky, I said, “This is the worst.”

I drew a saber from my hip.

I could see the gryphon and its hippogryphs in the sky—they were carrying in a shipment of monsters. The ones they held were ogres and orcs. Larger monsters this time.

“Yes, that’s how it ought to be. Lyle, make sure you’re ready for them.”

The gate guarded by Eva and Maurice remained steadfast. Maurice—an experienced knight in his own right—commanded the soldiers with crossbows.

“Aim for the mages first! Steady yourselves! Aim well!”

The crossbowmen were all paired with assistants to load the crossbows. They fired consecutive shots from atop the walls.

Seeing an orc about to throw a goblin into the walls, Eva took aim.

“Don’t underestimate an elf with a bow!”

Immediately, she released a flurry of arrows. The goblin was pierced as it flew through the air, and the orc similarly found itself shot through the head. Its hulking body fell back.

Inside the walls, the knights opened the gate to lure monsters in. They held their spears through the gaps in the sturdy blockade set up behind it, piercing through the monsters that took the bait.

Goblins with bows fired at Eva as she stood atop the wall. Without much room to dodge left and right, she raced along the perimeter, dodging by a paper-thin margin and returning fire.

“Oh c’mon, I’m over here!”

She was skilled at the bow and nimble on her feet. She leaped around almost like she was an acrobat.

“Are all elves that strong?” Maurice asked, smiling wryly as she watched. “I’ll have to make sure not to make them angry.”

Eva laughed. “Oh, I’m a pretty skilled elf, I’ll have you know. After all, I’m—Whoa there.”

She jumped down from the wall. A hippogryph swooped down after her, destroying the portion of wall where she’d been standing in its descent.

“The big one’s here.”

It intimidated her with a shrill cry and began its attack. Its front talons sliced through the air, the beast trying to capture its prey.

Eva used her fleet feet to dodge as she snuck her right hand behind her back.

From her quiver, she pulled a special arrow she'd saved for the occasion.

"This one's a Miranda special."

As she nocked it, the hippogryph raced at her. Its eagle head, tipped by its vicious beak, closed in to pierce her dead. It didn't seem to be wary at all of any measly arrows.

The shot Eva calmly fired stabbed into the hippogryph's head. But it didn't seem to have pierced its thick skull, as the hippogryph did not stop there.

"Eva!" Maurice cried. Everyone prepared themselves for the elf's death.

"I said it, didn't I? It's special."

In the next instant, the hippogryph burst into flames. It rolled and writhed, yet the fire continued to burn bright.

"Oh, it really is incredible," Eva sounded rather impressed. "An enchanted arrow, was it? That's pretty convenient."

What she'd gotten from Miranda was an enchanted arrow made using the methods taught in Aramthurst. The ones Miranda made seemed to be a bit more vicious than the usual ones. If the arrow hadn't worked out, she had been ready to use magic to take it down. Eva hadn't expected it to be over with a single shot.

As the flames completely engulfed it, it was not long before the hippogryph breathed its last.

Eva placed a hand on her chin and thought. "The Lovely Elven Archer... No, Gorgeous, perhaps? It would be perfectly fine to have a song about my exploits, wouldn't it?"

"Eva!" Maurice shouted. "I'll hear it all out later, so could you help out for now?!"

This gate continued to defeat its monsters without issue.

Changing the scene to Aria's gate—this one was a terrible mess.

"You piece of—!"

Aria pounced, her spear stabbing through an orc. She pierced deep into something vital, and blood showering her as she pulled her spear back out.

All the traps they'd prepared had been thrown off by the orc. The hippogryph who watched from the air was also troublesome.

From time to time, it would descend, grab a soldier, and return to the sky. From its talons would drop the corpse of an ally.

"Hah... Hah..."

There was no time to care about the blood splattered all over her. The monsters were tossed in one after the next, and her team was struggling to keep up with the magic bombarding them.

One of the knights deployed a magic barrier, but the spells pierced through and fell into town. The hippogryph had dropped the orc right in their midst, and the orc had proceeded to destroy all of their preparations. The army was just barely holding on.

"S-Someone! Help!" she heard a voice.

She turned to see Lionel being attacked by a goblin. It had straddled him and was trying to stab down with its knife. Lionel had barely managed to grab its hands, holding it back, crying as he pleaded for help.

Using her Art, Aria closed the distance in an instant, impaling the goblin and lifting it into the air. Then, with a powerful swing of her spear, she tossed its dead body across the ground.

Offering a hand to Lionel she said, "Can you stand? Get your weapon."

But seeing her, Lionel's face contorted in fear. Still on his behind, he backed away and shrieked.

"Eeek!"

She tried to reach out as he shouted and ran. But soon he was gone, and Aria had to retract her hand. *Oh, I see. I'm still covered in blood.*

Strengthening her grip on her weapon, she looked around. As she searched for any other allies that might be in need of help, an ogre dropped from the sky.

Yet again, the hippogryph had brought a troublesome foe with it.

“There you go, causing trouble again.”

Aria rushed out in front of the ogre. But the monster didn’t even spare her a second glance as it took a swing at the gate, destroying it. The traps were already rendered useless, and with nothing to stop them, the monsters began to pour into the town.

“This is the worst.”

The knights and soldiers began to give in to fear.

Aria stepped out and took her stance. She did not have the skills to defeat so many enemies.

It hurts to breathe. My body is heavy. The blood’s making my weapon so slippery that I can’t even hold it properly. I might be in danger.

As she plunged her spear into a goblin that leaped at her, the shaft snapped in two. Even if she wanted another weapon, the only thing nearby was the dagger hanging at her hip. It was quite long for a dagger, but she wasn’t nearly as good at wielding it as the spear.

“If only I was stronger...” Aria muttered.

The fact that I’m thinking about Lyle right now—well, I may be more of a maiden than I thought. But right now, I need strength. Enough strength that he’ll be the one relying on me.

As she lamented her own patheticness, the red Gem hanging from her neck let off a faint light. This red light enveloped her body.

With a screech from the hippogryph, the monsters rushed at Aria and the other humans all at once. The ogre roared and swung its club down at Aria.

And in the next instant—Aria vanished from the spot.

The club slammed into the ground, raising tremors, and Aria wasn’t there.

As the ogre craned its neck to search her out, there was suddenly a burst of blood from behind it. It turned to see its monster comrades’ torn bodies falling to the floor. The ogre stood frozen, its eyes wide in disbelief. The knights and

the soldiers didn't know what had happened either.

"Wh-What was that?"

"Where did the red-haired kid go?"

"Hey, over there!"

Aria had circled behind the monsters to grab the spear off of a fallen comrade.

Oh, I see. You finally accepted me.

The red Gem let off a faint light as it bestowed its Arts unto Aria. The spear she picked up was poorly made, and more brittle than the one she had used up to that point.

Aria gripped the spear and took her stance. From where her hands made contact, the weapon gradually began to change in color. Eventually, it had been covered in its entirety with a metallic luster, and she felt a firmness, a weightiness as she held it.

Swinging it around, Aria said, "Yes, that'll do. It's not slipping out of my hands."

Her Art had strengthened the weapon—a cheap spear had turned into a solid weapon sturdier than any she had held before.

The ogre roared and the monsters flocked to Aria. Before they could get close, Aria took a swipe with the spear, raising yet another fountain of blood. Seeing even the monsters out of range fall to the ground, she propped the spear against her shoulder.

"Oh, this is quite convenient. But it's also quite tiring."

The Gem that Aria carried had been passed down through the women of House Lockwood and had recorded their Arts. One of them served to strengthen her weapons. Yet another allowed her to send slashes flying through the air.

Aria clenched her right hand.

"Wow. I can feel the strength flowing through me."

Her hand let off a grating sound. This one was a simple strengthening Art. What made it different from Lyle's was how aggressive it was in its nature. Immediately boosting her physical capabilities, Aria accelerated with her own Art, causing blood to fly through any place she sped through.

Her allies were startled.

"Th-The hell was that?"

"All I saw was something red passing by."

"What a terrifying woman."

The hippogryph was about to make its wary descent, but before it could, Aria cleared away the monster on the ground and hopped onto the ogre. She grabbed its head, snapping its neck, before using it as a stepping stool to take a great leap into the air.

"This is House Lockwood's... My...power!"

The final Art allowed her to launch an attack with all her might.

By the time the hippogryph turned to flee, Aria was already right before it. She violently hammered in her strengthened spear. The spear shattered to bits, but the hippogryph's head had burst alongside it.

As Aria roared in the sky, the knights and soldiers cheered.

Sophia raised her right hand to the sky. Her breathing was erratic, her hair was disheveled, and she was covered with dirt and blood.

The gate had been breached, and the situation that presented itself—with monsters pouring into the town—wasn't favorable at all. However, the men were cheering.

"A-Amazing."

"The monsters..."

The monsters were kneeling on the ground.

Indeed, the monsters had made it into the town. However, as Sophia raised one hand, their movements suddenly grew dull.

Even the hippogryph soaring in the sky had been dragged down to the ground.

Clara was surprised. "Is that your Art? You unlocked your second stage now?"

Sophia possessed an Art that allowed her to control the weight of things, but it had previously been restricted only to what she made contact with. By unlocking the second stage of this Arts, its scope had grown immensely.

Sophia's Art had enough might to make monsters kneel on the ground before her.

However, Sophia herself was out of breath, and she looked like she was going to collapse at any moment.

"H-Hurry and finish them off. There's no time..." she muttered.

Clara relayed this to the knights. "Please kill them while you have the chance. She won't hold out much longer!"

"G-Got it!"

Armed knights and soldiers pierced the immobile monsters with their weapons. Shannon found the sight so repulsive that she had fled back into Porter.

Using her battle-axe like it was a walking stick, Sophia barely managed to stay on her feet. She watched as the soldiers surrounded the hippogryph, plunging their weapons through its hide.

"Make sure to destroy its heart. These ones have a strong vitality. Any half measures and it'll get right back up," a knight instructed.

"Got it."

They stabbed the hippogryph a few more times to be sure, and by the time it was all over, Sophia finally released her Art. Clara caught her as she fell.

"Sophia! Let's get you to Novem at once."

Sophia stared down at her palm. *Did I get...a little stronger?*

Her eyes drifted to the defeated monsters and her cheering allies before closing.

I stood before two orcs that had been so graciously dropped off by a hippogryph.

The orcs were armed with weapons they had snatched from humans, but I'd lured them into the space between buildings, ensuring they couldn't swing them wildly, as I used my saber to take them out one at a time.

Looking to the sky, I saw only one hippogryph alongside the gryphon.

"The others must have gone to the gates."

Although I checked the situation with my Art, I could only see a mishmash of blue and red dots. I could tell things were going in our favor, but we'd also suffered some heavy casualties.

The fifth head sent out the next set of orders. "For now, start with what you can handle. There's still an ogre left."

The hippogryph had dropped more than these orcs. Although I'd managed to take the orcs out, the ogre had used that chance to get away and cause further havoc.

Let's see where it went...

"Oh no. That's—!"

It was headed straight for where the residents had taken refuge, and where the injured were being treated.

Novem was administering treatment to all the injured brought in. She was being assisted by the town women.

"It hurts. It hurts."

Racing over to a weeping soldier, she cast her magic to close the wounds.

A woman who watched her seemed startled. "You can heal a wound that cleanly? Magic sure is convenient."

The soldier was unconscious by the time the treatment was over. After confirming this, Novem instructed the woman, "Please wipe his body clean."

After he's rested for some time, prepare food and water."

If a soldier's injuries were light enough, they could be sent back to the battlefield after a bit of rest. Of course, there were some who had become so afraid that they didn't want to take a step out and others who tried to take up arms even though they were still heavily injured. It took a few people at once to pin them down; this field hospital was a battlefield in and of itself.

As Novem wiped her sweat, a shriek came from the entrance.

"Eeep!"

She looked over to see a woman who had tripped over herself. She followed the woman's eyes to an ogre, stooping over to peer through the doorway. Drool oozed from its half-open mouth.

As the medical team fell into a panic, Novem rushed to the forefront.

"Stand down. No one go in front of me."

She readied her staff to defend the injured and the townsfolk, but as the ogre's eyes took in Novem, it froze. It shuffled backward, as if fearful, and shambled off.

The women were so relieved that many sat on the spot.

"That shaved a few years off my life."

"They're fighting things like that outside?"

"I'm shaking again..."

Novem put her staff away, silently returning to her treatment.

The ogre's next stop was the evacuation shelter. It sniffed out the scent of humans and used its club to bash down the door. And once the door was destroyed, it found exactly what it was looking for. Plenty of succulent victims.

The ogre grinned. But the entrance wasn't large enough for it to get to them just yet—it raised its club to make it wider. But then, a woman stepped out in front of it.

"You're quite large. The orcs were something, but I'd say you're about three

meters tall. However! I, Monica, have been ordered to protect this place by my chicken. You won't get past me!"

Not listening to a word she said, the ogre reached out in an attempt to grab her and crush her to death. Its sense of smell told the beast that this woman wasn't entirely human, but what did that matter?

The woman pulled out a massive hammer from seemingly nowhere. She raised it up and struck the ogre's hand.

The ogre pulled back, crying in pain.

"That limp-dick chicken is the only one allowed to touch me."

She'd managed to smash flesh and break bone. The ogre glared at her.

It tried to smack her with its club, only for that club to be repelled by her hammer. With her small body, she had mustered more brute strength than the ogre.

"I possess a full mastery of all maid combat arts. Now regret the fact that you ever met me!"

In no time at all, the hammer had smashed in its head, and that was the end of that.



I raced to the shelter to find an ogre on the ground. Its head had been crushed, and by its side, Monica stood with a hammer in one hand.

“Oh, chicken!” She waved at me without a care in the world.

“You can still smile in this situation?” I wearily asked her.

“It’s precisely *because* of the situation. I want to send you the finest smiles every hour of every day!”

“That sounds like a threat. More importantly, is anyone injured?”

“How cold. Though that’s not bad either. Putting that aside, we have no casualties. I, Monica, have reliably executed my orders.”

“That’s good. Everything seemed fine with Novem too. All that’s left...”

Monica shifted her hammer to both hands and looked to the sky.

“It’s coming!”

I followed her eyes, and there was the sight of a hippogryph coming straight at us. We quickly ducked away as the hippogryph forcefully slammed down on the ogre’s corpse. Did monsters not feel any sense of camaraderie toward their fellow monsters?

Readying my saber, I glared at the beast. There was a wrinkle on its brow that seemed to express its anger.

“What, are you mad that your comrade was done in? Then don’t step on him.”

The entrance to the evacuation shelter was busted, and through it, I could see the evacuees cowering in fear of the hippogryph.

“Lyle, take the battle somewhere else,” the second head calmly said. “It’s dangerous to fight here.”

With a slight nod, I pulled a knife with my left hand and chucked it at the hippogryph.

The hippogryph deflected it with one of its talons, but I hadn’t expected it to pierce through in the first place.

“Hey, eyes on me, bird.”

With a shrill squawk, the hippogryph charged at me. Perhaps because it possessed a horselike lower half, it was just as fast—if not faster—on land than it was in the sky. It had its aim locked on my back as I fled.

“That’s right, come on! This way!”

Monica was also chasing me alongside the hippogryph.

“Ah, stupid! You stay on standby!”

“But why?! My highest priority is my chicken, and—”

She’d apparently abandoned her job once she sensed that I was in danger.
Please give me a break.

“Protect the townspeople! I’ll be just fine!”

I used my Arts to increase my movement speed and leave the area, the hippogryph in hot pursuit. From inside my bag, I took out a lump of clay.

Once I’d run out into the largest street in Geony, I turned toward my foe. It was preparing to leap, its spread wings touching the ground, its body stooped over.

“Fire bullet!”

I held out my left hand, chanting a spell that would shoot out an orb of fire.

But a flame on this level would do nothing to a hippogryph. Some of its plumage caught fire as the orb burst, but it was not a monster that would falter from something so minor. The flames quickly began to go out on their own.

It has quite a flame-resistant pelt. That means it’ll be hard to burn, but... I was convinced of my victory.

“You need to watch where you’re stepping.”

I saw the hippogryph tread over the clay I’d dropped on the ground. That was why I’d fired off such low-output magic. A tiny spark was enough to get the clay to go off.

It was one of Miranda’s specialties—an explosive.

The explosion sent the hippogryph hurtling through the air, taking away a front talon and one wing in the process. Seeing how it was still convulsing, it had survived nonetheless. What a persistent beast. But it was already over.

I steadied my breath.

“D-Did that do it?” I asked.

The seventh head sounded satisfied. “How wonderful. What firepower from such a small volume. I’m sure you could crank it up even higher with some modifications. Now then, go finish it off.”

But just as I closed in to strike it dead, Lionel burst from around the corner.

“What are you doing here?”

He plunged his sword into the nearly dead hippogryph again and again. He seemed to be in a frenzy, and his face was a little scary to look at.

“It was me. I was the one who killed it! I won’t hand it to anyone else! Those fifty gold coins are mine!”

Again and again, he stabbed the beast, and then he turned that blade toward me. He staked his claim, adamant that I would not get a single step closer to his bounty.

“He’s being a pain when it counts,” the frustrated second head said. Personally, I was feeling chills, fearing that my ancestors might tell me to kill the man.

“Got it. He’s all yours. Make sure he’s properly good and dead.”

Lionel laughed. With a stiff face, he laughed, continually muttering under his breath about fifty gold coins.

“He wasn’t stationed here, was he?” the third head said with a sigh. “Did he desert under enemy fire? Oh?”

As I was standing before Lionel, aghast at the bloodcurdling look on his face, the chime of the emergency bell entered my ears.

“That direction... Miranda’s gate? Lionel, you’d better kill that hippogryph! I’m trusting you!”

I hurried over to where Miranda was.

Once Lyle had left, Lionel looked down at the hippogryph.

“I’ve stabbed it enough times. It’s already lost a leg, and its wing was blown off. It should be okay...right?”

He looked down at his own quivering hands. There were bags under his eyes.

His hand that gripped the blade would no longer listen to him. It continued to hold the hilt firmly and refused to let go.

“That’s right. I defeated the hippogryph. Now, I’ll return a hero. I can even be the heir to a viscount house.”

Still clutching the sword, Lionel turned and left.

“I should tell Aria about it. That’s right. I didn’t run away. I was fighting a hippogryph. That should get her to open her eyes. I’m sure she’ll see me in a whole new light.”

His lips curled into a smile as he teetered off. He had evidently gone a little mad with fear.

And once Lionel was out of sight, the hippogryph opened its eyes.

Chapter 75: Gryphon

Miranda was struggling.

“This might be a bit harsh.”

At first, she had managed to fend her foes off with ease, but a certain event had caused the situation to take a complete turn. Namely, the arrival of the gryphon.

Near her lay the corpse of an orc, an ogre, and a hippogryph.

Currently, a pair of golems made with her Art were holding the gryphon back.

Miranda had fashioned a black spider and a leopard. They were both over six meters across, but they could hardly do anything to their foe.

The gryphon opened its massive mouth wide, its shrill voice reverberating through the air. Her nearby allies held their ears, and Miranda could feel hers aching as well.

“Do you have to be so loud?!”

She sent the spider racing and the leopard pouncing as she herself pulled out her special throwing knives. The gryphon trampled down the spider and bit into the leopard midair, tossing it aside with its mouth.

The blades of Miranda’s knives were made out of clay. As soon as they made contact with the gryphon’s body, they stuck fast and exploded.

“This really is just awful.”

Unfazed, the gryphon emerged from the smoke of the explosion. It had grabbed the leopard-shaped golem in its front talon, and it proceeded to squeeze it until it was crushed. The golem turned to sand and fell apart.

The spider had already faded when it had been stomped on. There was no longer anything keeping the gryphon from Miranda.

Even my golems lost in brute strength. I’ve run through my supply of bombs,

and can my other tools even do anything to it?

It had been going well up to a certain point. She'd used explosives and other tricks to take control of the battlefield. But that all changed when the gryphon appeared.

The gryphon didn't even show any signs that it had taken any damage at all.

To be honest, I underestimated it. The hippogryph went down surprisingly easily, so I thought I could handle it... It's no wonder that defeating one of these will have you paraded around as a hero.

It was on a completely different level from a hippogryph.

Miranda spewed threads from her left hand. Weaving sticky strings into a web, she tossed it at the gryphon. It barely stirred as the gummy sensation wrapped around it.

She'd tried several times before to seal its movements with her webbing, but the gryphon would simply forcefully spread its wings. With a flap and a shake of its body, the threads would be scattered about.

"It's not cute at all."

As Miranda was drawing its attention, her comrades brought a sturdy rope net.

"Captain, leave this to me!"

On a knight's order, the net was thrown and the gryphon was captured. The knight and the soldiers pulled at the ropes that had been connected to the net.

"It can't move now!"

The gryphon put no effort into avoiding it.

"Let go of that rope at once!" Miranda ordered.

"Huh? Ngaah?!"

In the next instant, the gryphon jerked its body to the side, and with that, dozens of men holding the rope were yanked along and tossed into the air. With its beak and talons, it tore the net apart. Its mouth was open ever so slightly, almost like it was sneering at them.

“What a nasty personality you’ve got.”

Using the time the soldiers bought her, Miranda had produced a skeletal golem frame around herself. The surrounding dirt lifted and stuck to it, adding flesh to her framework structure. The form it took on was the same as when she had fought Lyle. Soon, she appeared to be a spider woman, like an arachne.

“I don’t really want to show this form off, so let’s end this quickly.”

As soon as it caught sight of Miranda’s new form, the gryphon stooped down and pounced. It moved at a tremendous speed, and before she knew it, it was already right in front of her. Its wide-open mouth was drawing near.

Miranda’s upper body protruded from where the head of the spider would have been. Her hands had been covered in larger golem hands, and her legs had been replaced with eight spider legs.

She scuttled backward to gain some distance, but the gryphon was fast. It swung its forelimbs, and as its claws touched the dirt, the ground was gouged out beneath it.

“Take this!”

Miranda leaped up in an attempt to mount the beast, but the gryphon leaped higher, fleeing into the sky. She looked up just in time to see it swooping down to grab her lower body before returning to the air again.

This is bad! I need to free myse—

She was lifted higher and higher; any higher, and the height would prove fatal. Rather than letting it torment her, Miranda dispelled the golem, letting herself drop of her own accord.

There wasn’t too much distance to the ground, but the gryphon assailed her as she fell. Without any other way to change her course in midair, she shot a thread from her right hand, wrapping it around the gryphon and pulling it tight to change her own trajectory.

Swinging like a pendulum, she escaped its claw before severing the string to fling herself some distance away.

She had a bit too much momentum as she landed, causing her to take a bit of

a tumble. But she was on her feet soon enough. With that said...

“You really are something else...”

By then, the gryphon had already descended right beside her. It raised its front leg—it seemed keen on using those claws to tear her to shreds.

I'm not done yet!

It happened just as she was about to make her next move.

“Not on my watch!”

“Lyle?!”

Lyle raced in, slamming a knee onto the gryphon's head with all his might.

As I ran as fast as my legs would take me, I found myself face-to-face with the gryphon who was closing in on Miranda. It was trying to cleave her with those sharp talons.

I mustered even more strength and ran—only to realize I wasn't holding any weapons.

Now that it had come to this, I used the power of the Jewel to strengthen my own body as I kicked off the ground. I thought I'd deliver a kick to its head, but I had a bit more momentum than I had counted on, and I instead ended up digging my knee into it.

But it was still a clean hit, so it all worked out.

“That's why I told you to keep your weapon drawn!”

“What are you doing, Lyle?”

“It's good that you arrived in time to help Miranda out.”

“All right, now go kill that gryphon.”

“Doesn't it get your heart racing, Lyle?!”

“What a manly gryphon! A perfect trophy!”

My powerful knee strike had the gryphon take to the sky, and once it had arrived at a safe height, it looked down, scouring to find who it was that had hit

it. Once it saw me in front of Miranda, it angrily held out its claws. It screeched and squawked a few times, making a terrible racket.

My ears hurt...

From behind me, Miranda explained the situation.

“Thanks for that. My gate was doing all right, but that gryphon’s been making a mess of things ever since it arrived. I’m pretty beat up. I haven’t been this cornered since I fought you, Lyle.”

“Is it that strong?”

“It’s incomparable to a hippogryph. It’s on a completely different level, I’d say. Even I couldn’t do a thing to it. I went through almost every tool I had on hand, but I only managed to scratch it at most.”

“Sounds scary.”

Miranda looked quite exhausted.

“Anyways, let’s work together to buy time. We might be able to take it down if we can surround it.”

I would have loved to go along with her on that one, but the folks in the Jewel were getting noisy. For a while now, they had been clapping their hands, chanting, “One-on-one! One-on-one!” to the rhythm.

I turned to her and smiled.

“No can do. One-on-one, that’s how we do things in House Walt.”

At first, it seemed she couldn’t find her voice. She opened and closed her mouth wordlessly. Then, after a moment she said, “You’re going to die, Lyle.”

“I don’t plan on dying. I’ll do something about it, so please take that time to recover.”

I wanted Miranda herself to recover, but I also wanted her to get this situation under control somehow or another. The battle hadn’t ended just yet.

“Now come, you fine-feathered fiend.”

Having returned to the evacuation shelter, Monica had a dark look on her face.

“I thought that child was a good listener... To think, he would head out.”

“I’m sorry,” Luka’s mother apologized to her. “I took my eyes off of him for a moment and he disappeared. That boy saw Lyle being chased by a hippogryph.”

They had given up on repairing the door to the shelter and had instead barricaded the opening.

Perhaps I should go search for him, but I can’t abandon my post here.

She wasn’t about to expose everyone in the shelter to danger for the sake of Luka alone.

Even if I want to inform the damn chicken, we’re in a battlefield right now. I can’t move from here. And more importantly... Her eyes went to Norma, who had begun to quiver at the sight of the hippogryph and the ogre. She wasn’t going to be of any use like this. *I doubt she can even serve as a messenger in that state.*

So, as initially instructed, Monica decided to focus on defending her post.

Now that I think about it, isn’t it a mistake to face off against oversized monsters with a slender sword like a saber?

The gryphon—so large, I had to crane my neck up to take in its hulking form—boasted a massive eagle head with the lower body of a lion... A monster that was simultaneously a bird and a quadruped all at once.

It boasted a massive pair of wings.

The saber in my hand looked so unreliable when pitted against such a massive foe.

As for what I was trying to get at—this was not the sort of life-form that a single human was supposed to challenge on their own.

Letting out *squawks* and *screes*, it stabbed at me with its massive beak. Its movements were so sharp that they left gaping holes in the walls of buildings

when they made contact.

“You’ve got to be screwing with me! How exactly am I supposed to fight that?!”

“You can do it if you try.”

“Show some guts. Guts, I say!”

“Don’t wimp out now. You have plenty of means at your disposal.”

“It’s not *supposed* to be easy. That’s what makes it meaningful.”

“Lyle, show us how much you’ve grown.”

“This is a path that we and all the men that came before us have gone down. By the way, I hear they used to beat them to death with their bare hands in the olden days.”

I’m different from you people, and I am not a savage who fights with my bare hands.

Its front claws stretched out at me. Its back legs were certainly those of a lion, but its front ones boasted the sharp talons of an eagle. As a talon came down at me, I rolled to avoid and tried to take a swipe with my sword.

“It’s hard!”

The feeling I got in my hand as I sliced wasn’t reassuring.

I rolled, I ran around, and I slowly chipped away. That seemed to be all I was accomplishing.

In that case... I shifted my grip on the saber, taking a deep step toward the gryphon as it came at me and thrusting out the blade. The blade tore into its skin, sinking in a few centimeters, but...

“Dammit!”

I was the one who couldn’t endure the force; I was forced to pull out. Even its flesh was hard as stone. Growing impatient, I held out my left hand.

“Thunder Bullet!”

I unleashed magic. With a crackling sound, a blast of light struck the gryphon

without doing much damage at all. It continued charging straight at me.

I dashed out of the way.

“By the goddesses!”

Hot on my heels, the gryphon took to the sky.

As I turned and assumed my fighting stance, the second head offered some advice.

“Calm down. Lyle, the enemy may look large and strong. In fact, he really is strong.” I steadied my erratic breathing. “But know this... There’s not a single monster in the world that can’t die. Every monster has its vital points and weaknesses.”

I knew that. But those hero makers—the gryphons and dragons of the world—those ones were the species with the fewest weaknesses. That was what made them so hard to deal with.

I gripped the Jewel.

My life would have been a whole lot easier if I could just take it out with the founder’s greatsword, but that blade was like a bucking bronco. It was difficult to handle. Sure, it would all work out if I could just hit the gryphon with it, but I would be in an even worse position if I missed.

It was a sword that drained every last ounce of my strength with just a single swing. If I failed, I would end up collapsing right in front of the gryphon.

Perhaps using it at point-blank range would do the trick, but there was no way an intelligent monster like this wouldn’t be wary of something like that.

I looked up at the beast circling overhead.

“Close range. If I can just get right up to it... Right. If I can somehow mount its back...”

I thought over the matter. What was my best course of action...?

Aiming for the moment that the gryphon swooped down at me, I held my saber in between my teeth. With my hands freed up, I picked up a rope that had dropped nearby. It was long enough, and it seemed sturdy.

“Oh?” The sixth head sounded a bit amused, but I didn’t have the time to spare for him.

The gryphon took the dive. It sped straight down before spreading its wings out and flying straight at me.

It was fast. If I let my guard down, I’d either be grabbed in those claws, or I’d have a few holes opened in my body. Or perhaps I’d even be torn to shreds.

I invoked my Arts at full throttle.

My bones let out a grating sound as a pale blue flame enveloped my body. It wasn’t a fire that would do me harm—this was the final stage of our founder’s Art.

With the second head’s Art, I measured out the distance to my foe.

I concentrated every nerve in my body, lowering my center of mass and awaiting the gryphon. I would end things here.

I was giving it my all. I couldn’t do this too many times.

The moment the gryphon made a grab at me, I wrapped the rope into a ring—and looped it around the beast’s neck. I imagined strangling it.

Due to my concentration, it felt like everything around me was moving slowly. I could vividly make out every minute movement, every change in expression of the gryphon as it sped at me like a bolt of lightning.

I kicked myself off the ground and landed on the gryphon’s back.

It thrashed. It kicked.

I desperately clamped my thighs onto its torso to keep myself from being shaken off. As I tightened the rope, I tried to use it as makeshift reins.

“Grrt oo.”

With the saber between my teeth, I couldn’t quite articulate myself, but I was trying to say, *got you*. This bird had put me through quite a bit of trouble, and I used the rope to strangle it with all my might.

It wailed as it thrashed. It felt like I was riding atop a wild horse.

But it smelled far more beastly than any horse. I was riding a gryphon, and yet

the awful smell had me disillusioned before I could feel even a shred of wonder. To make matters worse, I thought the lion portion would have been soft and fluffy, but it was strangely sticky and rough. It felt terrible to the touch.

The rampaging gryphon charged into buildings and ran into walls, but still, I refused to let go. I continued to pull with all my might. It seemed to be in pain, and there was a great volume of saliva spewing from its mouth.

The gryphon flapped its wings.

That's troublesome.

"I won't let you."

I scrounged up my mana to cast one full-power spell. Fire would burn the rope, and so would lightning. Of my remaining options, water seemed to be the best choice.

"Water storm!"

Water swirled up from the ground, enveloping both me and the gryphon. It rushed up with immense force, creating a tornado of water that even the mighty gryphon couldn't just brush off. The inside of the vortex was like a stormy sea, throwing us left and right and making it hard to breathe.

I was immediately overcome with a feeling of weightlessness. Before I knew it, I was seeing clouds. I'd shot us both up so high we were at cloud level.

I... I overdid it, didn't I?

"What even is this?" the third head said, dumbfounded.

The second head couldn't hide his surprise either. "Huh? Magic? Was that right there Lyle's magic?"

I was surprised myself. I didn't think I could squeeze out that much power. My eyes were spinning. If I relaxed, I knew I'd fall straight off of the gryphon's back.

As I looked down, the town-turned-battlefield looked so incredibly small. It really was just a tiny place we were protecting.

The gryphon had been suddenly tossed into the air with its sense of orientation completely thrown off. It was teetering, just barely managing to

keep itself upright enough that it could maintain the equilibrium to fly.

This was my best chance, but if I killed the gryphon at this height, I would end up falling to my death. My mana was running out. It seemed like a spell to slow my fall would be too intricate for me.

High in the sky and sopping wet, I felt freezing. My mind was going white. It felt like my strength was being sapped away along with my heat. The blue flame exuding from me was petering out.

I was near my limit.

The gryphon slowly lowered its altitude.

I could bank on it making it all the way down, but there was no guarantee it wouldn't regain its sanity before then and try to shake me off.

Everything seemed misty.

It was then I heard the second head's voice: "Lyle, aim for its heart."

"These monsters are incredibly tough. With gryphons, even if you stab straight through them, it's not strange for them to thrash around for a while after that. One stab to the heart. Do that, and even when weakened, this guy will keep flying. It won't have the leisure to worry about you anymore."

The heart...? Even if you tell me that, how am I supposed to know where it is?

"You have my Art, don't you? If you sharpen your senses, you should even be able to perceive your foe's heartbeat."

I tried to use the second head's Art to grasp the internals of my foe. I released the reins and gripped my saber.

"Aim for the gap between its bones and stab. You need to do it in one strike."

"Got it."

As I concentrated, it was almost like I could see straight through the gryphon's body. I could feel its pulsing heart, and I could even tell the location of its bones in detail. I could feel the sturdiness of its coat of fur and a heftiness of each layer of skin.

In order to pierce through, I gripped the hilt with both hands and stabbed

down with all my strength. The blade pierced from its back, proceeding through the beast's body until its tip reached the heart. I stabbed as far as the saber could go.

Then, the gryphon started to thrash again. Even with its heart pierced, it was still putting up resistance. It was astounding. The saber was still in it—the more it kicked around, the wider the wound would open up, yet still, it wouldn't just stay down.

The gryphon's blood splattered over me in the cold. Its blood was warm.

I gripped the saber strongly.

"If it doesn't work from the outside... Then how about this?!"

Sparing no expense, I unleashed magic. A bolt of lightning was unleashed from my hands, passing through my sword and into the gryphon.

The discharge caused the rope wrapped around the gryphon's neck to burn to ash. I squeezed out what little mana was left in me and converted it all to magic. Lightning sparked around my body, scattering around me.

Yet even still, the gryphon resisted. Its vitality was downright abnormal.

With one conspicuously louder screech, the gryphon began to let off a burnt smell.

"No, not yet!"

Thrash as it may, the lightning flowing through the saber was burning up its insides. It convulsed and spat white smoke from its mouth.

Gradually, the magic died down. My breathing was all over the place.

When I pulled the saber out, my nose was hit with the smell of burned flesh from within. The white smoke that came from the wound was swept away by the strong high-altitude breeze.

It was at that point that the gryphon's movements finally started to weaken.

I looked at the saber.

"I heard it was a fine sword... But it did well to endure that."

It didn't fold against the gryphon, and it had managed to endure my magic. It

really was a reliable blade after all.

“Well done, Lyle!” The second head praised me. His words were warm and he rejoiced as though this achievement were his own.

The gryphon let out a pained cry, a scream that echoed far and wide. Its wings flapped as though it simply refused to fall out of the sky; it struggled as much as it could. But this resistance was far weaker than what it had shown before.

As the ground grew nearer, I could make out the town’s outer walls.

“That’s...Aria’s gate, I think.”

By the look of things, the battle was over. Since there was no longer a need to worry about monsters from the sky, I could see signs that the soldiers had ventured outside the walls to hunt down the remaining monsters.

All four gates had secured their victory.

Meaning it’s our win.

“Well, would you look at that? Aria and Sophia both did their best,” the second head delightedly said.

I was near my limit. I cut off my use of Arts and clung to the gryphon with my own strength alone.

The gryphon approached the outer wall, flying unsteadily. Unable to control its direction anymore, it smashed straight into the wall and broke through.

The impact tossed me into the air.

“Lyle!”

And as I flew, I was caught by a blood-covered Aria. I could feel her heat through my frigid body.

Aria skidded across the ground as she landed.

“Ah, finally on solid ground again.”

“You’re soaked, Lyle! And why are you so cold?”

I turned my eyes to the gryphon and saw the knights and soldiers had surrounded it. It didn’t look like it was still kicking, but it did help that they were

there to make sure.

This was no time to say I was embarrassed or anything like that. Aria's arms were warm and comfortable.

"Could I stay like this for a bit? I'm going to freeze to death here."

Aria's cheeks turned red. "That's fine by me... But I'm filthy from all the blood that splattered on me."

"Yeah, don't worry about it. I'm covered in blood too. Also, I smell awful. And I'm soaked, and I'm cold."

Before I knew it, the evening had set in. I could see pearly gray clouds in the sky.

"Looks like I'm in a better state than you, then. Here, you can borrow my shoulder, so stand up. You're going to catch a cold like this. I'll take you to where the others are."

"Many thanks."

Relieved that it was finally over, I could feel my tension melting away and the power draining from my body all at once. But I didn't fall unconscious as I usually did, and that alone was reassuring to know.

I could hear applause from the Jewel.

"So, Lyle's a full-fledged adult, huh? I don't have any more to teach him."

"Oh, I'm not so sure about that. He's still pretty oblivious to how the world works."

"There's plenty of things for him to learn, but with this, Lyle is first-rate."

"It was quite a large and strong one, right? You've got to accept that."

"Right. But in my time, they were bigger, and smarter, and stronger..."

"Please save your bragging for later. You did well, Lyle. You really are a man of House Walt."

They really are rowdy. And reliable too. They're always so noisy and free. It's bothersome to be dragged around by them... But I never have to feel lonely.

Compared to how it was when I was at the estate, what a warm life I was living. I could feel happiness in their incessant noise.

“Can you stand, Lyle?”

“Somehow or another.”

I borrowed Aria’s shoulder to stand, but when I looked up, I saw Luka in the distance.

“Huh... Why is he outside?”

Luka raced out of the evacuation shelter. He was concerned about Lyle’s safety.

“Umm, he said I’d find him if I climbed up to a high place...”

To Luka who had lost his father, Lyle had become like a big brother to him over the course of the last few days. When he asked why the man was being so kind to him, Lyle had replied, “I’m fulfilling a request and atoning for some sins.”

He didn’t really get it, but Luka had grown very fond of Lyle.

A hippogryph had been chasing Lyle the last time Luka saw him. Perhaps it was because he was still a young boy, but he simply couldn’t contain his anxiety. He dashed out to have a look.

With his small body, he climbed up to the top of a roof. From there, he could access the old watchtower. It was tattered and falling apart, and so Lyle had opted not to take command from the tower. Part of the wood had rotted away, and if an adult climbed it, the walls would grate together and the whole structure would sway.

But a child like Luka could climb the tower safely enough. Though the parents would oftentimes warn them of the danger, the town children always played around it. The tower was a familiar place to Luka.

So he climbed up to see where Lyle had gone, only to hear a loud noise coming from the wall.

“Th-The wall was destroyed?!”

Luka was startled. He knew if the wall was breached, the monsters would flood in. But something was strange.

The adults were all cheering.

On closer inspection, there was Lyle.

The son of a hunter, Luka had decently good eyesight, and he could see the scene well. Lyle was safe—and nearby, the gryphon lay, unmoving.

Luka was overjoyed. He waved his hands wildly.

“Lyle won! The boss one! He took down dad’s enemy! Hooray!”

He cried out in his joy as he continued to wave his hands nonstop.

Chapter 76: Regret

I could see Luka waving his hand from a distant tower. Although I wanted to complain about the fact that he was outside at all, when I saw that happy look on his face, I could no longer say a thing.

Aria laughed. "Luka's really taken to you, Lyle."

"He's a kind boy. But it's dangerous there, so I should get him back inside. That tower's just shy of collapsing."

He was too far away for me to hear anything he was saying; however, I could pretty much tell from the joy he was expressing with his entire body. With that said, the location was a problem.

I was concerned that the tower would collapse with him on it.

"Hey, why do you pay so much attention to the kid, anyways?" Aria bluntly asked me.

After hesitating a moment on what to answer, I gave a slight laugh and said, "We're cousins."

"Huh? You are?"

"Well, I was just thinking it would be nice if we were."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Aria seemed a bit irritated with my answer. I apologized to her while stealing some glances at Luka. After asking Aria a few things, I found out the battle had pretty much ended.

"All that's left is to comb the town for any stray monsters. I'll get a team together."

It would be dangerous if there were any monsters left in town.

"I'll look into it."

"That'll be a huge help. Everyone's at their limit."

I could tell just by looking at Aria's weary expression. Although everyone around her was rejoicing at this hard-fought victory, many of them were injured.

"If I detect anything, let's send people that way. I'm pretty close to throwing in the towel myself."

Just as I was feeling grateful that I had such a convenient Art, I saw a single red dot on the map in my head.

"H-Huh?"

"What's wrong?"

"I'm getting just one reaction. This signal is..."

"Did a little one slip past us? We already defeated the gryphon and the hippogryphs, so it should be pretty easy to deal with."

I was bothered by the slowly moving dot.

"You're sure we defeated all the hippogryphs, right?"

"Yes, we did. Each gate handled one of them, and that one was Miranda's second one. Then, Lionel took care of the one in the town... Though I find that hard to believe."

Why does he have to be so bitter? Why can't he be more like Luka?

The red dot on the map was slowly approaching a blue dot. No matter how I looked at it, that was clearly the tall tower where Luka was...

I took off from Aria in a sprint.

"Hey, what's wrong? Lyle!"

I heard a scream from the Jewel. "Lyle! Hurry and help Luka!"

For a moment, I wondered who it was; after a slight delay, I realized it was the second head.

In the distance, I could see Luka high on the watchtower.

A one-winged hippogryph was approaching his tower. The beast was in a terrible state, and yet its eyes were clearly focused on the young boy.

“Lionel... The bastard didn’t finish it off!”

All the complaints I had for Lionel boiled over as I ran. My legs wouldn’t move as I wanted them to. My body was terribly heavy.

Unfortunately, there wasn’t anyone else around Luka. There was no one to save him.

“Damn it!”

The worst possible conclusion crossed my mind.

Luka’s location was also a problem. He had nowhere to run when he was on the tower. Even if he wanted to jump, he was a tad high for that. If he injured himself, he wouldn’t be able to run after that. But the more fundamental problem—Luka didn’t seem to realize the danger he was in.

“Run!”

“Lyle, seriously, what is it?!” Aria ran up to me with concern.

“Run! Luka! Get away from there!”

I raised my voice as high as it would go, but there was no way Luka could hear it. He was so excited that he failed to notice the hippogryph approaching from behind him. It was certainly the same hippogryph I’d fought before. The one Lionel should have landed the killing blow on.

This was beyond a distance I could span if I hurried.

I stopped in my tracks.

Aria seemed to grasp the situation. Her face paled as she looked at the tower.

“You’re kidding me... Didn’t we get them all?” When she tried to use her Art to help, she fell to her knees in pain.

Sensing that something was wrong, the men began to gather.

“Someone head to that tower! Hurry! A hippogryph is going after a child!”

The soldiers hurried as fast as their legs would take them, but I just knew they wouldn’t make it. I possessed a full grasp of the situation—I alone knew with absolute certainty the sheer futility of it.

My hand shot toward the Jewel—a bad habit of mine. But I didn't grasp it. I clenched my hand just short of the heirloom.

I hesitated.

Sensing how I felt, the second head called out to me. His voice was quavering a bit.

"Lyle. You understand, don't you?"

I continued to squeeze my left hand as I hung my head.

"You can actually use my Art, can't you? At this distance, you'll definitely make it. If you can get a weapon out of me just like you did with my old man..."

I felt like I was about to cry.

It felt like such a long time ago.

The oldest memory I possessed came from when I was around ten years old.

Although I could remember a time when my parents were kind to me, those memories were so vague and formless that I couldn't remember exactly when it was. I had a family, my grandmother, my grandfather—these were hazy memories of when I was loved.

But as for what I could distinctly remember, my memories only began at the point that I was sealed away in my room.

The room was filled with countless books. There was a warm bed as well. They even carried my meals to me.

But no one there wanted anything to do with me.

Once, I tried to speak to the servant who brought me my meal.

"Th-Thank you," I said.

At the time, I thought that if I only knew what I'd done, I could maybe figure out a way out of my predicament. At ten years old, I'd convinced myself that I was being treated like that because I had made some crucial mistake.

The servant woman looked down on me with scornful eyes.

She kicked the pushcart, sending the food spilling all over the corridor.

“Huh?”

“My apologies. I’ve spilled it.”

And with that, the servant left. I was not provided another meal that day.

I sat and thought—*what did I do wrong?*

If I tried to greet them, I’d be ignored. If I tried to hold a conversation, I’d be glared at. All those scenes of the mansion in my head were filled with warmth, but the reality was harsh and cold.

I felt envious of Ceres—my little sister, who got to eat her meals with my parents. I desperately wracked my brain over how I could possibly enter that circle. Hoping to earn their recognition, I marched out into the courtyard and began to train with my sword.

I did my best in practicing magic too.

But no one in the mansion would acknowledge me.

At the time, I never came into contact with Zel, the gardener who had ultimately saved me. I never met him. And yet, thinking back, perhaps he was the one who tidied up the yard whenever I made a mess with my training.

When I dragged my tired body back to my room, the servants had gathered to gossip.

“Oh, how precious Lady Ceres is.”

“She’s truly beautiful. And in contrast...”

“Why is the eldest son so hopeless? He’s a blight on House Walt.”

If I had to wager a guess, they purposely made sure to bring it up just as I passed by.

I couldn’t stand it.

Even so, one day... If I kept working at it, then surely my efforts would pay off someday. I continued to believe.

I lived in such a vast estate.

But the only places allowed to me were my room and a corner of the yard.

What's more, whenever my family members were in the yard, I was seen as a nuisance and forbidden from leaving my room.

Thinking back on it now, it was such a small world I lived in. A life consisting of nothing more than swords and magic, and reading the books in the room.

My clothes and all other necessities were given to me. Perhaps I was fortunate in that regard, but I was jealous of Ceres who would be pampered with dresses and jewelry and so much more.

Just how much did I struggle in that mansion where no one would spare me a glance? How much did I exert myself? And yet, all those efforts were meaningless before Ceres.

I was defeated by Ceres who'd only picked up a sword for the first time in her life. I was driven out.

My parents never looked at me from the start.

It was all so miserable, so idiotic... And it was then.

Those noisy men—my ancestors appeared.

I was also delighted to have Novem by my side. It was fun to travel with everyone.

Honestly, I didn't hate my exchanges with Shannon either.

Miranda could be a bit bothersome... But she looked at me. She saw me for me. When she did, I was so embarrassed I didn't know what to do with myself—but I didn't hate it either.

Whenever I got into an argument, I was always terrified, always ready to run away. Was it because I didn't want anyone to hate me?

Still, the problem was my ancestors.

They were loud and annoying, and they showed no restraint. Maybe that's why I managed to come out of my shell too.

They would complain, and I would gripe back.

That relationship was a very comforting one to me.

But then, the first generation head disappeared.

I learned that this state of affairs...couldn't continue forever.

My ancestors would disappear the moment they finished teaching me their Art.

Wasn't that...just too cruel?

"Lyle!" The second head's voice snapped me back to reality. "Listen well. You have the power to overcome this situation. I want you to save Luka. You can already do it, can't you? Haven't you been failing on purpose?"

Slowly, my quivering left hand clutched the Jewel.

"I mean, isn't that too cruel? I'm perfectly fine with all the Arts I already have, and I still have a lot left to learn!"

"Sorry, Lyle," Aria squeezed out her words, frustrated. "I...can't go to help him."

She was exhausted. It was probably impossible for her. As that pain had shown a moment ago, her body wouldn't be able to withstand the use of her Art.

Luka's smile crossed my mind.

It came along with the sight of the second head holding Dewey in his arms.

"Hey, I'm begging you, Lyle. I don't want...to see a child dying ever again. I want that kid to live. This is my selfish request."

My body shook.

A child very similar to Luka had died on the second head's watch. I could tell he was still beating himself up over it.

"I couldn't make it in time. I've regretted it all the while. My son died because I couldn't keep my promise. Are you going to shoulder these same regrets?"

I raised my head just as Luka realized something was wrong.

The soldiers near the wall were trying to tell Luka something.

"Me?"

He looked around and spotted it—a hippogryph missing a wing—one of its front talons was spitting up blood as it dragged its beaten body toward the tower that Luka had climbed. He hadn't noticed until it was practically upon the tower.

Atop the tower, Luka crouched and cowered.

“Eep!”

Despite its anguish, the hippogryph stared at him with hatred in its eyes as it placed its remaining front talon on the tower. The rotted wood easily gave way, and Luka clung desperately to the structure as it teetered to one side.

With the floor slanting and Luka nearly sliding off his perch, the hippogryph opened its mouth wide.

Luka could not help but yell, “S-Someone... Help! Save me, dad!”

He sought for his father who had already passed. His teary screams resounded far and wide.

I could hear Luka crying out for help. The voice of a child pleading for his father.

“Are you okay with this?! I'd never forgive myself. Never! What's there to mull about? You can do it, can't you? You can save Luka, can't you?! That kid is asking you for help!”

That's right. I can do it. I can, but...

“Don't put the dead on the same scale as the living! We're already dead, all of us. All that's left in the Jewel are some fleeting memories. Just the dregs! That kid has a future. He's still so small. He's got a life full of ups and downs ahead of him. He's not like us!”

As memories, the ancestors couldn't leave the Jewel. The only way they could intervene in the world was if they did it through me.

“We're meant to disappear. And if it's for your sake, even better! The reason I taught you my Art was because I wanted you to get stronger! You have the strength to protect that kid. You're different from me.”

The second head's enraged voice shifted to a far more subdued one.

"Hey... Lyle, I'm begging you. Can't you humor some of my selfishness? I don't want to see any more kids dying. I don't want to see it."

I could no longer hold back my tears. There was no stopping it now.

As I tore the Jewel from my neck, the chain portion of the necklace extended outwards. To the left and right—no, to the top and bottom of the Jewel at the center, the metal spread out as a liquid substance, swelling larger and larger.

"Wait, Lyle, what are yo—?"

Slowly distancing myself from Aria, I looked at the shape of the silver weapon in my hand. It was a bow. A silver bow that bore some resemblance to the bow the second head had used in his lifetime.

But it had no string.

The blue light exuding from the Jewel grew stronger.

A string of blue light spread across the silver bow. As I pinched it between my fingers and pulled it back, an arrow took shape. At first, it was just a vague hint of an arrow, but gradually it took on vivid detail.

It was an arrow of light.

"It won't span the distance," I muttered.

And then, as if to fulfill the very purpose it had been manifested for, the bow changed shape. It became longer, from a hunting bow to a war bow. The bow continued to grow until it stood even taller than me. The arrow of magic light grew along with it. I took aim at the hippogryph in the distance.

The second head's third and final stage of his Art—Select.

Once I locked my aim, I could see what looked like a magic circle—a marker over my target.

"Lyle, are you crying?"

I couldn't answer Aria's question.

I gritted my teeth.

I heard the second head say softly, “Lyle, you’re a gentle boy... Thank you.”

My fingers parted. The arrow took off at a tremendous speed, shooting in a straight line toward the hippogryph. Neither Luka nor the monster saw it coming.

The hippogryph had opened its massive mouth wide, waiting for Luka to fall as it shook him down from the tower. The tower was collapsing. Luka looked like he would fall at any second.

The arrow of light pierced straight through the hippogryph’s head, but it didn’t stop there. It continued straight through and shot into the sky.

After a beat, the hippogryph’s head burst open, and the clouds above spread out, a large hole opening up where the arrow had struck.

“Wow...” Aria gasped at the sight.

There were cheers all around. As my hands slumped down, the bow reverted to the Jewel—to the necklace. I clutched the Jewel in my hand.

The presence of the second head was quickly fading away.

I crouched down, gripping the Jewel in both hands, pressing it against my chest.

“I’m...sorry. I’m sorry.”

I cried as I apologized, and then I heard the second head’s soft voice.

Lyle’s painful apology lingered in the air.

“I’m...sorry. I’m sorry.”

The second head watched as Luka fell from the tilted tower and landed on his behind. It looked somewhat painful, but far from life-threatening. Before his eyes, the hippogryph’s head had been blown off and the beast had collapsed. He looked understandably flustered and confused. The ancestors were relieved to see him uninjured.

As he watched, the second head’s body began to break away in beads of blue light. He recalled the sights he’d seen on that day, seeing a bit of his own plight

reflected in Lyle and in Luka.

He pictured himself running through the rain, just before Dewey had died.

He called out to Lyle.

“Stupid. I’m the one who should be apologizing. Thanks, Lyle.”

Watching the second head disappear, the third head stood from his chair and reached out.

“Dad...”

The second’s body was completely enveloped in light.

“My old man lasted a few days, but this is it for me. Sley, I leave the rest to you. And to all of you. Lyle’s...a good kid.”

The fourth head gave a slight nod. “No need to worry. Lyle will be all right.”

“He managed to take down a gryphon,” the fifth head said, scratching at his hair. “He’s a full-fledged man of Walt... He’ll be fine.”

The sixth head chuckled. “Second head... Go forth without worry. After all, he has us with him.”

The seventh head looked at the second’s face. “How curious it is, for all the heads to be able to see one another like this. But Lyle is a lucky boy. For he got to know how our first and second heads truly felt while he was still alive.”

“I hope so,” said the second with a bashful laugh. “But me and the old man, we were small-time lords. Me especially—I was plain as hell, and it wasn’t like I did anything big enough to make it into the books. Even so, it would be nice if Lyle took something away from it. I’d have loved to teach him a few more useful skills.”

He heard Lyle’s teary voice.

The second head—or rather, Crassel looked at Luka.

The boy had been saved just in the nick of time, and it was almost like he was watching Dewey being saved as well.

“Lyle...you’ll be all right. You’re a better man than me. I’m glad...truly glad I met you.”

He was able to see the face of his distant descendant. He was able to see Luka—a boy identical to his own son, make it out alive.

Lyle had properly made his resolve.

The second head faded away. He dissipated into blue beads of light, leaving only a few words behind.

“Plain all the way up to the end. I’d have loved to go in a cool way, just like my old man.”



Yet another was gone from the round table room.

The chair that the second head sat at disappeared, and so too did the door that had been behind it. Instead, a pristine silver bow manifested, floating in the air just like the silver greatsword.

We'd won. The whole town was in a festive mood. There was food and drink, and all the surviving knights and soldiers were raising a racket.

After I'd said a few pleasantries and officially announced our victory, I slipped away. I wrapped a blanket around myself to fight off the cold as I stared at the night sky.

The moon was beautiful.

I could feel the cold penetrating my bones, yet I found myself rather indifferent to it.

I'd climbed to the rooftops to be alone, and from my starry bed, I could hear the rowdy voices of my allies from the hall. Mixed in with all the spirited clamor, Eva was singing one of her songs.

It seemed fun as could be. But I just didn't feel like taking part in it.

Suddenly, I heard the sound of someone climbing up the ladder to my roof.

It was Aria.

Her body was wrapped in bandages here and there, and she gave off a medicinal scent. That was a show of just how hard she'd worked.

Sophia was out cold with no signs of waking, while Miranda said she would have a hard time moving today.

Novem was treating the injured, and Monica was helping her out.

Shannon was...taking part in the festivities. She really did whatever she wanted.

I asked Clara to assist Novem where she could and to help get the paperwork in order. Honestly, that was the work I should have been doing. But I didn't feel a shred of motivation.

“You’re going to catch a cold if you stay up here.”

Aria had brought some hot soup along with her. Two cups, and one canteen. She filled up one of the cups and handed it to me.

“Here you go. Be careful, it’s hot.”

“Thanks.”

Sitting next to me, Aria took a sip of soup. I followed suit. Just one mouthful and I could feel the warmth penetrating through my cold body.

“I don’t know what happened, but what’s up with you today? You suddenly broke down in tears.”

After the second head... After Luka was saved, I’d been practically carried off by Aria. She must have been pretty concerned, seeing as I was acting crazy.

I felt like apologizing to her.

“Well, this and that... Thanks, for today. You were a huge help.”

“If you don’t want to talk about it, then so be it. It looks like Novem and Miranda don’t plan on digging too deeply either, so I won’t ask.”

It would take quite a bit of time to explain what had happened. As I was, I felt too tired and lifeless to do so.

“Did you hear that from them?”

“Yeah. Eva wanted to hear all about it, but Novem put in a few words, and she said she’d contain her curiosity. I’m not sure Sophia even knows what’s going on right now. She was barely on her feet, so I wiped her down and tucked her into bed. Come to think of it, Sophia’s chest is—”

Aria was grasping for topics, doing her best to keep the conversation going, so she started talking about Sophia. What was I honestly supposed to do when she told me—a man—that Sophia’s chest had grown again, and that her large chest got in the way when she was trying to carry her? I could do nothing but offer a wry smile.

Perhaps she realized it wasn’t the best thing to talk about as her cheeks turned red and she bashfully averted her eyes.

“S-Sorry. I just went with the usual swing of things.”

Does she mean like when she’s talking with the girls?

When I thought about it like that, Aria had turned into quite the lady adventurer. I didn’t know if that was a good thing or a bad thing, but she had certainly become quite reliable.

I looked at the moon.

Come to think of it, we watched the moon together after the first head disappeared too.

Back then, I’d said something that had earned me a slap, but the reason was still a mystery to me. My ancestors seemed to know what was going on, but they wouldn’t tell me.

I should ask someone about it in the near future.

“You look like you’re sad about something. I thought you’d be a bit happier after you took down the gryphon.”

“The price was too great, I guess.”

“It would have been downright impossible to do it without casualties. One of the knights I was fighting with told me about it; apparently, it’s a miracle that we managed to take out a gryphon with our numbers.”

There were traps and tricks. Honestly, a lot of careful planning went into that *miracle* and it was hardly a miracle as far as I was concerned. The way I saw it, it was a completely winnable battle. Yet it was in such a battle that I lost the second head.

I should have properly said my goodbyes. I should have let him go out on his terms.

I hadn’t been able to see his face at the end.

I was in the mood to resent someone. But who was I supposed to resent? Lionel, who failed to land the final blow? Or Monica, who’d left her post? Or Luka, who’d gone out when he shouldn’t have?

Just like Lionel, I had failed to finish the hippogryph off.

Monica had shifted her priorities when she sensed I was in danger. As a result, Luka had run out of the evacuation shelter, but there was no point in criticizing her for it.

Was I supposed to take it out on Luka, then? The second head wouldn't have wanted that.

In the end, we wouldn't have had any issues if I had just acquired his Art and said my goodbyes when I should have. It was my fault for dragging out what should have been a simple farewell.

As I hung my head thinking about it, I heard a cup drop.

By the time I realized it, there was a head resting on my shoulder. Aria was soundly asleep. She must have been completely exhausted.

I wrapped the blanket around her and hoisted her onto my back.

"You're pretty warm, Aria..."

Feeling her body heat pressed against my back, I clambered down from the roof. I needed to get her to a proper bed.

The next day Lyle decided to rest, and so it came down to Clara and Novem to pay everyone's reward. This meant Shannon would have to be used as the lie detector, and the girl was already complaining from the early hours of the morning.

"I'm tired. No more work. I'm just not cut out for it."

Clara had a troubled look on her face as she tried to soothe Shannon.

Although she complained about work, all she was doing was checking to see whether or not the soldiers were lying. What's more, the number of monsters hunted down had already been reported, so they already had a rough idea of what was and what wasn't.

They knew just how many of each sort of monster was defeated on which of the four battlefields.

"Just hold on a little longer. You won't have anything left to do once we've

paid everyone.”

Shannon sat lazily in her chair, her chin resting on the desk in front of her as her legs flapped up and down.

“I mean, everyone’s just scheming to see how they can get even a little more money. It makes me feel sick just listening to it. *I defeated ten whole monsters*, they say. Nothing but guys like that.”

In fact, it was rarer to hear an honest report. Some of them would subtly add just a few extra to their count, and that made for quite a bit of trouble.

In any case, it was not a fun job at all.

Novem was pulling it off with infectious indifference.

“It’s all part of the job. Once we’re done, you can have some of the sweets Monica prepared for you. Eat them with Luka.”

Once Luka—essentially her little brother—entered the equation, Shannon’s attitude changed a bit.

“Right. I need to brag to him about how I did a good job.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Clara said, relieved that Shannon was showing a bit of motivation. “And for that, you’ll need to stick it out just a little more. With that said, this last stretch might be the most troublesome.”

They’d started in the early morning, and after a slight break for lunch, they were already almost done. But the last stretch was an issue.

Novem’s expression was different from usual. It was hard to read what emotions were going through her head—and her opponent was to blame.

Clara looked down at the form.

Lionel Walt...a distant relative of Lyle’s. Well, you could essentially call them strangers at this point.

Lionel’s relationship with Lyle was a problem, but the bigger issue was how he had dealt with the hippogryph.

He’d personally reported that he was the one who defeated it, but troublingly enough, the beast had actually survived. In the end, Lyle had to land the

finishing blow. It made perfect sense that he wouldn't be paid for it.

However, Lionel himself probably wouldn't be satisfied with that.

Lionel entered the room. He seemed somewhat restless.

"Lionel, correct? Please, take a seat."

Novem urged him to sit down, and Lionel meekly obliged.

Will we get through this without an issue? Clara wondered. But evidently, things were not going to go as she had hoped.

"Assisting with the construction work, and participation in battle will put you at one gold coin in total," Novem expressionlessly informed him.

"You're kidding me! I defeated a hippogryph. I should be getting fifty gold coins for that!"

"You...deserted in the face of the enemy," Novem corrected him. "That's why you were there. And you failed to kill it. Thanks to that, we almost had a civilian casualty."

"Th-That's because the hippogryph got up on its own. It wasn't moving the last time I saw it. And that civilian you're talking about went out on his own, despite knowing full well he was in a war zone. That's on him."

"I see. Unfortunately, you did desert, so I cannot pay you. I was trying to be lenient, but it appears you did not get the message."

Lionel's eyes wandered. It looked like even he felt some guilt over it.

For a moment, it seemed like he would apologize, but then...

"P-Please, I'm on my knees here. Could you get me fifty gold? I've lost almost all of the equipment I borrowed. Most of my comrades are dead too. If I return like this, I'm going to be a laughingstock."

"That's your problem."

Novem was usually so kind. It was rare to see her this cold.

Does Novem hate Lionel, perhaps? Well, I can somewhat understand the reason.

He'd tried picking fights with Lyle from the very start. He'd put in some rather unreasonable complaints as well, and from Novem's perspective, he was probably beyond forgiveness.

"I-I don't mind paying the money back in full. In fact, once I inherit the Viscount House, I'll pay you twice the amount. So please, let the hippogryph be my achievement."

Novem was about to say something, but before she could, Shannon spoke up.

"I...feel bad for you."

"Wha—?! What are you trying to say?"

Lionel seemed a bit flustered. A girl younger than him was treating him with pity.

Shannon's eyes gave off a faint golden light. "Look, I doubt you'll repay us even if you do become the heir. But it doesn't matter. Even if you have achievements, it's pointless. It's not like father will let you succeed the house in the first place."

Lionel stood with such force that his chair toppled over backward.

"Y-You're lying. The viscount is expecting great things from me—he told me himself."

Shannon truly did sympathize with him. "Sis said it's never going to happen. You're better off giving up on it. It's in your best interest not to get involved with father."

"Hah! There you go, trying to pull the wool over my eyes. Don't think I don't know. That's how you plan to get Lyle to inherit House Circry. I'm not going to be fooled."

"Huh? Lyle's not succeeding it either. I mean, he's not interested in it. We only stopped by Central to decide where we were going to go next."

Lionel's face immediately turned pale. Hanging his head, he muttered. "Aha ha ha, so he really wasn't interested?"

Seeing him like that put Clara on guard. He was giving off a dangerous air—it was like he could snap at any minute.

“Look here,” Shannon chimed in. “This is just me repeating what sis told me, but your status is too low to become the heir to House Circry. It’s a different story if you want Doris to marry into *your* house, but the opposite just isn’t going to happen. So if you just want to marry Doris, go ahead, but...”

There was a hierarchy among nobles.

Within the Banseim Kingdom, Lionel was at the very bottom rung and was barely regarded as a noble at all. It was a pipe dream for him to marry into a viscount house.

“Then why did he tell me to take part in this subjugation force? Obviously, it’s because he has his hopes on me.”

As Shannon fell into a troubled silence, Novem picked up the conversation.

“You still don’t understand. We were *all* abandoned by the palace. You were put in the same boat the moment you were sent here. Ralph Circry threw you in the trash.”

Lionel’s fist let out a grating sound.

“Your payment is one gold coin,” Novem said as she placed a single coin on the table.

Lionel tried to say something, only to swallow his words. He clenched the gold coin tightly in his hand before taking off from the room in a sprint.

What was he going to say? Shannon wondered with a tilt of her head.

“He kinda looked really conflicted. Why’s that?” she asked.

Novem wrote a note on the form: *Payment received*. Then, she explained, “It’s his pride, I imagine. He wants to reject this reward from Lord Lyle. However, he knows the pain of not having any money. He simply couldn’t choose not to take it. Also... Well, I’m sure your sympathy is partly to blame.”

“Wh-Why’s that?! I said it with his best interest in mind! And if he really wants to marry Doris, he doesn’t have to marry into the same house as father. I just wanted to make sure he knew that!”

Shannon thought that Doris and Lionel truly loved one another. She had a vague notion that even if he didn’t have money, he could make some as an

adventurer just like Lyle.

Shannon's too pure, thought Clara. *I doubt he actually has that much resolve.*

Even Clara had only just begun to understand after Novem's explanation, so she was hardly in any position to laugh at Shannon.

I'm quite dim to the subtleties of other people. Even so, to think I'd be wrapped up in such a large incident the moment after I left Aramthurst.

Clara returned to her work.

Shannon's role was over, so she left the room with an unconvinced look on her face.

Once she was gone, Clara asked, "Novem, do you hate Lionel?"

"It's a little different from hatred. Perhaps I'd call it *regret*? No, sorry. I'm really not sure how to put it... Just forget about it."

Novem offered quite an ambiguous reply. Evidently, she didn't plan to say any more on the matter, as her mouth remained tightly shut.

Chapter 77: Farewell

The threat of monsters was gone. It had hardly been a day before the cleanup effort began.

Demonic stones were extracted from the defeated foes, and the corpses were burned outside the town walls. There was still much work to be done, though, and mourning the deceased would need to wait.

Watching the work proceed, Aria thought aloud: “It feels a bit dreary to be buried out here when the royal capital is their homeland.”

A majority of the deceased soldiers would be buried in Geony. Even if their bodies were brought back to the capital, it was hard to tell if anyone would take them.

“It costs money to entomb the dead,” said Miranda, who seemed somewhat knowledgeable about how things were done in the capital. “Even if we brought them all the way there, some houses might reject them for financial reasons. It would be more respectful to hold their funerals here.”

They didn’t have the resources to handle things on a case-by-case basis. And so, the bodies would be buried here in Geony.

“I’m just saying it’s dreary. I mean, what about their families? They can’t even visit their graves if those graves are in some distant land.”

Surely, some families would have gratefully accepted the bodies of their loved ones, but they had no way to be sure. At most, they could only deliver some belongings for them to be remembered by.

Seeing Aria so discontent, Miranda said, “Here, they will rest as the heroes that protected the town to their last.”

“I mean... I guess.”

Having been thoroughly exhausted in yesterday’s battle, the two girls were unable to help with the work. They were left to look on.

Scanning the area, Aria remarked, “Where’s everyone else?”

“If you’re looking for Shannon and Novem, they’re looking after Norma,” Miranda said with a giggle. “You know, we need to put in a proper report, and they’re making sure it gets done.”

Lyle had promised that all the achievements would go to Norma.

“Sophia’s still sleepy, and Monica has a lot of work to do... What are Clara and Eva doing?”

“They’re with Lyle.”

“Oh, I see.”

They continued to watch the soldiers and townspeople hard at work.

“When one would think you were issuing orders from the center, why are you suddenly showing up at the north gate?!” Novem’s condemning voice echoed through the inn.

“I-I mean,” Norma tearfully replied, “I thought my deeds were a little lacking...”

“You’re being evaluated as a commander! An incoherent report like this will simply have you suspected of fraud!”

Norma was sitting at a desk, with Novem scolding her like a teacher or home tutor. Shannon was by her side.

“You’re stupid. I mean, who’s going to believe any of this? At first, you even tried to claim you defeated every single hippogryph.”

“I-I’m not stupid! Now listen here, my future depends on this report!”

Norma had written up a report in which she claimed the achievements of everyone else on the battlefield in an attempt to show off just how much she had contributed. While simultaneously providing precise orders from the central base of operations, she was also fighting tooth and nail at all four gates at once! She was the one who defeated every hippogryph, and she’d defeated hundreds of the other monsters too. At least, that was what her report would

attempt to have you believe.

Anyone would be able to read it and say it was complete and utter nonsense.

“As for your *achievements*, taking command of the town’s defenses and slaying one hippogryph is more than enough! Please concede the other accomplishments to your subordinates.”

At first, Novem had gently told her, “That’s a bit much,” or “Wouldn’t it be better if you put it like this?” She had tried to correct her with kindness. However, Norma was soaring high now that the gryphon was out of the picture, and she simply ignored everything Novem said.

Eventually, Novem grew fed up, and in the end, Norma was left sobbing away.

“I mean... If I put down more achievements, they may even make me a millennium knight captain.”

In her delusions, Norma had skipped over the centum-knight rank above her and had jumped straight to millennium knight.

Novem glared. “If you want to achieve things on the front lines, then decem- or centum-knight is the right position for you. A millennium knight’s job is to rally their subordinates and ensure they all perform to their full potential.”

“If I try that, I’ll just end up stuck like Maurice. I’ll never get promoted.”

“Fine. Either do what I say, or I will spread the truth. Are you fine with losing all these achievements that fell right into your lap?”

Norma tried to argue with Novem’s threat, but she shut her mouth as she saw a grin spread across Shannon’s face.

Shannon was the daughter of a Viscount. Viscount Circry, no less. She had connections with people in high places, and Norma knew she had to be careful around her.

“If you don’t listen, I’ll tattle to sis.”

“W-Wait, please wait. I’ll do as you say. Please, I’m begging you. Just don’t be angry!”

Norma reluctantly started her report from scratch. “Goddesses be damned...

What is the daughter of such a powerful noble doing all the way out here?”

Although Novem was relieved that Norma was finally reflecting, she quickly turned expressionless as she snatched the paper away again. On it, Norma had written that she had issued orders—and fought *just a little bit* on the front lines. It was better than before, but it was evident that Norma had absolutely no idea why she was being scolded.

Novem began to rip the report to shreds.

“Do it again.”

“Why?!”

Seeing Norma burst into tears, Shannon sighed. “She really *is* stupid.”

We’d set up an archery range in the town to train our combatants. But it had been a rather impromptu, messy setup, and after a bit of discussion, it was decided that the range would be taken down now that the battle was over.

I wanted to help Luka with his archery practice one last time before everything was removed. I was accompanied by Clara and Eva.

Eva watched Luka draw his bow and provided a bit of advice.

“It looks like you have the basics down, so how about we move on to the next step?”

She was far more knowledgeable than me when it came to bows. I doubted she would teach him anything wrong, so I took a step back and watched with some peace of mind.

“Thank you, ma’am,” Luka offered his gratitude.

Eva seemed delighted. “Good boy. Now try copying me.”

Luka drew his bow and released a practice arrow.

Meanwhile, I spoke to Clara. My question brought a rather dubious look to her face.

“The moon is beautiful, is it?”

“Yes, and when I said that, she replied, ‘I would rather die.’”

“Lyle... You read a lot of books, don’t you?”

“Well, I’d say so.”

Clara looked like she didn’t quite know what to say. She took off her glasses and embarrassedly explained, “It means, ‘I love you.’ From what I could tell, it was just the two of you, and the mood was just right. Aria’s reply would then mean, ‘I love you too.’”

“Huh...? I mean, I was looking up at the moon and it was beautiful, so I just said so!”

“I’m sure you did, Lyle. But Aria is more of a maiden than you’d think. It wouldn’t be strange if she knew about what those words meant. And for you to then reply like that... You’re lucky that you were forgiven with just a slap. That is my take on the matter.”

I was dumbfounded, and Clara simply stared at me with a face as if to say, “I have no idea why you’re so surprised.”

“Isn’t that strange?!” I protested. “Why would it mean that?!”

“Please don’t ask me. It is a saying from a very, very long time ago. There are a handful of theories about its origin, and it is quite unclear which one is correct. All I can tell you is that it’s very old and famous.”

Who thought of that nonsense...? More importantly, how am I supposed to interact with Aria now?

As I struggled to come to terms with it, Eva added herself to the conversation.

“Oh, what a lovely story,” she said. “Still, your knowledge seems quite biased, Lyle. You performed so well yesterday, but now that I’m eavesdropping on you, it feels like you’re a completely different person. Well, it’s nice to have a bit of a gap. It’s like a side of the hero that no one knows about—and I love that sort of thing!”

In Eva’s head, was I some young genius who’d won a battle of this scale despite the odds? Unfortunately, I couldn’t tell her—sure, I did have some input, but most of it wasn’t my idea.

“Still, that’s quite boorish of you, Clara. You don’t need *theories* or *explanations* when it comes to these things. The phrase exists to convey your boundless love, and that’s all it has to be.”

Clara seemed a bit irritated to hear that. “It’s not a bad thing to want to know.”

“No, it’s not bad. Just tasteless. As long as everyone understands, then what’s the harm? The most important thing is that there’s love.”

It did seem that these two weren’t seeing eye to eye. There was Clara who loved books, and Eva who loved stories. I thought that they could get along, but they were already arguing.

“Information should be passed down precisely. It has nothing to do with taste.”

“Where it came from has nothing to do with the person saying it; they just need to get the message across. And aren’t those long, drawn-out stories of word origins just boring?”

“I knew it. The elves are no good. Their songs and stories are all about exaggeration and alteration. It’s all just to get people fired up. I hate it.”

“I’m only exaggerating a bit so these tales are better remembered! If you’re curious, you can go and look into it on your own. The feeling’s a lot more important than the accuracy!”

It looks like they’re not going to get along...



Just as I was about to step in, Luka's arrow finally hit the mark. It made a firm, reassuring sound, and our eyes all turned toward him. Thankfully, that put an end to the argument too.

"I did it! I hit it! I hit it, Boss!"

"You're getting better. A fine archer you're shaping up to be."

"Ehee hee hee."

I patted his head as he rejoiced.

"You're a fast learner. If we can keep at this pace, I've got a lot more I can teach you," said Eva, who was in similarly high spirits. She was sincerely kind to Luka.

"Okay!"

That was when Shannon arrived with refreshments.

"Ick! That's three more people than I wanted to see."

Her basket was filled with drinks and sweet treats. She's quite clearly brought enough for everyone here.

"Ah, Lady Shannon!" Luka delightedly called out, and Shannon begrudgingly made her way over.

"If only it was just Luka. Then we could eat all this together."

Looks like she was planning to finish off five people's worth of sweets with just the two of them.

That night, I summoned Eva to make a request to her. We were inside Porter's chassis, and Novem was with us too.

When I spelled out what I wanted, Eva made a rather unpleasant face.

"You want my brethren to know about what happened here? You're pretty much telling me to pass around the new material that only I know about."

New material—new stories were essentially an elf's meal ticket. When it came to tales and songs, the word *new* was enough to drag a larger crowd. Not

to mention that this incident was sure to cause a stir in the capital... I needed them to get fired up or else.

But she reacted poorly to the request.

“Is there anything we can do about that? Hey, how about you only spread the official story?” I suggested. “Then you’ll be the only one who knows the truth.”

“On an emotional level, no. It’s the truth that’s being covered up, and that’s nothing but a net negative for me.”

This was a new story that she had personally experienced. Understandably, Eva was very reluctant to concede it to the other elf performers.

The story she’d be spreading was a false one. It was a tale of Norma taking charge, but even so, it had been a long time since anyone had slain a gryphon. It was sure to be a hit in the capital. And perhaps, Eva would find her own popularity alongside it. It was certainly a huge loss for her to spread the tale to her fellow elves.

“Understood, I can offer fifty gold coins... No, how does one hundred sound?”

She did react a bit when I brought up money, but...

“D-Don’t take me lightly. If this story becomes popular and I become a fan favorite, I can make that much in no time. I can grab my popularity with my own hands.”

I failed to persuade her. My shoulders dropped, and Novem swapped out with me for the negotiations.

“Eva,” said Novem.

“Not even on your request, Novem. I only put in this much effort so I could turn these accomplishments into a song. Sorry, but it’s not going to happen.”

Eva made her strong apprehension clear, and Novem nodded a few times at that.

“Yes, I can imagine. I know that elves feel a sense of superiority when monopolizing tales that no other elves know about.”

“That’s right. So I’m sorry, but no.”

“However—if you tell the tale even once at the capital, I’m pretty sure the other performers, be they elves or not, will all find out about it.”

“Urgh!” Eva groaned. By her expression, it was clear that Novem had struck a soft spot. “S-Sure, but hearing it a handful of times, they’ll never win against someone who experienced those events personally. The information we have is on another level. It’s completely different!”

“Yes, I’m sure it is. If it’s you, Eva, I’m sure you’ll gain popularity in no time.”

“Th-Thank you?”

“And I think it’s such a shame.”

“Huh?”

“Eva, you know that this subjugation force was abandoned by the palace, don’t you?”

By the initial estimate, the force should have been completely annihilated. When such a gathering returned to the palace toting such major accomplishments, it was the palace that would feel betrayed.

“Let’s say we return, and you sing of our achievements. A rather miffed palace will try to shut your mouth. They may spread lies to try and take you down, Eva.”

Will they really go that far? No, wait, I can see it. Yeah, they would.

It wasn’t so hard to imagine Ralph doing that when he’d practically sent us to our deaths.

“B-But you did achieve great things. The palace will be forced to recognize that.”

“They might insist that some foul play was involved. I can’t say anything definitive, but you might find yourself in danger if you spread our exploits alone.”

Summing up what Novem had to say, even if we returned from the gryphon subjugation mission, the palace might scrounge up any way that they could to condemn us.

For instance, they could claim that we pillaged a village for supplies along the way, bringing ruin to the king's subjects. Or something of the sort. If such rumors spread, the promotions and rewards promised to the subjugation force could be rescinded, and worst-case scenario, we could be framed as criminals.

"And so, our best bet is to spread the truth—at least, the official story—in advance, so that they can't do anything to us by the time we arrive."

That was the main reason we wanted to spread rumors. Of course, we could have spread them ourselves through the towns and villages we passed through on our way back to the capital. The information would reach everyone eventually. But it would travel far faster if an elf like Eva made use of her fellow elves.

The speed with which the tale spread would be on a different level entirely.

Thus, the request, but...

"Novem, are you sure you should be telling her that much?"

At first, I was just faintly hoping that Eva would go along with it. I wasn't planning on pushing the point too hard.

"We're all in the same boat together. I want Eva's assistance, by all means."

Eva began to hold her head. She seemed to be mulling incredibly hard over it.

"M-My life is in danger. But...this is a brand-new scoop only I know about. If I tell anyone about it... But I don't really want to die, so..."

She was at war with herself.

Personally speaking, I valued my life over any fresh scoop, but to Eva—to an elf—this was apparently a problem that warranted serious consideration.

"Got it... I'll spread the word. But it's going to take a bit of time."

Once Eva finally gave in and decided to prioritize her life, Novem nodded.

"Of course. Don't worry about the time. We intend to stay for a little bit to lend manpower to the restoration effort."

If we didn't help out with the reconstruction to some extent, the town would be exposed to danger once more. I didn't just mean monsters by that; the world

was populated by some rather nasty bandits.

At the very least, they needed to be able to protect themselves.

I didn't want the result to leave a bad taste in my mouth, and I had the second head's request to consider too.

A few days after the battle was over, the subjugation force was busy cleaning up after the funerals and aiding with the reconstruction.

Maurice had ventured out to inspect the fields beyond the walls. These devastated fields and the civilian houses around them needed to be put in order.

"Now that it's been reduced to this, it might be quicker just to rebuild it from scratch."

At Maurice's words, the old couple who owned the property shook their heads. There were two small children standing behind them.

"We'd love to, but we don't have the leisure. If you can just get it to a livable state, that's more than enough."

The children had lost their parents, and there were no workers to spare. Maurice didn't quite know what to say to them.

Finally, he settled on telling them, "I'll do what I can," and began issuing orders to his men.

That was when someone—not a knight, but a civilian who took part in the force—raised his hand.

"Umm, my family's in the carpentry business. I think I can do something if I have the tools."

Maurice was a bit startled. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. If I can just have access to the same tools I used when we were building the town's defenses, I can make the place livable."

These words from a carpenter's son brought some relief. Then another—a middle-aged man—raised his hand too.

“As for the fields, I might be able to help.”

“Can you do it?”

“I ran to the big city from the countryside. Although I’ve been stuck in the slums ever since I got there...”

Emaciated and tattered, this middle-aged man had apparently joined the force hoping to turn his life around.

I thought our teams were arbitrarily decided, but did he knowingly assign these men to me? He’s pretty tactful for his age.

Lyle was still taking command, even for the reconstruction effort. At first, Maurice thanked his lucky stars that he had been assigned people who knew the work, or who had the right knowledge, but now he realized that each person had been assigned to him with full knowledge of their abilities.

He has a better grip on things than me. Perhaps a hero is someone like young Lyle.

Maurice felt embarrassed that he had looked down on the boy as young and inexperienced.

As the reconstruction work continued, I was holding a report up in one hand. I was on a hill, teaching Luka how to use a hunting knife.

I watched him as I heard Clara’s report.

“Ten people have chosen to remain in the town. It will be a great help, since the town lost most of its manpower, and Mr. Pat was delighted.”

They would probably be a welcome addition, given the town’s immediate needs. With that said, I never thought that anyone would choose to live here rather than return to the capital.

“On the other hand, there are around twenty townsfolk who want to accompany us to the capital.”

I almost did a spit take at that. Just when I thought we’d lost ten, we gained an additional twenty.

“Did they say why?”

“They lost their homes and fields, apparently. Also, many of the young ones always wanted to go to the capital.”

“They could just live on in their homelands. I already put in a bulk order for food supplies and building materials from the nearby towns and villages. That’ll help them stand on their own.”

Clara sent me a doubtful look. “I think your common sense is a little off, going so far for them. In the first place, I think it would be normal to return immediately after defeating the gryphon.”

It seemed I was strange for aiding the reconstruction and whatever came after that. Certainly, I was no feudal lord. From the eyes of others, it probably looked idiotic for me to invest so much money and labor.

My eyes returned to Luka. He shed sweat as he swung his sturdy, broad-bladed knife.

In the first place, I’m just doing this because of the second head’s request...and if I had to bring up another reason, it would have to be Luka.

It was true that I saw him as something of a cute younger brother, but more than that, there was a very high chance that he carried on the blood of House Walt.

“The sixth made a bit of a mess. If I don’t go this far, there are a few people who won’t let me hear the end of it.”

I muttered the words aloud, and Clara cocked her head.

“Did something happen?”

“Yes, actually, a relative of mine caused some trouble in these lands, albeit quite a long time ago. I’d like to do a bit of atoning.”

“Your relative? Is that so...”

Did she accept that explanation or not? Clara hardly expressed her emotions so it was hard to tell.

Luka peered at my face from below. “Lyle, sir. Have you been here before?”

“I haven’t. But an ancestor of mine did stop by, you see. It looks like all sorts of things happened.”

“There’s a granny who knows a lot of things. Do you want to ask her about it?”

I’d grown a little curious, so I decided to ask the old lady. I just couldn’t tell what was fact and what was fiction when it was coming from the sixth head’s mouth. It would be interesting to hear what someone else had to say about the affair.

The knowledgeable granny was in the evacuation shelter, sipping on hot water. When I came with Luka and said I wanted to hear some old stories, she readily accepted.

“You want to know about Luka’s ancestors, do you?”

The granny’s gentle face suddenly filled with disgust when I told her what I wanted to know.

Luka cocked his head. I personally was a little scared of what I would hear.

“Y-Yes, that’s right. I think that one of them might be a man who came from afar.”

The granny’s eyes lowered to the cup in her hands.

“I didn’t see it personally. This is just a story I heard after the fact. I was still young then, and this wasn’t a town, but a small village.”

An unpleasant vibe was emanating from the Jewel.

“Huh... Isn’t this mood the worst?” the third said.

Then the fourth: “There’s no guarantee it’s the sixth head...”

“I somewhat want to hear, somewhat don’t...” the fifth continued.

“Hey, we don’t know if they’re talking about me yet,” the sixth stammered.

“Enough excuses,” demanded the seventh.

One voice was missing. Yet another had disappeared.

“At the time, this child’s house was a house of hunters. One day a mysterious stranger who seemed to have status stopped by our village. The one who tended to him was the only daughter of the hunter’s house.”

The sixth head finally conceded. “Ah, yep. That’s me.”

So it is you.

“He was a mountain of a man; I hear he was strong as an ox. A warrior who single-handedly exterminated all the monsters plaguing our village. And so, the residents couldn’t come out too strongly against him, and they had to let him stay.”

Frustrated, the seventh head’s voice sounded a bit gruff. “Oh, it looks like you were a real nuisance.”

“But the girl must have fallen for him. She was quickly blessed with a child. A boy, so the girl’s parents were delighted, I hear. Young as you are, you might not understand, but at the time, the village was thankful to be graced with outside blood. And so, they could say nothing to him.”

Certainly, I didn’t really understand. *Would the third head get it? This sounds more like something the second head would know about.*

“But the young man left the village shortly after that. Apparently, he left a bit of money behind, but the girl was devastated.”

The third and fourth heads spoke coldly.

“You’re the worst.”

“You fiend.”

“It wouldn’t be strange if any of you had any children you don’t know about!” the sixth head protested. “Lyle, listen to me. When a lord passes through a village, sometimes the village presents a woman to tend to them. It’s not like I’m the only one in the wrong here!”

It just sounded like an excuse.

The fifth head scoffed. “I’m guessing this happened when you ran away from home. In that case, you were just my stupid runaway son, and the village didn’t present her to you. This is entirely your fault.”

The seventh head jumped aboard the hate train. “That’s right, this is your fault.”

The granny went on: “After that, the boy grew into a splendid man. But the girl—his mother—never remarried to the very end. ‘Maybe that man will come back someday,’ she’d say.”

At that moment, my opinion of the sixth head took a nosedive. This was probably how all my other ancestors felt too. All but the sixth head himself.

“So you were always waiting for me... Angie!”

He seemed moved to tears. It was hard to imagine that this was a line coming from a man who couldn’t go see her because he was too scared of his wives.

You’re the worst. Go apologize to Angie.

“I only heard the stories, but I felt so bad for the girl. I wanted to say a few choice words to the man who abandoned her.”

I felt more apologetic than ever before. I wanted to tell her, “I’m so sorry about my ancestor.”

“But...”

“B-But what?”

I felt like I was dancing on fishhooks. *There’s more?* I anxiously wondered.

But the granny said something curious: “After that, the village began to prosper. For as long as the man’s son was alive, financial aid came from who knows where. The adults who knew what was going on kept their mouths shut. They refused to tell me what was going on. Even now, I haven’t the slightest idea. The others gossiped that the man was a noble from a fine house. That he was providing his financial backing to the village.”

Someone continued to support the village? That shouldn’t have been the case, at least, as far as I’ve heard from the sixth head.

The fifth head immediately said, “Don’t ask me,” while the seventh head clarified, “I don’t know either.” It wasn’t that the sixth head had aided them in secret either. The man himself reacted with a “Huh? Really?”

Luka, seemingly not knowing what this conversation was about, appeared terribly bored.

“Umm, so that man’s descendant is Luka?”

The granny slowly nodded at my question. “Yes. I’d like to see him grow up and reach a good and ripe age like me.”

That settled it. We were blood relatives.

The ancestors seemed relieved.

“That’s good. I’m really glad that Lyle did his best, then.”

“My conscience aches. Thanks to a certain someone.”

“I sincerely apologize for my stupid son.”

“You’re suddenly acting like I mean something to you?! Fifth...you’re the real villain here!”

“Silence, fool! You were so scared of my mothers that you couldn’t lift a finger, and now you take on that attitude? It’s pathetic. But I wonder which house it was that supported them.”

That was bothering me too. “Are you sure? You know absolutely nothing about who it was providing aid?” I asked the granny.

She shook her head. “I heard nothing. But the adults were all very cautious. The rest of us had to wonder if not saying their name was one of the conditions for receiving their support. It’s thanks to them that the village grew into a town, but it seems we’ll have to start from scratch again. Oh, but more importantly, Luka is looking quite sleepy.”

I looked over to see Luka nodding off while standing.

It didn’t seem like I’d be able to learn any more, so I ended it there. Rather... I wanted to bring that story to a close already. With that said, I felt that I’d be able to give my all to the reconstruction effort now that I’d heard it.

It took two weeks for Eva to return. By then, we were already preparing to pull out. Although we were reluctant to go, we couldn’t stick around here

forever. Our food stocks were running low, for one, but more importantly, the palace would make the first move if we took too long. We needed to return before then.

Eva had spread the rumor through the nearby towns and villages, and according to her, the stories would soon reach the capital.

“By the time we reach the capital, there should be quite a few people who know about it.”

At that point, the palace would be unable to extinguish the flames.

If there were only a few people in the know, they could silence them. Worst case, they had the power to erase a small town and everything around it. But once the rumor had spread too far, and the number of targets to erase grew too numerous, surely they would at least hesitate to pull the trigger.

The rumor would spread through the capital, and surely a great crowd would gather to witness our return.

After hearing Eva’s report, I passed her a bag of gold coins in gratitude.

“Thank you. And here’s your reward.”

Eva happily took it, but then, she began to stare at me with a serious look on her face.

“Err, is something wrong?”

“Hmm... Well, I’ve done a bit of thinking. You remember the last time we met? That was pretty exciting too. So, I’m thinking I might see some more interesting things if I tag along with you, Lyle.”

“We’re usually a lot more normal than this.”

“Are you *sure* about that?”

She made it sound like my normal was different than the generally accepted normal. I wanted to object, but Eva opened her mouth first.

“Hey, can we travel together for a bit? I mean, I’m going to leave the capital eventually, and I can travel in comfort if I’m with you guys. And, I know I won’t be bored.”

“With us? I don’t really mind... But Novem’s a bit, well...”

Novem was quite strict when it came to choosing our party members; or rather, her criterion was fundamentally different from mine. She was a perfect partner if it wasn’t for that.

“Don’t worry. I already told Novem. She said I could join if you agreed.”

“So you already ran it past her? Fine, you have my permission.”

I’ll need to talk to the other members about it. I wonder what Miranda will say? And maybe Clara will be against it...

Having more people meant having more problems too. But those complications were still far better than being alone.

“Thank you. I’ll prove useful, just you watch. Also, I’ll sing whenever you want me to. For a fee.”

“You’re charging?”

“Naturally. I know my worth. Well, I guess I could do some free singing too, if I’m ever in the mood.”

And so Eva, a rowdy girl, became a temporary member of the party.

It was finally time for the subjugation force to leave the town. Some remained, and we had some new additions too. Our members were shuffled around a bit, but once we were setting off it was... How to put this, a bit dubious.

“I love you, my second homeland!”

“Good day, and fare thee well!”

“I’ll come back to see you lot!”

I cringed a bit as I watched a few of our members in such high spirits.

One of the reasons we didn’t immediately return to the capital was that a great number of our troops experienced Growth after the battle with the gryphon. Many had never properly gone through Growth before, and the battle had become a significant experience for them.

There was a short delay, and then people started falling ill one after the next. Unfortunately, such a large bundle of experience meant a long period of sickness to follow.

Even those who were fine at first started dropping once a few days passed.

As a result, we concluded it best to stay stationed until everything calmed down.

Those who overcame the high tensions of a post-Growth period looked upon their merry comrades with terribly cold eyes. They were practically the eyes of dead fish.

“Was I...like that too?”

“Don’t say it! I want to forget already.”

“I’m glad I wasn’t home for that.”

I personally was fretfully fearing the time I’d start showing symptoms, but it seemed that I wasn’t going to fall down sick this time around. My second Growth had carved a deep wound upon my heart.

That was one thing that could never happen again. I couldn’t let it.

As the subjugation force set off, the townsfolk and those who chose to stay saw us off. Many looked upon the Growth victims with conflicted expressions. And not far from me was a weeping young boy.

On his back was the bow I’d been using. On his hip was a sturdy hunting knife.

“Are you really leaving, sir?”

I was an adventurer. I couldn’t remain.

It pained my heart, but I had to go.

“I’m an adventurer. Luka... You need to get strong enough to protect someone.”

Shannon, who treated Luka like he was her little brother, looked at me with disgust.

“Lyle’s speaking out of character again. Luka, you can’t grow up to be like him, okay?”

All right, she's getting a forehead flick after this.

"Whether you want to be a hunter or an adventurer, you have to be strong. Also..." I turned to Clara. She was clutching a picture book and a book with simple enough prose. "You can have these. They'll help you learn to read and write."

Luka's mother looked troubled. "Umm, we can't accept something so expensive..."

"We have no use for them," Clara said, shaking her head. "They're hand-me-downs from Shannon."

That was a lie. Clara had made them with her Art.

Luka took the picture book. He seemed delighted as he read the title.

"I read this together with Shannon. I had Novem and Monica read it to me too."

Shannon brushed her hair to one side. "Luka, I give you permission to call me *sis*."

She's acting all high and mighty. You need people to read picture books to you too, so why are you acting like you're any better than Luka?

"Okay, sis!"

Shannon's face lit up.

"Make sure to practice your reading and writing," I said. "It'll definitely be useful someday."

"Okay..." Luka hung his head.

The time came for us to set off. Maurice hopped atop his horse and called out, "Lyle, we have to get going."

He went around, calling this same order out to everyone else. I saw him off before turning back to Luka.

"Let's meet again someday."

"Okay!"

Clara climbed into the driver's seat, and I heard the loud sound of the engine starting up. We boarded Porter, but our comrades were all already settled inside, and it was a bit...claustrophobic, shall we say.

In any case, Shannon and I climbed up the top hatch and sat on the roof, gazing out at the sight of the townsfolk waving their hands.

Shannon spread her hands wide and waved back.

Porter started moving, and the town shrank smaller and smaller. And suddenly, Shannon was crying.

"Are you sad?"

"Oh, shut up. A heartless guy like you could never understand how I feel."

"Yeah, yeah. That's right. I'm heartless."

It must have been painful for Shannon to say goodbye to the first *little brother* she'd ever made. I could sympathize a little bit.

"We'll see each other again someday."

"I don't need any of that useless consolation. In the first place, you're leaving the country, right? And that means I'm leaving the country too. We're never going to see Luka again."

In the future, we planned to set out for a foreign land—the city of adventurers, Baym. The chances of us reuniting were incredibly low.

"But as long as we live on, the possibility exists."

Right, as long as we're all alive, we can meet again.

Luka continued to wave until we were completely out of sight.

Epilogue

As she sat inside Porter, Aria's face was pale. She lay on the long bench with a blanket wrapped around her.

She'd felt perfectly fine before they set off, yet all of a sudden, her body was acting up. In the seat across, Miranda similarly looked pale and in pain.

"This is harsh... I feel sluggish and sick," Miranda said. She's fallen ill at nearly the same exact time.

They could hear Lyle and Shannon talking on the roof. For now, they didn't have the energy to deal with the others, so they rested in their blankets, but...

"Hey, hey, I'm hungry. And it sure is boring around here. Eva, start singing or something."

"Hey, don't touch my hair with those grubby hands! Hey! Don't wipe them on my clothes!"

Sophia had been making noise for a while now. She tugged on Eva's hair and pestered her for a song. Though she claimed to be hungry, she had done nothing but eat snacks for a while now, and she had no reservations about cleaning her grimy hands on another person's clothing.

These actions would have been completely unthinkable from the usual Sophia, but she had fallen ill quite a bit earlier than Aria had, and she had only risen from the ashes that morning.

Currently, Sophia was in her post-Growth phase. She was in an unusual mood, and despite her regularly being a diligent person, she had turned into a complete slob.

In the early morning, she'd captured Monica and had her make something halfway between a blanket and a robe. That was what she was wearing. Her Growth was also defined by the fact that she had been eating nonstop ever since breakfast.

“Hmmm, what a bother. Novem and Clara are in the driver’s compartment. Now that it’s come to this, let’s have Monica look after her.”

Though nominated for the role, Monica looked genuinely offended.

“I’m busy and want absolutely nothing to do with her,” Monica angrily said.

The reason for this lay in the snacks Sophia ate and the curious robe she was wearing.

“That good-for-nothing parasite snatched the blanket I’d prepared for that damn chicken and devoured all the snacks I made to fill his stomach! I’m busy prepping for the new batch of snacks I’ll have to cook up during our next rest stop.”

Oh, so she didn’t have Monica make them. She snatched what was already being made. No wonder she’s angry.

Sophia cackled. “Oh, what’s it matter? Lyle said I was free to use the blanket. In fact, it’ll be far nicer for him after it’s been warmed by my skin.”

“Hah? You want the chicken to use the clothes you’ve worn? Inconceivable. If I find time, I, Monica, shall knit a brand-new one for him.”

“Aww, but I’m sure Lyle yearns for human warmth. Oh, I’ve got it. We just have to warm it together!”

“Silence, blanket woman! Keeping that chicken warm is my job!”

Eva watched this exchange, aghast. “Is it always like this?”

Aria didn’t feel the motivation to talk, but given Miranda’s silence, she had no choice but to speak up.

“Right. Something like that.”

“How rowdy and fun.”

She didn’t feel inclined to tell the elf she was being sarcastic. “Yes, it’s fun. Fun as hell. So please, just let me sleep.”

Seeing Aria pull the blanket over her head, Eva started to shake her.

“Wait. I can’t have you sleeping! Sophia’s been tugging at my hair nonstop!”

This time, it seemed that her ears had become the point of interest.

“An elf’s ears sure are long.”

“Oww! Hey, that hurts! Quit it!”

Aria closed her eyes under the covers.

Urgh... I don't want to do anything.

Sophia was causing trouble, and she could hear Eva and Monica making a fuss over it. The inside of Porter had become quite a lively place.

The subjugation force left the town behind. The wagon carried the proof of our hunt—the corpses of the hippogryphs.

The other monsters had all been burned after they were stripped of their demonic stones and any materials that could be worth something. Only the gryphon was being preserved whole using the seventh head’s Art, Box.

We stopped along the way for a long break, and I headed out to take in the sights.

My eyes were drawn to Lionel, who was muttering something under his breath.

“Has he been alone all this time?” I asked Shannon since she was beside me.

She replied with a bit of pity in her voice, “I heard it from one of his friends. He’s been acting strange ever since he got through his Growth. He’s been like that for a while.”

This was usually a state when people started jumping for joy and frolicking around, but Lionel had a face of complete despair and abandon as he continued to mutter to himself. His friends were keeping their distance as they found him off-putting.

That was a while ago. Yet even now, he was still mumbling.

“What happened to him?”

“Hmm, well, I just told him the truth,” Shannon said.

I heard the voices from the Jewel.

“Reality can be a cruel mistress, at times,” said the third head.

“Maybe Shannon’s words hurt him,” the fourth wagered.

The fifth continued, “She’s younger than she looks, after all.”

“But,” added the sixth, “he really is a pathetic guy.”

Finally, the seventh head said, “I sympathize with him, but it’s hard to say he’s going in a good direction.”

Am I supposed to call out to him? But he hates me. He might just refuse to listen to what I have to say.

“Shannon, did you say anything awful to him?”

“Huh? Why me? I just told him that father had no intention of choosing him as the heir. Come to think of it, I also said that you didn’t have any interest in succeeding a viscount house.”

Lionel seemed to think he could marry into House Circry as long as he had the achievement of slaying a hippogryph. Surely he’d be hurt once he realized that was all a lie.

“So it’s your fault, after all.”

“How rude. I mean, it just felt too pitiful to deceive him.”

After listening in on our exchange, the fourth head seemed to pick up on something.

“Lyle...” he said. “You have some fault in the matter too.”

After I gripped the Jewel, the third head explained, “That status was all he wanted in life, and then he found out that a certain *Lyle* whom he thought of as his competition had absolutely no interest in it. Isn’t that humiliating? What’s more, this *Lyle* knew the truth the whole time. Young Lionel’s pride must be in tatters.”

Huh...? Is this my fault? Then what am I supposed to do?

I was about to try to talk to him, but the sixth head cautioned, “What, are you trying to hit him when he’s down?” so I gave up on that.

Sophia stepped down from the hatch on the back of Porter. She had seemingly taken a liking to the blanket she was wearing as a robe, as she was still wearing it that way when she went outside to take in some fresh air.

“Whoa, she’s breached containment,” said Shannon.

I approached Sophia with Shannon. We needed to shove her back in as soon as possible.

“Sophia, you know you have to stay inside. What happened to Monica and Eva?”

Sophia smiled. She smiled as she clung to my arm.

“They both went out. Oh, you’re so warm, Lyle. I’m warm too, so let’s hug and be warm together.”

What exactly is she trying to do when we’re outside where everyone can see us?

“Shannon, we’re getting her back in there. On my count.”

“R-Ready.”

Together, we forcefully dragged Sophia back to Porter.

“Please wait,” she cried out. “I want to play outside. Monica said she’d be cooking outside. It would be rude not to snatch a little out of respect.”

Shannon’s interests were piqued. “Monica? Yes, it really would be rude not to sneak a taste. How about you let her play, Lyle? Just a little bit?”

Are you sure she wants to play? I think she’s just hungry.

“Just a little bit,” I conceded.

As soon as I permitted them to go to Monica, Shannon and Sophia both clung to me.

“Hooray!”

“Now let’s get going, Lyle.”

Sophia loosened her grip on my arm, and as there was some slack around her chest area now, I could see inside...and I saw she was completely naked

beneath the blanket.

She was wearing shoes, but nothing else.

“Sophia!”

“Yes?”

“Wh-Why aren’t you wearing anything?!”

“Hmm? Oh, you’re talking about this? I like how the cloth feels against my skin.”

Please don’t wear such baggy clothes for a reason like that, I thought as I forcibly carried Sophia back to Porter.

“Lyle? Lyle? Where’s the food?”

“I’ll bring it to you later. Just stay inside. Shannon, you help me.”

“Why?”

Shannon, who didn’t know about Sophia’s current state, merely cocked her head.

All throughout the break, Lionel continued to mutter to himself.

Everyone kept their distance from him.

“They were mocking me from the moment I was born. Those feudal Walts are Earls, so why are the court Walts some useless nobodies?! Why are they jobless? Why are they at the very bottom? Back at home, they said that those other Walts were just a branch house and that they were just getting cocky. So I believed it myself...”

A competent branch house, and a main house that hadn’t seen a lick of change in centuries. They were laughed at by everyone around them.

“Why does this have to happen to me? When we’re the real Walts? When they’re just a branch house...”

He continued to say everything that came to mind, despite there being no one to take in his words.

“I see. Yeah, that’s right. Branch house? Main house? What’s that got to do with it? Nothing, that’s what. Which one is stronger—that’s the only thing that matters.”

His head hung, Lionel burst into laughter. The look on his face was anything but normal. He concealed his madness-struck expression as he continued his monologue.

“Then I just have to become stronger than Lyle. And then, I can torment Lyle and have him realize which one of us is on top. I’m the superior one. That’s right. Of course, I’m right.”

They were at the very bottom of the royal court. To Lionel, Lyle hailed from the feudal House Walt, a detestable lineage. Even if this was completely unjustified resentment, to him it seemed more just than anything.

Comparing the two of them, Lyle was amazing.

Back in the capital, back when Lionel had been the tagalong of a woman with status, Lyle had been earning a fortune with beautiful women waiting on him.

The eldest son of a branch house. A stupid child driven from his own house. That was what he thought of Lyle, and yet he’d lost to him. Aware of his overwhelming loss, Lionel was driven to madness.

And the answer at the end of this madness...

“I’ll surpass Lyle no matter what. I’ll teach him which one of us is right. And for that... I’ll do whatever it takes.”

He would use any means at his disposal to win against Lyle.

The day livened up by Sophia’s post-Growth was nearing its end. That night, I lay within Porter as I sent my mind into the Jewel.

The second head’s weapon glistened as it floated above the round table.

The silver bow he’d left behind could shift between a longbow and a shortbow. It was an incredible weapon that could fire off arrows of light, and perhaps it had taken after the second head’s earnest personality, as it didn’t devour my mana nearly as much as our founder’s sword.

It was a sincere and easy-to-use weapon.

Floating next to it, the silver greatsword would go on a rampage and steal away massive swathes of mana as soon as I gripped its hilt.

They were like polar opposites—just like their owners had been.

And the fact that the weapon was there reminded me that the second head was not.

I'd been scared to visit the Jewel ever since then. I hadn't stopped by once, not since I'd fought the gryphon.

Only the third head was in the round table room. He was sitting in his chair, staring at the bow.

"Oh, what's this? Have you finally found your resolve?" he teased.

He didn't seem to be angry.

"I...don't know what I can say."

I'd wasted all the opportunities he'd given me to say goodbye. As a result, I was left with the worst possible parting. I couldn't even see his face at the end. I felt sorry for the man who disappeared.

"I don't know what you're misunderstanding, but neither me nor my dad are angry at you. I can't speak for the others, but we were happy."

"Happy?"

"In the end, the second head got to see you saving Luka. If you'd taken his Art immediately, then he wouldn't have even met the boy. But thanks to you, he saw him, and he saw his life being saved. At that moment, I reckon dad was able to imagine what it'd look like if old Dewey was saved too. He looked pretty happy."

Hearing the third head say that did make my heart a bit lighter.

"And you don't have to keep mulling over it. We're just memories. The real ones—well, they all died long ago; we're here for the sole purpose of teaching you our Arts, Lyle. You shouldn't think too hard about it."

"I never said goodbye."

“And you regret it? But dad said he was thankful to you. He said you’d be all right, Lyle.”

You’ll be all right. I heard him say that. I did... But I never properly looked him in the eye. I never faced him like I should have.

“I refused his Art for my own selfishness, and so I never got to thank him properly.”

My tears were starting to come out.

“You did enough. Your feelings got across well enough, Lyle. So it’s all right.”

My parting with the first head had been sudden. As for my parting with the second... I thought we could be together forever if I just kept failing. But that didn’t work out.

“Lyle, you should keep this in mind. I... We all have a reason we exist. We intend to fulfill our roles.”

“Yeah...”

“And I don’t mean I want to go away this very instant. That’s not it. But you know, it would be unnatural if we stuck around forever, messing with your life.”

Was it selfish of me to wish they would continue to look after me?

“Once I think I’ve done my duty, once I think I can disappear, I’ll tell you. And Lyle, you can tell me if you want me to go too. But there’s just one thing that can’t happen—I can’t be here forever.”

“Why not?”

“Because that’s what it means to grow up. To be your own man. It doesn’t have to be right now, but you’re better off preparing for it. After all, we’re all men you were never meant to meet in the first place.”

When I nodded, the third head laughed.

“Good boy. Still, compared to how you were at first, I can hardly recognize you. You’re still naive and unreliable, but you’re worlds apart from how you were back then.”

He was back to the usual third.

“W-Was I really that bad?”

I knew I was bad, but worlds apart...? Was I *that* bad?

“You sure were. Even looking at you now, I find myself surprised more often than I’d like to admit. But still, a lot of things happened, this time around.”

I’d gone out to fight a hippogryph and ran into a gryphon instead. From there, I snatched the right to command and defended the town. It really was a lot.

When it came to Luka’s circumstances, honestly, I felt I would have been better off not knowing. But the fact that the memories of my ancestors had been revived meant that facts like these were bound to come to light.

“The sixth head really surprised me.”

“Well, it’s that. You know. You ended up cleaning up after his mess, or rather atoning for his sins. That aside, I wonder which house was sending them support. Maybe a vassal of ours was showing some consideration?”

It was ultimately left unknown, but it was a very curious tale.

“Come to think of it, what was your reason for having me take up this request?”

“What do you think it was? I think you’ve figured it out.”

Reflecting on what my ancestors told me, I did have a guess.

“Was it to make me realize I’m surrounded by very talented people?”

“You’re not wrong, but it’s a bit dicey. To put it simply, you and everyone around you are very competent. We wanted you to know that there are all sorts of people in the world—those trying to climb up, those stuck in a rut. And you came across quite a few surprises, didn’t you?”

Well, I did know it took quite a few people to make the world go round.

I was surprised by Lionel, and by Norma too. I had to wonder: did they really need to go so far for a promotion? Their desire to make easy money was a bit too strong for my tastes... Yeah, that was awful.

“You’re generally competent. You don’t understand the feelings of normal people, and the kids around you are a bit...”

He made it sound almost like Novem and the girls had their own share of problems.

“I’m not going to tell you to understand everyone. I just want you to remember that there are all sorts of people out there.”

I thought over it a moment before answering, “Okay.”

And in a wary voice, the third head went on, “Also, Lionel. He might be a bit dangerous.”

“Lionel?”

“This incident was a bit too much stimulation. I’d recommend some caution when dealing with him.”

I nodded at his advice. Lionel wasn’t in a very sound state of mind.

Finally, I had to check something. “Third head.”

“Hmm?”

“Why did you choose to use a sword and not a bow?”

“There was no deeper meaning to it. It’s just as I told the second head. A noble gets a bad reputation if they keep carrying around a bow. A sword and a spear are a noble’s weapons! Well, at least, there were a lot of people who thought that, back in my day. So I chose the sword.”

“I-I see.”

“Once I grew up, I went around killing horned rabbits with my sword, you know. It was a huge deal—grandpa, dad, and I. The three of us got together and said we’d hunt down every last one of them. We got so fired up about it... Though it proved impossible in the end.”

I didn’t really know how to react, now that I’d heard the story behind the three rabbit haters.

“Dewey died right in front of me, and I wanted to become strong—strong enough that I could have protected him. In the end, I was just dragging it out the whole time,” the third head confessed as he gazed at the silver bow floating over the table.

Sophia hugged her knees as she sat. Aria and Miranda were still lying down, wrapped in blankets.

Pressing her face into her knees, she reflected on what she'd done the day before.

"I'm too embarrassed to look Lyle in the eye."

Not only had she run around naked wearing nothing but a makeshift robe, she had also consumed so much food that her body was still feeling heavy a day later.

Shannon sighed. "You walked around in your undergarments back when you lived at our house. Is there any reason to be embarrassed about it at this point?"

Sophia lifted her face. "That's different than being seen naked!"

"Is it that different?"

As the two argued, Miranda slowly sat up. Her complexion was just as bad as it had been the day before, but her eyes were now stagnant and lifeless.

To be blunt, she was terrifying.

"Water."

"Y-Yes, right away, sis!"

Shannon immediately reacted, fetching the canteen and offering it to Miranda. As she drank from it, Miranda glared at Sophia with an air of darkness.

"I'm hurting. Keep it quiet."

Sophia nodded again and again. "C-Certainly!"

Miranda languidly spaced out just as Lyle descended from the ceiling hatch.

"We don't really need three people up top," he explained.

Monica and Clara were in the driver's compartment, while Novem and Eva were keeping watch from the roof.

As soon as he appeared, Miranda changed. She was still in bad health, but the

light returned to her eyes. She gave off a bit of a feeble, helpless aura.

“Welcome back, Lyle.”

“You need to sleep when you can, Miranda. You look like you’re still in pain.”

“I’m all right. I’m getting a lot of rest. But it’s gotten pretty bad today.”

Seeing Lyle take a seat next to Miranda, Sophia thought to herself, *She must be going through a lot of pain. But to be so considerate to Lyle... Miranda’s amazing. And a little scary.*

She seemed to be containing her agony with pure willpower as she spoke to Lyle, and Sophia was honestly impressed.

Glancing at Shannon, she seemed relieved that Miranda was in a better mood. She took the canteen back and hung her head tiredly.

Lyle was pondering how he would interact with Miranda when she was having such a hard time.

“U-Umm, should I do something? Do you want me to do something?”

“Oh, you don’t have to worry about it. But yes, right... Could I borrow your lap to use as a pillow?”

“If it helps.”

Miranda boldly asked for a lap pillow, taking Sophia by surprise.

S-So audacious! Wait, why is Lyle accepting so easily?!

Miranda lay on Lyle’s lap, and though Lyle looked a little bit bashful, he rested his hand atop her shoulder. Sophia stared on jealously, when all of a sudden she noticed that Porter was losing speed.

“Is it break time?”

Shannon shook her head. “Can’t be. I mean, we just took one.”

So Sophia stood, fearing something might be wrong. Sensing something off, Eva popped her head in from up top.

“Hey, why are we stopping?” she asked.

Porter quickly came to a complete stop.

“I haven’t got a clue. Do you see anything outside?”

“I’m asking because I don’t. In which case, something might be wrong with Porter itself.”

Sophia was just about to take a peek at the driver’s compartment when Monica appeared, carrying Clara on her back.

“Clara?!” Sophia cried out in concern.

“She’s fine,” Monica reassured her. “Her health suddenly took a hit. I have identified it as the same Growth indications that you are all experiencing. She cannot continue to drive like this, so I think it is best for her to get some rest.”

Then, Monica turned her eyes to Lyle. She looked at Miranda with an unamused look on her face, but quickly burst into a smile.

“You heard me, you insignificant chicken, so get driving.”

“Yeah, got it. Sorry, Miranda.”

“O-Oh, I’m perfectly fine. There’s nothing we can do if Clara’s down for the count.”

Sophia didn’t overlook the glare that Miranda shot Monica for only the briefest of moments. Monica, being Monica, responded with a triumphant smile as she beckoned Lyle toward the driver’s compartment.

“Let’s do a lot of flirting together, my chicken.”

“No, we’re not doing that.”

As soon as the two of them were gone, Miranda’s mood worsened and Sophia turned to Shannon for help. But Shannon pushed the canteen onto Sophia.

“I-I’m going to the driver’s compartment too!”

“Looks like nothing’s wrong,” Eva said as she shut the hatch. Sophia was left alone with three incapacitated party members.

Hey, someone save me!

But her help never came. Up until the next break, she had to spend her time in total awkwardness.

I'd taken over driving Porter. I could hear the sounds of Monica and Shannon playing in the seat beside me as I fiddled around with the Jewel.

"Hey, it came right apart. What's wrong with it?!"

"Hmph. I guess cat's cradle was too advanced for a little girl. Well, I, Monica, never hold back. Not even in games. The only person I'll ever lose to is that useless chicken over there."

"That's so unfair. Lose to me too! Hey, one more time."

"Challenge me as many times as you want. I'll always accept. Have at thee!"

The two of them were playing with a bit of yarn tied into a loop.

As Porter slowly moved forward, we were surrounded by the rest of the subjugation force moving on foot. I focused to match their pace as I gripped the Jewel.

Would the day come someday? The day that everyone would disappear?

Would I be able to part with all five of them in a way that I'd be able to come to terms with?

Just thinking of the farewells that lay ahead of me, my heart ached.



“If only
I was
stronger...”

Aria
muttered.

SEVENTH

6

Author
Yomu Mishima


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Tomozo

I was joined onstage by **Eva** and **Miranda**, who both wore quite provocative outfits. They were highly revealing, and to be blunt, far too stimulating. Upon rising to the stage, they took their positions on either side of me. I grabbed their shoulders and pulled them close.

"As you can see, I've obtained money and women. Now all that's left is status and fame!"

"I shall hunt down this gryphon and seize glory for myself! If you follow me, I'll make it worth your while."





“M-Ms.
Monica?
What is a
tsundere?”

Monica
looked
aghast.

Novem spelled out what
seemed to be the moral of the story.
So that's what it was about?
Shannon thought, nodding
to herself.





“Stuff it. Mount it.
My boy’s first gryphon
must be put on
display!”

“They’re
pretty nice,
aren’t they?
Gryphons?!”

“A gryphon,
huh? Lyle, you’re
finally going to
be first-rate.”

“If you’re a
man, you can’t
miss a gryphon
hunt! Good for
you, Lyle!”

“I didn’t have many
opportunities in
my time. I only
managed to kill
two of them.”

My ancestors
were getting
carried away.

“You need to get
your hands on
its materials and
stones. They’re
worth a fortune.”













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SEVENTH 6

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