



SEVENTH

7

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

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INTRODUCTION

Shortly after demolishing a group of noble's schemes by slaying a gryphon, Lyle and his party members come across some disconcerting rumors in the capital. The crown prince of Banseim has broken off his engagement. Furthermore, he's found himself a new fiancé before the old one has even departed the city. The prince had originally been betrothed to Lianne, the princess of **Fonbeau**, a land which Banseim had previously been at war with. Now that the engagement has been cut short, there's no telling when conflict will break out again. For some strange reason, though, the citizens aren't the least bit concerned. Through circumstance, Lyle ends up meeting Lianne and learns the **truth behind why the prince broke off the engagement**. It was all due to **Ceres Walt**, the very same individual who drove Lyle from his own home—his little sister, and his fated foe. It appears the other strange occurrences happening in Banseim trace back to Ceres as well. She's begun to make her move, and it seems she intends on dragging Banseim into whatever conflict she stirs up, sowing chaos among all who live there. Is it finally time to learn the true nature of the power of the Heretical God's Child?

SEVENTH

First Head



Basil Walt

First Stage

Full Over

Raises physical abilities from between 10% to 20%.

Second Stage

Limit Burst

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

Third Stage

Full Burst

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

Second Head



Crassel Walt

First Stage

All

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

Second Stage

Field

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

Third Stage

Select

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

Third Head



Sley Walt

First Stage

Mind

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

Second Stage

???

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

???

Arts of the Ages	Author Yomu Mishima
Prologue	
Chapter 78	Triumphant Return
Chapter 79	Full Monty
Chapter 80	Negotiation
Chapter 81	The Miracle of Remelrandt
Chapter 82	The Hero General Sley Walt
Chapter 83	The Princess of Fonbeau
Chapter 84	Fellow Student
Chapter 85	The Heretical God's Child
Chapter 86	The Truth
Chapter 87	Decision
Chapter 88	The Maddening Metropolis
Epilogue	

Illustrator
Tomozo



CONTENTS

Prologue

If only these peaceful days could continue forever, I thought.

It was such a small, trifling wish for I, Lyle Walt, to make, and yet it fell apart in no time at all.

“Why, oh why, was I born without wings? If only I had wings, I would have taken off through the deep blue sky. That’s right—I’m going to become a bird!”

Her left hand to her chest, her right hand stretched out as if to grasp at the sky, Aria stared up at the gray winter clouds looming above us. There was no blue sky—not a single speck of it.

Clara grinned. “Does this gloomy gray look blue to you?” she said. “Your eyes must be going bad. Of course, a spear fits you far better than wings, Aria. Wouldn’t you do better on a battlefield with specks of blood flying everywhere? If you want to be a bird, I’d recommend a gryphon, a perfect fit for such a savage.”

She usually kept her emotions from showing and hardly spoke, yet now Clara had become the sort of girl who spewed toxicity with a smile.

I hid my face behind my hands. There was one more individual I didn’t want to look at.

“Oh, dear Aria, you want to be a bird? How nice. I’d love to be one too. Oh, but I’d prefer to be kept in a nice cage so I don’t fly away. Lyle, won’t you be my birdcage?!” Miranda stared straight at me as she spewed such cringey dialogue.

We’d nearly reached Central, the capital of the Banseim Kingdom, when the three girls entered a post-Growth state.

Growth was a sudden change that everyone experienced. Before a Growth happened, an individual’s health would rapidly deteriorate, and they’d have to writhe in agony for a handful of days.

But once it was all over, they would find that their physical or magical abilities

had greatly increased. To put it simply, they would grow stronger. At the same time, this surge of new strength would bring in a sense of elation and put the mind in a rather dangerous, euphoric state.

Miranda approached me. “But if a birdcage is too much, you could be a rope too. Tie me down tight! Make sure I don’t leave your side! I want to tie you down. And I want to be bound by you!”

The usual Miranda would have never said anything of the sort.

Clara held her stomach as she rolled around in laughter. “She wants to be tied up, she says! We’ve got quite the pervert on our hands! Well, she’s always been a spider woman who tied people up with her threads, so on the contrary, it might fit perfectly! Lyle... You have my condolences!”

Condolences for what? The fact that Miranda likes me? Or this situation?

Offended by Clara’s words, Miranda shot her a sorrowful look. “How mean. I’m no pervert. I’m just a little possessive!”

A little? I think it goes a little beyond that... I mused.

As I dealt with this rowdy trio... Or rather, as I was apprehended and left with no choice but to tend to this rowdy trio, my eyes scanned the area, searching for my ticket out of there. *Someone, please help.*

Porter had parked by the side of the road, and beside it, Monica was busily cooking up a meal.

When she noticed my gaze, she energetically waved a hand. “Hiya, chicken dickwad! You’d better look forward to dinner tonight!” she cried out.

It was hopeless. Her master was pleading for help, and yet she was so focused on the food she was going to feed me that she didn’t even realize my situation.

Sophia was standing, expressionlessly, a short distance away. The sight of the girls seemed to remind her of how she had been not so long ago—when she had gone through a Growth of her own. There was no light in her eyes.

“Why can’t I just disappear...?” she muttered as she sat, holding her knees.

It felt too cruel to ask her for any help. My eyes turned to my other comrades.

“Have a look, Novem! I made a new outfit!”

“It looks great on you, Eva. You’re using some very fine fabric.”

“Yeah! I snatched... I mean, I got some of what Monica was using.”

Since there wasn’t much else to do on the road back, Eva had tailored herself a new stage costume. It was bold and revealing, and she seemed to be very satisfied with how it turned out.

She proudly held it out to Novem.

But it seemed she’d used some materials from Monica’s stash...

“Hey, you! You no-good elf! Don’t go arbitrarily using my things! I was planning on using them to make something for that damn chicken!” Monica immediately flew at her in a rage.

“What’s the harm in letting me use just a little bit?!” Eva rebutted. “And you’re the one who said you’d give me some if I helped out.”

“You barely helped at all, and you’re acting very brazen, elf... No, on another note, haven’t you gotten the waist measurements wrong?”

“Th-That’s not true. I know I’ve been eating a little too much lately, but I’ll work it off. No problem.”

“Yes... Keep telling yourself that.”

Shooting her a look full of all sorts of hidden implications, Monica left to return to her cooking.

As she passed by me, I heard her mutter, “Looks like someone’s getting the super-high-calorie menu today.”

“Eva,” Novem cautioned, “just because we’re comrades—no, precisely because we’re comrades, you cannot simply use what doesn’t belong to you.”

“Sorry... But I really did help her with some stuff. Honest.”

“Even so, you need her permission.”

Eva seemed sincere enough, but the scolding continued, and neither of them seemed like they were going to help me.

My final hope was the most useless of the bunch: Shannon. I glanced at her.

“Monica! Look! How about this stance?!”

She was gleefully taking the savage swallow stance over by Monica’s cooking station. It was a vital stance—both the fundamental groundwork and the final form. It encompassed everything from alpha to omega.

The stance was the quintessence of the martial art that Monica had taught us. At first, there didn’t seem to be much point to it, but after we tempered our martial arts and polished our techniques, the final step would be to give meaning to this meaningless stance. It was a stance that would evolve into a powerful technique unique to everyone who learned it.

The first time I heard about it, I knew it was something incredible. I swore I would perfect it someday.

But Shannon’s stance... To be blunt, she was full of openings. When she did it, hers just looked like some farcical pose.

Monica seemed to share my opinion on the matter. “Abysmal. You couldn’t hurt a fly like that. This goes beyond the stance itself—the issue is more fundamental. Redo it.”

Shannon’s shoulders drooped. She seemed genuinely disappointed.

“You can’t be serious... I spent so much time thinking about it...”

Come to think of it, she did say she was thinking about her final move when I caught her eating snacks... Then she got tired of it and we started playing. That’s Shannon for you.

As she stirred the pot, Monica advised, “For now, put more effort into the basics. You’re ten years too young to even think of completing your special stance. That’s not even a figure of speech. You’d best think it will take ten years to complete.”

“I can’t wait that long! I need to complete it before that damn gigolo!”

I glared at Shannon, but she didn’t even seem to notice me. She was playing with Monica, and she—like the others—wasn’t going to help me.

In the first place, would she even help me out if she did notice...? No, she

wouldn't.

As I heaved a sigh, Aria grabbed my hand.

"Huh?"

"Now, Lyle... Let's dance!"

"Err, I'd like to decline if I... A-Aria!"

She was far stronger than I could have ever imagined. She forcefully took hold of me, and I couldn't peel her off. Thus, I was roped into Aria's dance routine.

Holding both of my hands, Aria began to spin on the spot; I was essentially being swung around.

"Wait! Stop! Please stop, Aria! *Ariaaa!*"

"Aha ha ha, you're surprisingly good at this, Lyle! Nicely done!"

"This is terrifying! My feet aren't touching the ground!"

Watching the two of us, Miranda gave a round of applause. "Dance with me next. I like the ones where our bodies are glued to one another."

"Isn't that nice, Lyle?" Clara said with a smile. "I'm not envious in the slightest, by the way. But you did strike me as the sort of guy to get dragged around by a lady."

The usual Clara—that expressionless yet somewhat gentle girl—was nowhere to be seen.

"Someone, save me!"

I heard five voices from the Jewel hanging from my neck. This was the cursed item—err, no, scratch that. My guiding light containing the memories of five of my ancestors.

The third head of House Walt, Sley Walt, sounded just as jovial as usual. "Looks like Aria's full of cheer."

"She can't stay still for a second," said Marcus Walt, the fourth head, who sounded a little weary. "But this is an unstable time for all of them. Make sure you patch things up with them later, Lyle."

“Well...do your best,” added the fifth head Fredriks Walt, a man of few words.

Just as I was thinking, *Do none of you have any actual advice?* the sixth head Fiennes Walt hesitantly said, “If only Miranda had a bit more poise. As Milleia’s great-granddaughter, she should be a bit girlier than that. Don’t you think so, Lyle?”

I did not know Miranda’s great-grandmother. How was I even supposed to answer that question?

“Oh, she’s definitely descended from Auntie Milleia,” the seventh head Brod Walt grumbled. “More importantly, Clara’s got a sharp tongue.”

Don’t tell me she wants to complain on a regular basis, but she just holds it in? Is that what’s reflecting on her post-Growth state? As she was now, Clara was so expressive and toxic that I had to wonder if it was true. *I wouldn’t mind if she spoke her mind a bit more on a regular basis...*

But just as the thought crossed my mind, Aria’s hands parted from mine.

“Ah...” I absentmindedly exclaimed as I was thrown into the air.

Aria collapsed on the spot. “Aha ha! My eyes are spinning! The world is spinning!”

“Ah, Lyle!” Miranda’s hand extended toward me.

I could really use a little help, I thought as Clara laughed aloud.

“Whoa! Man’s first flight. This is a day for the books. I need to jot it down.” She took out a notepad as she stared up at me.

And fly I did, thrown to quite a ridiculous height by Aria’s brute strength. I stared down to see a river flowing beneath me...



And into the water I fell.

“Why me?!”

After crawling out of the cold river, I dragged myself over to the bonfire to warm my aching bones.

Winter had already entered full swing.

And as I sat there shivering, Monica fretfully tended to me.

“Waaaah! Damn chicken! To think this would happen to you while you were by my side!” she sobbed as she wrapped a blanket around me and brought me some warm food.

“That look suits you, gigolo.” Shannon looked at me and laughed.

“You’re the real gigolo here.”

“Hah? I’m properly working, I’ll have you know! I hewed out a whole bunch today!”

Speak properly, girl. Are we counting helping out with chores as work now? If we are, I’m working several times more than you!

Eva gave a bemused laugh. “You flew quite a long way. Is Aria ridiculously strong or something?”

“She’s gotten even burlier with this Growth.” Sophia nodded. “It’ll be trouble if she goes on a rampage with that monstrous strength. Well, it looks like she’s starting to calm down.”

Sophia’s eyes turned to the three who had been forced to sit on their knees. Before them stood a very imposing Novem. Her back was turned to me, so I couldn’t see her expression, but I could tell she was angry.

“What do you think you’re doing, throwing Lord Lyle into the river?!”

Her voice had turned gruff with rage. Her demeanor had done a complete one-eighty from her usual self, and that made it all the more terrifying.

Her sanity returning to her, Aria tried to put up an excuse. “I mean, I didn’t

think he would fwy so fawww...”

Fwy so faw, she says. It was kinda cute, and I thought I might forgive her just for that.

No wait, that’s wrong. I’d caused a lot of trouble with my own Growth, so I couldn’t get mad over something like this. I decided to put in a good word to Novem.

“Novem, they’ve all just gone through Growths, so please forgive them. See, they’re slowly regaining themselves now, so it’s all good.”

They were all in such high spirits from the crack of dawn, but once evening rolled around, they had mostly recovered. But when it came to Growths, the scariest part came after one had completely regained their sanity.

It came the next day, when they reflected on all they had done, and writhed in pain and agony (but mostly embarrassment).

Novem turned to me. “Regardless, there’s a line you shouldn’t cross.”

“I understand, but... It’s already getting dark, and it’s cold.”

The chill got even harsher once the sun sank away. I wanted those three to warm up and go to bed.

“Understood... Make sure you properly apologize to Milord. All of you.”

Upon hearing that, Miranda immediately stood and clung to me. “Lyle, Novem was so scary! Console me!”

Her eyes were full of playfulness, and Novem—standing behind her—smiled. She was smiling, yet terrifying at the same time.

“It seems you still don’t understand, Miranda.”

Miranda turned and looked her straight in the eye. “See how scary it is?” she said, returning a belligerent smile.

Even with her Growth, Miranda was still Miranda.

Clara stood and began enthusiastically jotting things down on her notepad.

“I must make sure to record this day in its entirety,” she proclaimed. “And tomorrow, I’ll flaunt it to those two as they writhe in pain! Let’s make this a

memory we can remind them of whenever they're close to forgetting!"

Oh... Clara's not back yet.

Aria looked at me. "Miranda has it good... I want to be hugged too. That's right! When it's cold, I've heard it's best to rub our bare skin together."

All of a sudden, Aria was pulling off her clothes, only for Sophia to rush in and stop her.

"What do you think you're doing?!"

"Let go of me! We're going to share our heat! I'm going to kindle my love with Lyle in the nude!"

"Calm down! You're going to regret it! Once tomorrow rolls around, you're going to regret it!"

"I won't have any regrets! For I live for love and love alone! And I'm very curious too! I want to see what a man looks like in—"

"Aria! Stop it already!"

I softly averted my eyes from the scene... I couldn't bear to look anymore.

That was when Eva took a seat beside me. My clothes were hanging nearby, drying by the heat of the bonfire.

With all that clamoring going on around us, Eva spoke to me.

"What a lively and fun party you have."

"A bit too lively, if I'm being honest."

"Better than having it strained and awkward. Human relations are hard wherever you go. This sort of arrangement is one of the better ones."

She must have met all sorts of people and seen all sorts of sights through her travels. She seemed excited.

"That aside," she went on, "why are we entering the capital ahead of the subjugation force? We could have just gone with them."

We were headed for the royal capital. We'd been sent off on a hippogryph hunt, and we were on the way back. This was usually where we'd all march in

lockstep, with everyone entering the capital together as triumphant heroes.

But... We weren't welcome. Not in the capital, and mostly, not by those court nobles in the royal palace. Those nobles were the ones who had plotted to erase us.

We'd been told it was a hippogryph hunt, but the foe we encountered was a gryphon—a monster far larger and far more ferocious than a hippogryph. If all went as planned, we were supposed to have been annihilated. The nobles who plotted all this would certainly not be pleased to see us returning in one piece.

"We need to spread the news before the volunteer army returns. I'd imagine the rumors are already spreading through the palace, and we'll have to show some evidence to solidify them."

Eva nodded with a smile. She was the one who'd done her best to spread the rumors; well, she alongside her fellow elven performers.

"Yes, I'm sure they're getting heated over it in the capital. But do we have to go this far?"

Do we have any need to? That seemed to be the question on Eva's mind, and I could hear a voice responding from the Jewel. Although he was answering in regards to Eva's question, his was a voice that only I could hear.

"If we don't do anything, I'm sure the palace will find some excuse to stick the blame on us and have us dealt with," the fourth head coldly explained. "We need to go so far it might seem like overkill, or we'll be the ones in danger. With that said, the corruption of the capital's just as bad as it was in my time."

Then the fifth head, reflecting on the time he was alive, spoke in an irritated tone. "Some times are worse than others, but it's always terrible nonetheless. There's nothing wrong with being careful."

I relayed their opinions to Eva: "We're just taking every measure we can. It'll be too late to act after something's already happened."

Even I didn't know if we had to take so many precautions, but five men all with more life experience than me were saying it, and it was probably true.

Right... The number was down to five.

I was overcome by a curious emptiness whenever one of the voices disappeared.

“You’re more cautious than I expected. Well, that might be just right for the party leader.”

“On that note,” I said, “are you sure you should be tagging along with us? If all goes well, we’ll be heading east after this. We’ll be headed straight to Baym.”

The Free City. The City of Adventurers and Merchants. It had various names, but in short it was a metropolis that attracted many an adventurer. The free city was not contained within Banseim’s territory; it was a foreign land.

Eva’s eyes lit up. “Do you think I have any attachment to the kingdom? I want to see the world with my own eyes. A world larger than the one I know. I want to gather many more wondrous stories and songs! And while I’m at it, it’s even better if there are tales only I can tell. I have my hopes on you, Lyle. Now go and pull off something just as great as slaying the gryphon.”

As a singer, Eva wanted to someday sing of a tale that only she knew. It seemed she was prepared to go to the ends of the earth for that goal. I couldn’t help but be startled by the zeal the elves had toward stories and songs.

“With that said... Winter is really setting in. We won’t be traveling or working for a while.”

Eva crossed her legs, staring into the fire with discontent. But as someone who was used to traveling alone, she knew. She seemed to accept it.

“I don’t plan on doing anything crazy during the dead season either. It’s going to be a cold year, and I’m sure there will be plenty of snow.”

Banseim could be a very snowy place. When the snow heaped up, it could make it incredibly difficult to travel. If possible, I wanted to head east after we took care of all our troubles in the capital.

We’d keep going until we found a large town to spend the winter.

There was a major reason for this.

“Winter, huh...” the fifth head reminisced. “It’s when the farmers take off.”

The seventh head wasn’t one to encourage winter travel either. “Skirmishes

break out everywhere. In some cases, there are wars on the borders too. I'm sure there are some that have already begun."

Banseim was a large nation. At times, the nobles would wage wars against one another, and other times, they would stage insurrections against their own houses. If you ventured out to the national border, you'd get wrapped up with Banseim's wars with foreign powers as well.

This was the season of war. Feudal lords would often make soldiers out of their subjects, and most of those subjects were farmers. Once it was the off season for those farmers, the lords were free to mobilize them.

If they waged war during one of the busier times of year, it would damage the autumn harvest. This situation was shared pretty much everywhere, and so this was a season when everyone became rather hectic.

Eva heaved a sigh. "If you go out without a plan, you'll find yourself straight on the battlefield. It really is a terrible season."

I had to agree with her there.

"It's awful."

From the Jewel, the third head endorsed our opinion. According to Banseim history, he was a distinguished war veteran hailed as the Hero General, but... "I get the reason they do it, but I hate war. I never wanted to die on the battlefield. I wanted to peacefully age until I died in bed."

When he said it, there was a certain weight to it.

In any case, it was best to stay in one place during the winter. Even if we wanted to move elsewhere, we'd need to take various measures we could have otherwise done without. Our best bet was to start when it got warmer.

"We might end up spending the winter in the capital at this rate," Eva muttered.

Anything but that...

If possible, I wanted to spend the winter somewhere, anywhere that wasn't the capital.

We reached one of the gates that granted passage through the mighty walls that surrounded Central. We were all wearing hoods as we pulled up in a large horse-drawn wagon.

We were dressed in a way that identified us as adventurers at a glance, and we had loaded a massive wooden box atop the wagon. The sides of the box were left uncovered so everyone could see the dead gryphon within.

The deceased gryphon had been kept mostly intact, and it looked like it could start thrashing at any second. Those coming and going through the gate would look at it with shock and terror.

“Is that a gryphon?”

“It’s similar to the hippogryph I saw, once upon a time.”

“They both have the same eagle head. But it’s far larger.”

“Then could that be the rumored...”

Some showed interest in the atrocious monster. Others kept their distance out of fear.

There were various reactions, but what was important was that everyone witnessed the gryphon.

The gatekeeper approached us.

“Since you’re not with the subjugation force, I’m guessing that’s a separate gryphon... Are you adventurers?”

I removed my hood and replied, “Yes, we defeated a gryphon, so we thought we’d sell it at the capital. Monster parts are valuable resources, but when it’s a gryphon, I’d imagine there are more merchants who’d love to buy the entire specimen.”

The gatekeeper looked us up and down.

I hadn’t said anything wrong. Central was a trade center. It was home to many affluent merchants, and surely there were some who would prefer to buy an entire gryphon to stuff and mount.

It was also perfectly natural for an adventurer to come to the royal capital if

they wanted to make a name for themselves.

Looking rather impressed, the gatekeeper let us through. Perhaps he didn't find us that suspicious. "You've got skill for your age. Sell your name if you want, but don't go causing trouble."

I nodded understandingly.

"Of course. We'll try not to cause a stir."

"We're the ones on the receiving end of all the trouble," the sixth head said from the Jewel. "Now then... Now that we're inside, it's time to play ball! Lyle, start advertising!"

As soon as we'd led the wagon through the gate, we were crowded by people who had heard the rumors. The gate was usually plagued by heavy traffic, and now there were even more people there than usual.

Standing before them, I loudly declared, "If you want to hear the tale of the gryphon hunt, then please make your way to the plaza ahead. There, we'll tell you exactly how we slew the fearsome beast."

Under the watchful and inquisitive eyes of the capital's residents, we boldly pressed on.

It was just as the sixth head had expected. As soon as we made it into the city, the ball was in our court. It didn't matter what moves the palace made—it was already too late.

When I glanced at Eva, I saw her covering her mouth with a disgruntled look on her face.

"It's always so dusty around the gate," she said. "It makes my throat sting. I hate it."

"Eva, I leave the rest to you." I egged her on as I pointed toward the plaza.

And suddenly there was a fire in her eyes. "You can count on me. I'll give you all the publicity you could ever ask for."

At times like these, it really was reassuring to have an elven comrade.

Chapter 78: Triumphant Return

It was the day that Lyle's party arrived at the royal capital. On that day, Ralph Circry, head of House Circry, made his way to the palace with haste.

It was already night by then. Just as he'd finished his work for the day and had started back to his estate from the palace, he was suddenly summoned once more.

The reason he was summoned had to do with the rumors spreading across Central.

"That brat..." he muttered with loathing as he entered the meeting room where the other nobles awaited him.

Some of them seemed on edge, while there were others who simply sat there, silently drinking wine. They were all either barons in peerage or greater. Thus, they were all *true* nobles—recognized as nobility by their peers.

Once Ralph arrived, an earl spoke up. "Viscount Circry, have you heard the rumors?"

They wanted to know if he had any grasp of the situation. Ralph could only nod to this.

"I have."

"That is good. It saves me the trouble of explaining. Now then, there is only one reason I called you here... We are now required to prepare a reward for the heroes who exterminated the gryphon."

Though he called them heroes, the earl's expression was incredibly cold. Ralph was a father himself, and he could understand what the earl was getting at, to some degree.

"Then perhaps some medals and a monetary award would be appropriate."

He proposed a bit of money and some decorations. However, a noble who was more involved with military affairs refuted this. "If that was all we handed

out for slaying a gryphon, we would have people doubting the prosperity of the kingdom. Those medals will have to come with an annual stipend attached, and we'll at least have to promote them or we'll be breeding dissatisfaction. Not from the subjugation force. Our knights and soldiers will be discontent."

No one could have expected that the hippogryph subjugation force—which was supposed to have been annihilated—would return after slaying a gryphon.

Ralph held a position as a civil official. He was often at odds with those who were classified as military officials. "Please bring up that proposal again after you've secured the budget for it," he protested.

His foe glared at him, but Ralph remained unmoved.

A few seconds into this staring match, a weak-willed noble offered, "I-In that case, let's claim there was a problem with the subjugation force and penalize them. Yes, if we say they plundered a village along the way, we can at least get it so we won't have to pay a reward for slaying the gryphon..."

The earl responded by lowering his fist onto the table. The message was clear: *not another word*.

"The gryphon has already entered the capital. An adventurer is spreading the word far and wide, and the subjugation force is being lauded as unlikely heroes. I launched an investigation with what little time I had, and it turns out that rumor has spread through all the nearby towns and cities as well."

The earl tossed a document over the table.

Ralph took it, scanned through it, and immediately grimaced.

"That brat."

Lyle's face crossed Ralph's mind. The report detailed the rumors circulating around the capital—the high praise of just how strong and noble the subjugation force turned out to be. There had been whispers for a while now, but now that the capital's residents had actually seen the slain gryphon with their own eyes, those whispers blew up all at once.

"You must understand," the earl loathsomely concluded, "we have no choice but to welcome them."

There were a multitude of reasons that Ralph and the other nobles would need to prepare a warm reception. No, it wasn't that they had to—it was more that it would be far more trouble if they didn't.

Sure, it would be simple enough to trump up some false charges, but too many people were involved. Far too many.

Time was also an issue. There was far too little time to work with.

A portion of the subjugation force had already entered the city. That left no time to actually burn down the villages the force had passed through to create evidence. What's more, there was the risk of rumors—or rather the truth—spreading that they had fabricated charges simply because they didn't want to pay a reward.

What would the knights and soldiers who didn't participate in the force think about it? They would wonder if the same would happen to them when their time came around. Indeed, they might become distrustful of the palace.

If that happened, then they would have to be concerned about the army refusing to move or only marching half-heartedly when ordered.

Worse yet, if they moved too boldly to implicate Lyle and the others, that left a high likelihood of their opposition factions within the palace catching on to their deeds.

When all was said and done, there were far too many drawbacks to not welcoming them.

"I hear your daughter took part in the force," the earl said, glaring at Ralph. "The man your daughter brought turned out to be quite the capable adventurer. As her father, you must be very proud."

Ralph clenched his fist. "I didn't think he would be capable of killing a gryphon."

"Whether that's true or not, it doesn't matter. For now, let's resolve the problems set out before us. Let's grant promotions, medals, and an annual stipend to the returning subjugation force. We'll prepare an appropriate up-front reward too. You can do that, can't you, viscount?"

The earl didn't say it aloud, but he was essentially saying, "This is your responsibility. You clean up after the mess."

In the Banseim Kingdom, the medals of honor given to those who achieved excellence came with an annual stipend. The recipients would receive a fixed amount of money each year. In short, this meant he would need to secure the funds to pay a stipend for several hundred people each year.

Ralph gritted his teeth, but he quickly smoothed over his expression and replied, "I'll get to work immediately."

"Yes, I'm counting on you. Good grief, it just had to come at our busiest season..." The earl stood, and soon he and the other nobles were filtering out of the room.

"This coming spring, we can put out an official—"

"It seems Viscount Circry has no eye for talent."

"Yes, as it turns out, his daughter is the better judge of character."

They left, each mouthing off complaints and cynicism directed at Ralph.

Now left in an empty meeting room, Ralph endured the urge to scream. Again and again, he reminded himself that he was inside the royal palace. There was no telling who could be listening.

Steadying his breath, he pressed a fist against his brow and waited for his rage to subside.

"You'll regret making an enemy of me—of House Circry."

Harboring an intense hatred of Lyle in his chest, Ralph smoothed over his face once again and left the meeting room.

We were on the capital's main road. The lady leading the slow procession on horseback, smiling and waving, was the captain of the hippogryph subjugation force, Norma Arnette.

"Hurry it up."

She and the others were flanked by lines of spectators who had gathered to

see and cheer on the heroes. The knights and soldiers who took part seemed to accept their overwhelming praise with bashful pride.

Some would even find the courage to wave back.

As I awaited them in the square, I was joined by Miranda, who had a bit of a gloomy look on her face. A beauty with such a melancholic expression would have made for a beautiful painting, but she was evidently thinking about what she'd done yesterday.

Now and then, she'd bury her face in her hands.

"Someone kill me..." she muttered.

I was not going to laugh at her. I couldn't.

"I understand how it feels."

"I'd like to hurry up and forget everything that happened yesterday."

Aria had similarly been depressed since the crack of dawn, while Clara refused to leave her room entirely. It was quite a bit of trouble.

Standing on the opposite side of me from Miranda, Novem stared at Norma.

"She's letting it get to her head again. I hope she doesn't let her guard down."

Does she really understand that the palace sees us as a hindrance? I wondered. Though honestly, I was a bit envious of how simple she was.

"She's honest to her desires. She knows what she wants," I muttered.

Novem concurred, "Yes, it is a bit envious... But I do not want to follow her example whatsoever."

As she waved her hand from high up on her horse, Norma was clearly enjoying the situation. The subjugation force was walking in file, marching down the main street. Their wagons were decorated with the heads and wings of hippogryphs to show off all their achievements. It was practically a victory parade.

I didn't tell her to do any of that—that was all on Norma.

Once she finally reached the square, Norma looked down upon us from her horse. Her ego had grown a few sizes in the short span from the gate to the

square.

“Nicely done. That was good work coming from a mere adventurer.”

She was presumably talking about how we raised attention and gathered spectators for their reception.

For a moment, Miranda’s face turned expressionless. “You’re acting pretty self-important. Aren’t we supposed to use this moment to show that we are well acquainted with one another? I don’t care if someone else becomes a hero from what we did, but you...really have a death wish.”

Her cold voice slipped its way through all the cheers, and once it reached Norma, her smile froze and she hastily climbed down from her horse. The subjugation force also came to a stop as its members delightedly called out to their families who had gathered in the square.

Still with a stiff smile plastered on her face, Norma reached out to shake my hand.

She grabbed one of my hands with both of hers and wildly shook it up and down in a frenzy almost like she was trying to tear it off.

“M-My word, Sir Lyle. You truly are reliable!” she stammered, a cold sweat pouring from her brow.

Novem immediately stepped in. “You’re troubling Lord Lyle. Release him.”

“Y-Yes ma’am!”

I shook my head at the cold attitude both my party members were taking. “Be a bit gentler, both of you. See, today’s supposed to be our big moment.”

The cold winter air was warmed by the many cheers—cheers of the members of the subjugation force, who initially had no hopes placed on them at all.

Not everyone had returned alive, but those who did puffed out their chests with pride. We also managed to show the onlookers my supposed friendly relationship with Norma.

“Now then, this is where it gets hectic,” I said.

Novem and Miranda nodded.

“Yes. I doubt they’ll stay silent after you smeared mud on their faces.”

“My house is definitely going to make a move. Now what to do, what to do.”

The hippogryph subjugation squad was set to be thoroughly annihilated, but not only did it return alive, its members had become gryphon-slaying heroes. Ralph, the person who plotted this campaign, would surely be frustrated.

“I’d like to settle this peacefully if— Huh?”

The cheers in the square weren’t showing any signs of dying down.

The people cheering for their families who returned; the knights and soldiers who carried themselves proudly before their families; such proud, triumphant reunions... Watching them caused me to feel a bit dizzy.

Suddenly, my body was in pain, and it was excruciating just staying on my feet.

Seeing my face turn pale, Novem frantically grabbed me, supporting my weight. “Milord!”

Miranda immediately took over command. “Norma, you continue to the palace to give your report. I feel bad for putting a damper on all these reunions, but you must take everyone with you.”

Norma waved her hand to signal the others, and without questioning us, she replied, “Yes, I know that much. Err, I understand, ma’am, so don’t glare at me! I shall make it to the palace with all due haste.”

Under Miranda’s stern glare, Norma quickly hopped onto her horse and took off.

We made off on our own way—Novem helping me walk, and Miranda leading the way.

“What timing,” said Miranda. “Lyle, don’t tell me...”

I’d suddenly fallen ill, and I was familiar with the sensation. There was no doubt about it...

“S-Sorry. I won’t be able to move for a while... I’m about to have a Growth.”

I couldn’t muster any strength, and just moving was painful... This pre-Growth

ailment was one I couldn't forget even if I wanted to. I couldn't contain my cold sweat.

"We'll be at the inn soon enough," Novem encouraged me. "Please rest."

"I'm really...sorry."

Why do I have to be rendered immobile at such a crucial moment? It's pathetic, I thought when I heard a voice from the Jewel.

"Mister Lyle, huh...? I can't wait!" the third head teased me, as per usual.

With all the merry cheer enveloping the hippogryph subjugation force, there was one member who walked with a dark look on his face. His name was Lionel—Lionel Walt.

"It's not my fault, it's not my fault," he muttered under his breath. "I didn't do anything wrong. The one in the wrong is—"

The force was on the march again. As he trudged forward, a voice called out from the crowd.

"Ah, Lionel!"

He turned to the voice, only to see the little sister of his friend, who had fallen in the battle with the monsters. His friend had always doted on his sister, and Lionel remembered him saying he'd buy her a present with his reward.

He slipped out of the march and walked up to her.

"I don't see my brother anywhere," the girl told him. "Is he not with you?"

"He died," Lionel emotionlessly replied.

There was a moment of pause before she exclaimed, "Huh?"

"He's dead. A hippogryph scooped him up and crushed him in its claws. We don't have his body, and we couldn't retrieve anything to remember him by either."

His friend's little sister stared at him, her eyes open wide. "Th-That can't be. I mean, he wasn't the most serious guy, but he promised he'd return no matter what. There's no way he died."

As the girl broke into tears right in front of him, Lionel's mouth curled into a crooked smile. His face was stained with madness.

"He got captured and killed when we tried to desert the force together. I can't even say he was brave, or that he died fighting. It was a miserable way to go. He was completely useless. We don't have any remains because he fell behind when we ran."

The girl was startled.

"It was so pathetic I can only laugh at this point. If he was at least the slightest bit useful to me... But truly, he died for nothing."

As he cackled, his friend's little sister slapped him across the face. Lionel glared at her as she ran off with tears pouring from her eyes.

Lionel didn't seem particularly moved by this. However, the crowd wasn't so callous.

"What's with that guy?" they jeered.

"I can't believe him."

"How could you say something so cruel to a family member?"

He stood there, unmoving until the knight directing the force came up to him.

"Get moving already. Don't stop here," the knight said before he was on his way.

Lionel began walking to rejoin the group. His monologue continued.

"That's right. I went out of my way to give them their opportunity. We failed because they were useless. It's not my fault. It's not my fault. It's not—"

There were bags under his eyes, and he was quite visibly abnormal. There was no one on the force who felt inclined to speak to him when he was like that.

I was down with all the symptoms that came before a Growth. And so, there I lay on the bed at the inn, suffering and unmoving.

"I don't want to do anything..."

Every word that came out of my mouth was negative. Aria and Sophia were looking after me.

“Lyle, you’ve got terrible timing,” Aria informed me.

“That’s right,” Sophia added. “We’re supposed to start negotiating with House Circry...”

Yes, I really did feel sorry for that.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry for being so inept and hopeless. I’m sorry for being useless Lyle. Yes, I’m nothing but a useless Lyle. We can even shorten it to Uselyle if you want.”

“He’s got it bad...” Sophia said with a troubled look on her face.

“You think so? Isn’t he always like this pre-Growth? Forget that—I need to wipe your body down. I’m propping you up, okay?”

The two of them forcefully sat me up and wiped me down.

“It’s cold... I’m going to freeze.”

“Don’t worry, you’re not going to freeze,” Sophia diligently answered.

I did nothing but complain, and Aria told me, “I understand, it must be really hard to handle. Let’s hurry and get it over with.”

The towels were soaked in warm water and wrung out, but the room was so cold that any wet spots were hit by an immediate chill.

I looked around.

“Where’s everyone?”

Wiping down my leg, Aria said, “Novem took Eva and Clara off to see some elf bigwig. Apparently. Meanwhile, Miranda went shopping with Shannon. Monica joined them as a guard and bag carrier.”

“Yes, she threw a fit, insisting she wouldn’t leave your side,” Sophia wearily said. “That was quite something.”

Aria sighed. “Not that there’d be a problem if she stayed behind. It’s just that Novem insisted it would be better if we stuck around with you now and then.”

Once they were done with the cleaning, they dressed me up and tucked me into bed.

I didn't have to be too mindful around Monica, and that made it easier for me. But apparently, these two were nursing me on Novem's orders.

What's she thinking, exactly?

The ancestors in the Jewel didn't skip a beat. They were just as cheery as ever.

Starting from the third head...

"Maybe she wants them to pick up a wide variety of jobs. Well, I think it's a good thing."

"It's not a mistake."

"Still, they're a lot more reliable than they used to be."

"You mean Aria and Sophia? It's been nearly a year. Of course, they're going to do some growing up."

"A year... So we've been traveling with Lyle for almost a year."

Once the winter passed and spring came around—that would make one whole year since I was driven from House Walt. All sorts of things had happened in the span of a year.

Aria left the room to dump out the bucket of hot water. Sophia found a chair to sit and reached for a book that she'd left half read. I could hear the sound of her flipping the pages.

Back when we first started out, Sophia would be nervous whenever she was alone with me in a room. Now, she was calmly reading like it was nothing.

For a while, it was quiet and calm. Then Aria returned and told us, "It's even colder outside. I'd reckon it might start snowing soon."

The moment snow was brought up, Sophia reminisced. "Snow? Back when I was a little girl, I was always looking forward to when it snowed. Once I grew up, the snow just meant more work, and I couldn't be happy about it anymore."

Aria grunted her agreement as she lay down on a nearby sofa. "It's dangerous when the ground freezes over. It's white as far as the eye can see, and every

year, I'd hear about how someone slipped and fell into the river or fell into a hole."

That was another thing that made the wintertime so dangerous.

If we were wandering around in unfamiliar lands, we could all too easily slip and fall into a river—and the rivers were truly dangerous during the winter.

I silently listened to their conversation.

Aria spoke about the childhood she'd spent at the capital.

"I tried making a snowman, once. It was so muddy and filthy, and someone came and destroyed it almost immediately. I cried, I did."

This seemed to spark a memory in Sophia. "My house was out in the countryside, so we had plenty of snow, and I loved playing around in it. But shoveling the roads was a huge hassle."

House Walt's territory was in the south, where it never snowed enough to accumulate. Their stories were novel to me... *I don't remember ever playing in the snow.*

Granted, I could only remember events from after I was ten years old, and I didn't know what I'd done before that. *Did I ever play in the snow?*

Lending an ear to their conversation, I closed my eyes.

The old me... What sort of guy was he? According to the seventh head, my grandfather, I was a bundle of talent well-loved by my family. Despite that, I was suddenly alienated from the moment I turned ten. He felt it was unnatural at the time, but he didn't know why it happened.

Perhaps the answer lay in all the memories I'd forgotten.

Clara had been holed up in her room ever since she'd arrived at the capital, but Novem had dragged her out to a place where the elves would get together. This was an organization where the elves who made a permanent display of their craft at the capital would work together with the traveling elf performers.

Eva was the one guiding them down the rather convoluted path to get there.

“Clara, you need to get a grip on yourself already,” Eva said.

She seemed quite fed up with Clara, who was still rather depressed.

“Back before I lost my left arm, I was a member of a certain party. No, I was trying to become a member. It was a very comfortable place with good people. But when I hit my Growth and turned foulmouthed, they kicked me out.”

She spoke of how she’d been driven out of a party in the Academic City of Aramthurst.

Is that why she was alone despite being so skilled? Novem wondered.

“We’re not bothered by it. Lord Lyle doesn’t mind, and he’s not going to drive you out.”

“I’m thankful for that,” Clara apologetically said. “Come to think of it, that’s probably where it started. Ever since that happened, I started to think that it was just a lot easier to stick it out alone.”

Eva teased, “Oh, past tense? Then you’re having more fun now than you did alone. Well, you’re more stubborn than you look, so I can see why you’d have trouble finding a good party.”

Clara turned a bit sullen. “I just caused a problem with my Growth,” she rebutted. “Everything else was fine... I think. Rather, didn’t you teeter from troupe to troupe while ultimately traveling alone?”

“I was alone for the sake of my objective,” Eva boldly proclaimed. “I’m not like you.”

Seeing the two of them glaring at one another, Novem tiredly said, “Please get along a bit better.”

“I get along with her fine—as a comrade,” Eva said, brushing aside a lock of hair.

Clara averted her eyes. “I will do the job given to me.”

Novem had brought them out together specifically because she was concerned about their worsening relationship. She sighed. *Maybe it would be better to keep some distance between them instead.*

Eva proceeded, her feet well accustomed to these dim alleys, and before long she was pointing at a building with a stream of elves going in and out.

“That’s the place, Novem!” Eva enthusiastically cried out.

Unlike the attitude she took with Clara, she was always kind to Novem.

“You’re like a dog wagging her tail,” Clara muttered.

Eva ignored her and threw open the door—where an unexpected face greeted them.

For a while now, Monica’s complaints had been unending.

“I can’t muster any strength when that inept chicken isn’t around. I don’t feel any sense of competition anywhere. I have no motivation. I want to return.”

She easily carried a great load of supplies, looking completely unfazed.

Shannon, meanwhile, was simply radiant. She seemed to be having the time of her life. Both her hands were full, carrying the sweets Miranda had bought for her as she restlessly looked around.

“Oh, shut it, Monica. More importantly, where are we going next, sis?!”

She was itching to go to the next store already.

“Unfortunately,” Miranda said with a smile, “that store was the last one.”

“Aww.”

And while Shannon looked discontent, this meant Monica was beginning to cheer up.

“Then I shall return to the inn and tend to my chicken. I’m certain the two we left at the inn will be unable to provide satisfactory service. Yes, I’m certain that chicken is crying and waiting for my return.”

“That guy doesn’t think that much of you,” Shannon calmly answered. “I’d imagine he’s sleeping right around now.”

“Don’t insult my bond with the chicken! Even as we speak, the poor bird is imagining my face as he weeps into his pillow! I can tell!”

It's troublesome because I can't tell if that's a lie or not, thought Miranda. *Automatons sure are a pain.*

She did lie quite a bit, but she did speak unfathomable truths now and then. Monica was an automaton who could implement what seemed like absolute nonsense, and she was someone that Miranda struggled to measure out.

A human-shaped machine made by the ancients... There was some sort of mana line that connected her to Lyle—that much was true. It wouldn't be wrong to say they were bound by unseen threads.

However, she couldn't imagine that Lyle would actually cry just because Monica had stepped out.

Yes, that has to be a lie, Miranda reached her answer as she started back toward the inn with the other two in tow. A disgruntled Shannon was at the center, while Miranda took the lead, and Monica trailed behind.

She could hear the conversations being exchanged around them.

"Did you hear? It's going to happen soon."

"They must be planning to announce it in the spring."

"I can't wait."

A handful of older ladies were standing around, exchanging gossip. Miranda lent an ear to it and thought, *That's a scene you'll see anywhere you go.*

She returned her attention to her surroundings. *They're here.*

Though Monica had been so happy at first, her expression gradually faded.

"Have you noticed?" Monica whispered to Miranda.

Miranda nodded. "Good grief, what a troublesome bunch," she said as she purposely veered off down a deserted alley.

"Sis, that's the wrong way," Shannon said with a curious tilt to her head.

She clearly hadn't noticed. Miranda lightly prodded the girl's forehead and said, "Shannon, regardless of how amazing your abilities are, they're absolutely pointless if you can't use them right. You should at least be aware when we are being followed."

Shannon hastily focused light into her amber eyes and timidly looked around.

Monica set down her bags, then took her weapon out and held it at the ready. Miranda continued to hold her own haul as she stopped and turned.

“Now come out. I picked a nice and deserted spot for you, so shouldn’t you offer the courtesy of revealing yourself?”

It was a seemingly empty alley. But suddenly, a handful of figures appeared from both sides to box them in. One of them was a man who served as the butler of House Circry—Renaldo.

He had a cane in one hand and wore a coat with a matching hat.

“You’ve grown a lot, Lady Miranda.”

Miranda recalled how she’d acted after her Growth. Her expression turned a bit sour, but she knew that Renaldo didn’t mean anything by it. He was sincerely complimenting her.

“Thank you. It’s nice to know I’ve improved in your eyes... And so? Are you here to kill us?”

Miranda’s statement struck such fear in Shannon that she couldn’t move a muscle. Her legs were shaking. Miranda and Monica positioned themselves to protect her.

“Lady Miranda, please hand the corpse of the gryphon over without a word and return to House Circry. That is how we can settle things peacefully.”

Miranda chuckled. “He really is a pathetic, shitty old man. He’s the one who tried to drag us down, and now that he’s failed, he’s going to take it out on us? Did he task you with cleaning up after his mess?”

She knew that her own house would be out for revenge should anyone sully their names... And she found it incredibly deplorable.

“He truly is a fool. He used to be far more respectable.”

Back when Miranda’s mother had been alive, she had been blessed with a kind and reliable father. Those memories only served to irritate Miranda more.

Renaldo pulled his cap low, concealing his eyes. “I only came to issue a

warning today. At this rate, we will be—”

Miranda wouldn't let him say the rest. “Renaldo. Once you get back, pass a message to that pitiful man. Tell him that Lyle wants to talk to him. We will prepare a place to negotiate. Tell him to attend.”

And with that, Miranda walked off. Monica retrieved her bags and picked Shannon up, carrying her under one arm. Renaldo and his men parted to let them through.

As they passed one another, Renaldo said, “You really do take after your great-grandmother.”

“Thank you.”

Renaldo gave a slight chuckle, and with that, Miranda was back on her way to the inn.

Chapter 79: Full Monty

The manor of House Circry. Ralph Circry had a haggard look on his face as he heard Renaldo's report.

He hadn't gotten any proper sleep for the past few days.

"He wants to bring a viscount to the negotiation table? That whelp is getting too big for his britches."

All his discontentment toward Lyle had brought a coarseness to his tone. His fatigue and frustration and all sorts of other things were piling up on top of one another.

With a serious face, Renaldo asked, "How do you respond, master?"

"Hmph! I accept. We'll kill Lyle on the spot. That should make Miranda somewhat obedient."

Renaldo shook his head. "It isn't just her appearance; her nature takes after Lady Milleia as well. One wrong move, and you won't get off with a scratch or two. I'd also like to bring up that young Lyle was the one who defeated the gryphon, if rumors are to be believed. Unfortunately, even among our more skilled members, we do not have anyone who can fight a gryphon."

Although the retainers of House Circry had seen their fair share of violence, they were a specialized force—purely trained to fight other humans. Sure, they'd be able to kill Lyle if they caught him off guard, but it would be difficult now that he was wary of them.

"So you're telling me to lower my head to that brat?" said Ralph.

Renaldo nodded. "Any more will only add to your shame, master. I won't say it's impossible to win. However, if it does come to blows, we will suffer significant casualties."

If Renaldo was going to go that far, then Ralph had to accept it despite his irritation.

“Fine... Tell him I accept his negotiations,” Ralph said. “But if he oversteps his bounds, we will not let him get out of this alive.”

“Yes sir!”

It was just as Renaldo gave his reply that Ralph recalled the other man of House Walt.

“What became of the other brat?”

Renaldo quickly realized he was talking about Lionel and gave his report.

Lionel’s home was the same home where Basil Walt—the progenitor of the feudal House Walt—was born. Although, with that said, the original house had grown old and tattered, and so had a few portions rebuilt and repaired over the years.

But even now, after all this time, the court House Walt continued to use the property.

This usually dead and desolate estate had a visitor—Doris, second daughter of House Circry. She’d immediately rushed over as soon as she heard that Lionel had returned.

“No. You’re lying to me.”

“I’m not lying. I only stuck around with you because you turned out to be rich. I don’t particularly like you, and when I said I loved you, I was lying. I was only after the status and assets of House Circry.”

With a smile, Lionel vomited his true feelings all over Doris. Doris looked to be in so much pain that she could barely stay on her feet.

“E-Even so, I still...!”

Though Doris would proclaim her own love regardless, Lionel cut her off with a laugh.

“This is why sheltered little ladies are no good,” he said. “If marrying you won’t get me a viscount title, it’s pointless... Your precious father put me through hell, and I hate you for being his daughter. Now don’t show yourself

before me ever again!”

“Wait. Please wait, Lionel!”

“There’s a place out there far more suited to me. That’s right—if he can obtain everything, then surely I can do it too,” Lionel said before turning his back. Though Doris reached out to him, he entered his house and shut the door without ever looking back.

Just how many days have I been bedridden, anyway?

My body was still as heavy as ever. Each day was still a struggle and a half, and it was during that excruciating time that a letter arrived from Ralph.

“It seems he’s willing to negotiate. However, he specified his own time and place—it seems he won’t let us have control over that. He also said we have to bring the gryphon with us no matter what,” Miranda reported to me after she’d read the letter front to back.

I lay in my bed at the inn. I didn’t leave the covers; I only shifted my eyes to register her presence.

The seventh head immediately showed his displeasure with the letter. “It looks like he doesn’t understand where he stands in all this. Don’t you think he needs a painful lesson on the subject?”

He seemed to be seeking approval from the others.

“He’s dealing with a gryphon-slaying hero,” the fourth head calmly said. “It’s only natural for him to be on guard. But this is out of the question. There is nothing to compel us to charge into what’s obviously a trap.”

The fact that Ralph had designated a time and place meant he’d set a trap there. He probably intended to station his men to attack us, and perhaps he was planning something far worse than that.

This...is a pain.

Miranda waved the letter around as she sought my opinion.

“What do we do? It’s definitely a trap.”

“I don’t wanna go anywhere...” I curtly replied.

Novem nodded. “Yes, we should be the ones deciding on the time and place.”

“We definitely can’t go right now, at least,” said Miranda, who seemed to be in agreement on that one. “Lyle’s not in any condition to participate.”

Due to my pathetic state, these two were leading the party in my stead.

I felt like I had to apologize to them.

Clara was there too—reading in the corner.

Gazing at the letter, Miranda cocked her head. “Why would the palace want the gryphon, anyways? I highly doubt they’re after the materials.”

She seemed to be struggling to understand why Ralph and his cohorts were so fixated on the gryphon’s body... *Come to think of it, I don’t know why either.*

I glanced at Novem. “Novem,” I simply said her name.

She quickly caught on. With a smile, she explained, “Gryphons and dragons are monsters so mighty and renowned that they make heroes of those who defeat them. To nobles, rather than their materials, it is their imposing figure that holds the most meaning. They are stuffed and put on display. Sometimes feudal nobles send them among one another as gifts.”

Gifts? I wouldn’t be happy to receive something like that, I thought.

The third head added, “You might not want one, Lyle, but gifts serve more purposes than just to spark joy. You can show others just how great your assets are, or just how strong of a monster you can overcome. That’s mainly what makes gryphons and dragons so popular.”

Nobles sure are a pain.

It no longer had anything to do with me, but just thinking about all the hidden meanings that could go behind a gift was wearing me out.

Miranda sighed. “That might make them popular with feudal nobles, but not so much with court nobles. I do know of some court nobles who put them out as decorations, but it’s mostly the attention seekers. They just want to stand out by making themselves look so much bigger than they really are.”

Apparently, there were differences in the sorts of gifts that feudal nobles and court nobles received as well.

“I-I only displayed the monsters I personally defeated...” the seventh head protested, sounding genuinely offended.

He was the one who liked stuffing and mounting, and his outburst got him some teasing from the others. The sixth head was especially harsh.

“Oh, you’ve always been like that, come to think of it. Always the show-off.”

“Yeah, come across them now and then,” the third head said with a laugh. “Nobles who doll up their rooms with taxidermied monsters and animals. I see, so you were one of those sorts.”

As it turned out, the other ancestors weren’t so interested in the subject.

The fifth head took it a step further: “People who stuff animals are the worst. Why go out of your way to desecrate those cute little things?”

To an animal lover like himself, it seemed to be a pastime he simply couldn’t understand.

With everyone chastising him, the seventh head’s voice shrank softer and softer. “Quit complaining about a guy’s hobbies...” he muttered.

The fourth head sounded quite unconcerned. He was thinking more about why Ralph was seeking out the gryphon. “I did think he’d show some interest, but he seems to be quite fixated. Maybe he wants to offer it to someone in a high position?”

Even if he wasn’t personally invested, perhaps he’d want to secure it as a gift. Was that why he wanted the gryphon defeated by the subjugation force? That seemed to be the fourth head’s best guess.

“Maybe he’ll send it to a feudal noble,” the third head suggested. “I’m sure he’ll want to brag all about it. *This is the gryphon our knights took down*, he’ll say.”

The gryphon itself didn’t interest the fourth, but after pondering the third head’s point, he began to grow a little invested.

“Very good,” he said. “If he wants the gryphon so badly, then that gives us

some leeway. It looks like we can wring him dry.”

I’d thrown around quite a lot of money during the gryphon hunt. The fourth head began scheming a plot to fill that hole in my coffers.

Miranda—who couldn’t hear any of the conversations going on within the Jewel—was still puzzling over why Ralph would want the gryphon.

“Something’s off. That pathetic man wouldn’t want the gryphon—it’s unnatural. He has no interest in materials or taxidermy.”

“Maybe he wants it as a gift?” suggested Clara. “But that’s something the palace should be putting in as a request to the Adventurers’ Guild. There’s no real reason he needs to get it from Lyle.”

Novem thought briefly before arriving at the same conclusion as my ancestors.

“Maybe not. Perhaps it’s significant that it was the gryphon taken down by the capital’s subjugation force. I’d imagine he intends to send it to a high-ranking feudal noble.”

Duke, marquis, margrave—whichever it was, they were probably situated somewhere around the top. Perhaps he needed to procure it quickly to send it to some high-status noble.

That was the conclusion we reached.

Well, not really... It wasn’t we. I was the only one who wasn’t doing any thinking. Everyone else reached that conclusion.

Miranda looked back at the letter. “Should I tell them that we’ll set the time and place?”

“I know it’s your house, but will we really be all right negotiating with a noble?” Clara anxiously asked.

Miranda shot her a slightly dubious smile. “Nobles are in the business of selling their honor. They fly into a rage if you smear mud on the family name, so he might try to get back at us. That’s precisely why we can have absolutely no reservations about crushing them underfoot.”

Miranda casually suggested destroying her own house. She was reliable, but a

little scary too.

“Well, it will all have to wait until Milord is up and about,” Novem said, looking at me. She had a rather troubled look on her face.

“And we should avoid his post-Growth state too,” Clara added. “I’ve only heard about it myself, but we shouldn’t let him out in public like that.” She sent me a sympathetic look.

“Yes, we can’t let *anyone* see him like that,” Miranda mercilessly added.

Hey, I don’t want to go out in that state either.

I pulled the cover over my face and closed my eyes so I wouldn’t have to take on those pitying eyes.

“Oh dear, he’s sulking,” Miranda giggled.

In a room of the palace, Maurice—Norma’s adjutant—stared at the medal he’d been awarded. Normally, he would have been delighted to receive it, yet he wasn’t feeling very optimistic.

Maurice sighed. “So I’ve been promoted to decem-knight captain, huh...?”

He was genuinely happy that he got promoted. His house had risen in status as well. His family was delighted, but...

“What are you so depressed about? This is why you’re hopeless—why you never get anywhere. Be happy and proud,” said Norma, who triumphantly showed off her medal on her chest. She had been promoted to centum-knight, and she couldn’t have been any more pleased with herself.

Maurice was a bit envious of her attitude.

“Dame Norma, we’ve been promoted, but we haven’t received a reward yet.”

“Is that what you’re so worried about? I’m sure they’re carefully deliberating the appropriate reward for a gryphon hunt. Oh yes, and maybe the higher-ups are arguing over where to station me now that I’m so great and accomplished.”

Norma deluded herself, imagining the superior officers all fighting over who could have her in their unit.

You should have a bit more self-awareness. You know that your fellow knights hate you, don't you? Maurice wearily thought. But Norma had been given achievements she didn't earn and had been subsequently promoted. She was in a splendid mood.

She seemed to have forgotten all about the palace's nobles, who had welcomed them with bitter faces upon their safe return.

"You look happy," Maurice snarked.

Norma smiled and replied, "Of course I am! I'm on my way up in the world, no doubt about that. Even the rank of millennium-knight will be mine in no time."

There was no doubt in her mind. Norma held an unwavering belief in her bright future that lay ahead, and in contrast, Maurice could not have been any more pessimistic.

It was then that a civil officer approached them.

"Norma Arnette, Maurice Asher, this way please."

"Of course," Norma cheerfully replied. "It looks like our reward has finally been decided."

A cryptic smile spread across the official's lips. "That is correct. The minister wishes to personally speak to you two about the reward. Good for you."

Though Maurice was feeling chills, Norma laughed.

"I see! The minister himself!"

The minister's personally talking to knights of lowly status like us? Maurice wondered. *I have a bad feeling about this.*

Normally, someone far lower down the totem pole would have been tasked with dealing with them. Something was off—and it seemed to be getting more and more off by the minute.

Sat in the minister's room was a man who belonged to the same faction as Ralph—the same earl who had taken charge of their meetings.

The minister smiled from ear to ear as he looked over Norma and Maurice.

Norma had been stunned, mouth agape, from the moment she heard what her reward would be.

“I’m glad you like it,” the minister chortled.

His words snapped Norma to her senses. “P-Please wait!” she protested. “Why am I getting demoted?!”

“Demoted? Don’t be daft.” The minister grinned. “From times antiquity, a grant of land has always been considered a fine reward. His Majesty has ceded you some land that was originally under his direct control to repay your efforts. From today onward, you are both feudal nobles. It is a fine promotion.”

Norma had sought to rise through the ranks within the palace. To her, this may as well have been a demotion.

Maurice hung his head. Knowing he wasn’t going to be any use, Norma pleaded, “Minister, I want to be a knight of the palace. I do not see value in some countryside—what’s more, a detached enclave far removed from the king’s land!”

Of all the territory the king governed, there were locations known as enclaves. These were bits that were broken off from the main central territory—inconvenient spots surrounded entirely by the territories of other feudal lords. There were various reasons why such places existed, and in most cases, these lands had their share of problems.

For instance, perhaps there was so little value that everyone simply refused to take the land, and so it remained in the king’s possession.

“Rest at ease. Your income will definitely increase.”

“B-But!”

Since feudal lords collected tax from their fief, they usually enjoyed a higher income than nobles of the court. With that said, the land they were given was far into the countryside. Both Norma and Maurice had been raised in the big city, and a higher income wasn’t enough reason to be sent off to the middle of nowhere.

If she was being honest, Norma wanted to make a lot more—while also living

in the capital.

“I beg of you. Please reconsider this reward!”

“Oh? You want me to smear mud on His Majesty’s face?”

The reward had been bestowed by His Majesty, the king. Norma was in no position to object to it. She had no say on the matter.

She buckled at the knees.

The minister watched her with a mean-spirited smile.

“You are a hero who made quick work of a gryphon. I’m sure you can perform well as a feudal lord. I have my hopes on you—on both of you.”

As far as the minister was concerned, he’d promoted them and given them a *reward*. He’d provide a tangible reward while pushing all his troubles off to a distant land.

“My business with you is over.”

This was a job well done; a satisfactory result. It was written all over his face as he ordered Norma and Maurice to leave the room.

“How could such a sinful man exist?!”

As I gazed at myself in the mirror, I realized that my own beauty was a sin.

Yes, I knew—I knew all too well.

I am...beautiful.

With my top bare, I struck a magnificent pose in front of the mirror. Then another, just as splendid. It didn’t matter what pose I took, I was always stunning nonetheless. What a terrifying man I was.

“Oh, how marvelous!”

The blue sky had spread out above after a long spell of cloudiness, and it was like the heavens were blessing my very being. No, that’s wrong—they most certainly *were* blessing me.

I threw open the inn window and yelled, “Come one, come all—look and

behold this beautiful man!”

As the cold air crept into the room, Sophia frantically pinned me down and cupped a hand over my mouth. Aria hurriedly slammed the window shut. She glared at me with haggard breath.

“What do you think you’re doing?!”

Aria was clearly angry, but Sophia was holding my mouth, so I could only mumble in response. I tried giving her hand a little lick.

“Eep! P-Please don’t lick me!”

She jumped back with a start.

I winked at her. “You’re adorable, Sophie dear.”

“Sophie?! Lyle, please get a hold of yourself.”

Oh, how cute she was when she turned red with embarrassment.

“I *have* a hold of myself. In fact, it feels like I’ve been reborn better than ever. Indeed, I could even fly through the sky. Do you want me to prove it?”

I tried to open the window only for Aria to stand in my way.

“You’re not getting past me! And wait, we’re on the third floor! What are you going to do if you fall and get injured?! We have some important negotiations today!”

Oh, that’s right. We have some important negotiations today.

I used my hand to comb my hair back.

“Leave it to me. I’m a great negotiator.”

“Why did it have to be today...” Aria held her head in her hands. “It could have been yesterday or any other time before that...”

She seemed resentful that the negotiations had been scheduled for today.

Sophia embarrassedly muttered, “At this rate, we’d have been better off with Lyle when he was still under the weather.”

What? You prefer me when I’m sick?

“Girls, girls, I know you want me all to yourselves, but this is a bit much, don’t

you think? You know, I'm— Well, I'm *everyone's* Lyle."

Aria looked at me before averting her eyes and wiping away her tears. "Don't worry, Lyle... I'm not going to bring this up later. I'll forget all about it, okay?"

"You just need to endure it for one day, Lyle," Sophia agreed. "How about you take it easy in your room?"

My word. It seemed these two lovely ladies wanted to spend the entire day with me.

"How far do my sins go? You horrid, beautiful man! You've driven two women mad with love!"

They both covered their faces, refusing to look at me.

"Lyle's incredible, really."

"He's a natural."

"At least he's having fun."

"It's always a joy to look at."

"Oh, Lyle... You really are the wonder child of House Walt. It takes a special sort of gift to make us laugh this much."

All the cackling from the Jewel had me muttering, "You're making me blush. Please, compliment me more."

"You're the best, Mister Lyle!" the third head laughed. "Please, keep sharing your wisdom. Man, I simply can't wait for tomorrow to come. Rather, how can he have such impeccable timing?"

"These are important discussions. Will we really be all right?" the fourth head asked with a bit of concern. "I'm not sure we can just leave this to Lyle."

"On the contrary, I'm looking forward to seeing how Mister Lyle's going to overcome this," the third replied. "How about we accept our losses and see how it plays out?"

"Yes, let's watch!" the sixth head boomed with laughter. "This might be better than a bad comedy."

Well, I'm glad that everyone's enjoying themselves. But... Wouldn't it be the

greatest sin of all to not spread my marvelous existence through the world? I need to show myself to far more people.

“All right! Let’s head out.”

As I turned to leave, Sophia raced in front of the door and spread out her hands. By her stance, she seemed keen on keeping me in.

“Sophia, stand down! Everyone out there—the world needs me!”

“You can’t! What *you* need right now is isolation! This room is all you need! I cannot let the wound in your heart spread any further!”

But as we were making a ruckus, the door swung open anyway, and there stood Monica and Shannon.

“Time for breakfast, cockhead!”

“Whoa, what a terrible sight so early in the morning. At least wear some clothes. Aren’t you embarrassed?”

Monica seemed happy enough, but Shannon furrowed her brow with disgust as she saw my top half... *Oh, she has a point. This certainly is embarrassing.*

“Whoops. Pardon me.”

“As long as you understand. You may be an idiot after a Growth, but at least you know how to listen. I guess you’re not all b— *Hey!*”

Just as she started to praise me, she suddenly burst into a scream.

“Yes?”

“Why are you stripping the rest?!”

“Huh?”

What is she talking about?

Shannon shook her head, unable to contain her shock. “Why are you looking at me like you’re thinking, *What is she talking about?* Do you seriously plan to strip naked in front of all of us?”

“Yeah, so?”

“Are you being serious?!”

“What’s wrong? You hated how I wasn’t committing to it, right? Yes, me too. I was just thinking how lopsided it was for me to only be naked up top. You’re right; after all, there exists no outfit in the world that surpasses my perfect naked form. My apologies, I’ll show you the goods right now.”

“Like hell I’m interested in seeing you naked! Hey! Don’t! Strip!”

Shannon’s eyes were teary.

Does she really want to see me naked that badly? Then I must hurry and strip!

I’d gotten my trousers off. Just as I was reaching for my underwear, Aria and Sophia—who had been petrified in shock—started moving.

“Not on my watch!”

“You mustn’t strip! You mustn’t!”

They both leaped on me, making quick work of pinning me down.

“L-Let go! Shannon wants to see my birthday suit!”

“Don’t screw with me?! Who in their right mind wants to see your shoddy thing?!”

“Shoddy?! Have you ever seen it before?! Don’t go around spreading lies! I’ve got it—in that case, everyone, confirm it. See with your own eyes whether it’s shoddy or not! Now, everyone, get an eyeful of my greatsword!”

I desperately tried to strip, only for Aria to pin me down.

“That’s enough! Monica, you help out too!”

Monica looked at me and blushed. “I should think not. I’m very interested in the chicken’s chicken. Even if it’s but a dagger, it is still the finest blade for me.”

I resisted Sophia’s unfathomable might as bit by bit I pulled the trunks down.

“Urgh, I’ll show it to you right away. On that note, could you two not get in the way? You too, Shannon. Don’t just stand there. Help me out.”

With both her hands covering her face, Shannon wasn’t looking at me. She was red to her ears.

“Don’t talk to me, pervert!”

“Wrong! I am perfect! Everyone else is a pervert!”

I resisted and fought. Another slight victory. Another centimeter down. But the two of them were very strong. They’d both just gone through Growths of their own, but apart from that, they had gotten quite skilled at their craft.

I’d worked up a sweat, and so, too, had Aria and Shannon in their desperate attempts to dress me.

“Don’t resist! Hey, don’t squirm!”

“It’ll be over soon enough, Lyle!”

I cannot submit! I cannot fold!

Resolving myself to nudity, I mustered one last bit of strength. “I can’t lose!”



Two women had their hands on my trunks, straddling me to prevent me from reaching my true potential. But I resisted fate. I desperately tried to liberate myself when a set of new silhouettes appeared in the doorway.

“Novem! Miranda! Save me!”

Novem and Miranda stared down at me expressionlessly.

“We’re saved,” Aria said, relieved. “You two, stop Lyle— Huh?”

Novem had grabbed Aria by the shoulder.

Meanwhile, Miranda had grabbed Sophia’s arm.

“Why me?”

In her fluster, Miranda looked at her coldly.

“I really trusted you, Sophia. What a shape.”

“Huh? Huuh?! Why?! Ah, no! Lyle is getting away!”

With newfound aid from Novem and Miranda, I managed to slip out of their grasp, tumbling across the floor and taking distance.

“Success!”

Aria was pinned down by Novem.

“Why are you holding me down?!”

“Aria, it seems that I have overestimated you. To think you would push Milord down—this is unforgivable.”

“Wrong! I didn’t push him down! Well, I did, but Lyle—!”

Novem’s voice had been expressionless, the emotionless tone sending a slight chill down my spine. But that was inconsequential. I finally pulled off my trunks. The rustling sound seemed to echo through the boisterous room.

By the time those trunks had fluttered through the air and landed on the floor, I had spread my arms wide. The sunlight poured through the window, providing me with the perfect backlight.

“Now, everyone, look at me!”

Novem was the first to oblige. Her face immediately flushed red.

“L-Lord Lyle? What are you—?”

“I’m presenting my nakedness!”

Aria wept. “This is why I was holding him down! Lyle tried to strip, so we were struggling to get his clothes back on!”

“Sorry.” Miranda released Sophia and apologized. “I should have realized.”

“N-No, we were the ones who were misleading.”

Monica stared fixedly at me.

“Dear chicken, you’re really not ashamed?”

“What part of my naked body is shameful? I’d be perfectly fine walking around outside like this.”

“That’s my chicken! You can calmly pull off what no sane person would dare imitate.”

“Naturally. I’m special, after all. Aha ha ha!”

As I let out an exaggerated laugh, a towel was chucked at me.

Miranda smiled. “Lyle... Put on some clothes.”

By her attitude, she clearly wasn’t taking no for an answer.

It was then that I realized: “How cute. You don’t want anyone else to see me naked?”

“Tomorrow’s going to be hell for you, Lyle.”

She sighed as I obliged her request, reluctantly wrapping a towel around my waist.

Once all that was settled, Eva and Clara joined us in the room. Clara took one look at Aria and Sophia—both worn and weary—and cocked her head.

Meanwhile, Eva looked at me and asked, “Hey, why is Lyle wearing a bath towel?”

“Well, they insisted that nudity was no good. Do you want to see?”

I excitedly tried to pull the towel off, only for Novem to grab my arm. I began to hear grating, jarring sounds that no arm should ever make.

“Milord, this conversation isn’t getting anywhere. Please restrain yourself.”

“Aww,” I groaned.

The third head chuckled. “How to put this... The vibe’s a bit strange this time. Is it that? Maybe he’s gotten used to it and settled down.”

“Yes, he’s a lot more obedient than usual,” the fifth said, seemingly holding in his laughter. “I understand that he’s confident in his naked body, but he’s lacking a bit of impact this time.”

Eva shrugged. For the time being, she got straight into it: “I’ve gathered some intel from my friends in the capital. Novem was right about why the palace wants the gryphon. It’s intended to be a gift, and there’s hardly a better gift than the gryphon that we—the capital’s subjugation force—took down.”

I crossed my legs as I sat on the bed, placing my locked hands atop my lap.

“Hmm. Do go on.”

“You’re kinda throwing me off here.”

Eva seemed bewildered by how different I was from my usual self. *Oh, I understand. I understand completely. Now that I’ve gone through this Growth, I’ve become so beautiful I can’t even believe it myself.*

I’m sure her heart is racing. Yes, that slightly fed-up look in her eyes had to be her attempt to hide her embarrassment—but I could see straight through her.

“Apparently, they want to have it stuffed, mounted, and ready before an important guest arrives at the capital. A few other rumors are going around, but that’s about the only definitive information I have.”

Now we knew why Ralph wanted the gryphon. He didn’t even know where we were keeping it, and so he was pacing back and forth, bothered by the fact he couldn’t steal it from us.

As for Clara, it seemed she hadn’t gathered any new intel. However...

“Miranda, can I ask you something?”

“What could it be?”

“I’ve been in Aramthurst all my life, so I don’t know too much about the capital. Therefore, I can’t be completely sure...but I thought it was strange.”

She was being far too ambiguous, and we all cocked our heads quizzically.

Miranda shrugged. “From my point of view, Aramthurst is the strange one. Was there something that bothered you specifically?”

Since she was speaking without concrete evidence, Clara seemed to lack confidence in herself. She stumbled over her words.

“Just speak your mind,” I told her. “I’ll accept your everything. Now jump onto my chest! I’ll welcome you anytime!”

“I would rather not.”

She must be embarrassed with everyone watching. Clara modestly turned me down.

“This is just my personal opinion,” she prefaced before explaining, “The citizens felt strangely agitated. Not all of them, but it was like a majority were waiting intently for...something. It reminded me of the mood before a festival.”

Shannon quickly shook her head. “There aren’t any festivals, this time of year. Are you sure you’re not imagining it?”

But Sophia sided with Clara on the matter.

“I understand how you feel,” Sophia said. “Back when I first came to the capital, it was so crowded and lively, I thought there had to be some sort of event going on.” She seemed a little happy, knowing that Clara felt the same way as her.

“Is that it? I hope I’m just imagining it.” Clara sighed.

Then, Eva looked at me. “Oh, that’s right. Lyle, there’s someone here to see yo—”

“Damiaaaaaan!”

“Oh, Lyle. You look cold, dressed like that.”

This boy-like man who carried an unwieldy staff unbefitting his petite build was Damian Valle. He sported unkempt brown hair and glasses.

Although he usually wore a white lab coat, today he opted to wear a regular coat to match the season.

Behind him, one of Monica's fellow automatons—Lily—stood on standby. Unlike Monica, however, she wore a subdued, navy blue dress. Her hair was black, and she rarely asserted her presence.

Damian had paid us a visit, and he seemed completely undeterred by the fact I was only wearing a towel. His only concern was that I looked cold, and he quickly moved on from that.

It didn't surprise me; he'd always been a scholar who was only interested in his own research. One of those genius types detached from the world at large.

"Are you talking about this? I'll admit, it's cold, but that matters little when I have to show this body off to the world at large."

"Oh really?"

"So anyways, what brings you to the capital? Aren't you supposed to be holding your lessons at Aramthurst?"

"Well, my laboratory exploded, you see. I came here to replace a few tools. But I managed to make a rather large Porter based on the blueprints you provided, so transportation's become nice and easy."

"I see. You have it rough."

As we both shared a merry laugh, Aria—who had been watching from behind—raised a startled voice.

"Wait. Hold on a second. I think we just casually breezed past the fact that the lab exploded, but isn't that pretty serious?"

"Yes." Lily nodded. "My master would have died without me. The building was left in a terrible state, and the headmaster flew into a rage."

"That headmaster is just awful," Damian complained.

"Aren't you the awful one here?" Sophia suggested, shaking her head.

Monica looked at Lily and clicked her tongue. For some reason, the two of them simply couldn't get along.

"Oh my, do I perhaps spy a Boinga? It's been too long, Miss Boinga, my dear sister with the ever-interesting name. Have you been doing well, Miss Boinga?"

Lily repeated Monica's prior name again and again, almost like she was trying to tease her.

"Old news! I've now received the splendid name Monica! This is why mass-produced models are such a bother. Their teasing has no class whatsoever."

"Don't get a big head just because you're a custom model."

"Do you want me to scrap you here and now?"

Just as they both held up their weapons and took their stances, Damian and I stepped in to mediate.

"Monica, no fighting."

"You're being noisy. How about we have some peace and quiet?"

Their shoulders drooped, and as we watched them reluctantly stow their weapons away, I asked Damian, "Incidentally, what are you here for today? I doubt you came just to see me."

"Oh yes, on to business. There was actually something bothering me." Damian went into something odd that was going on at the academy. "An academy professor suddenly abandoned their classes and moved to the capital. The headmaster was furious as you might imagine. He nagged me to look into it while I was here."

"Do you know anything?" Lily asked me. "Elves are usually the most well-informed, but even they said they knew nothing. We are at an impasse."

"An academy professor? No, this is the first I'm hearing of that."

I glanced at Eva, who shook her head. "I know that the professor is somewhere in the city, but I don't know what he's here for."

"This...smells like a case," I said, pressing a hand to my chin.

"I hate trouble," Damian disinterestedly went on. "Honestly, I can understand

why someone would want to abandon all that teaching nonsense. I'd love nothing more than to hand over the headmaster's letter and to be on my way. I can't return to Aramthurst until then."

Unfortunately, I couldn't meet Damian's expectations. I told him I'd reach out if I figured anything out, and then we went our separate ways.

Chapter 80: Negotiation

There was a sector of the capital dedicated to storehouses—streets upon streets lined with nothing but storage. This one evidently hadn't seen any use as of late as it was full of dusty junk and quite tattered to boot.

A chilling draft weaved its way through the piles of scrap wood.

Miranda had chosen this spot to hold the negotiations, but the dark look on her face suggested she was regretting it.

"Miranda, dear Miranda, that look doesn't suit you. Your smile will brighten up my life."

My statement of fact got a laugh from Shannon. "You've been like that all day. Aren't you embarrassed yet?"

"No, why?"

Miranda put a hand on her brow. "I completely misread the situation. Why hasn't he changed back yet?"

There was a large metal vat that we'd filled with firewood and turned into a heater. We were all huddled around it.

Novem looked at me anxiously. "Usually, he would have calmed down by now."

I've been in peak form since the crack of dawn!

Aria looked at me as she held her hands over the fire. "He's more subdued than usual, but I guess it's a trade-off. Lyle, seriously. Why do you have such awful timing?"

Clara performed a series of checks on her prosthetic left arm. "Will the negotiations be all right?" she asked, glancing at me.

Eva—wrapped in a blanket—sent me a doubtful look. "Lyle, do you still remember the plan? Are you able to negotiate?"

“Don’t worry.” I smiled to reassure her. “I don’t fail.”

“Where exactly does that confidence come from? The usual Lyle may be unreliable, but the current one is making me a lot more concerned.”

“There were some laughs,” I heard the seventh head disappointedly say. “But I’d like something with a bit more oomph if you understand what I’m saying.”

The sixth head agreed. “Yeah, it’s lacking. The naked bit was kinda funny, but...”

He seemed to take a liking to my naked form. *Hey, I’m not interested in men, but...I do have an immaculate physique that can even lead other men astray... Good grief, what a sinful beast I am.*

Gripping the Jewel, I stood and glanced back. Behind me towered a creature frozen in ice. It was still mostly in a wooden crate, the white, frosted ice faintly revealing the corpse of the eagle-headed monster sealed within. A gryphon—it was clear to see.

“They’ve arrived,” I explained. “They have the warehouse surrounded. They’re on the ceiling too.”

Sophia lifted up her battle-axe, and everyone else soon followed suit. We were all armed and ready as the warehouse door opened and Ralph entered in a winter coat. He was well guarded, surrounded by Renaldo and his other retainers who knew a thing or two about violence.

His voice echoed across the warehouse. “I’ve answered your call, whelp.”

I welcomed Ralph with a smile. “I’m glad you could make it. I have the goods right here.”

Ralph’s eyes sharpened. “You went out of your way to freeze it?”

“Yes, otherwise the decay would be something awful,” I said with a nod. “So we froze it. Wouldn’t that make it easier for you?”

“It would have been a lot *easier* if you just handed it over already. Go.”

One of his retainers came over to inspect the frozen monsters. He seemed to be confirming its most prominent features. Eventually, he returned to Ralph and whispered with him over something or another.

This is the deciding moment, I thought as I was hit with a flight of nervousness. But my beaming smile never faltered.

After hearing his retainer's report, Ralph nodded. "It seems there is no mistaking it."

"Naturally." I nodded too.

The man glared at me. "All right, now let's do business. I've prepared one hundred gold coins. Take them and leave the capital."

That's quite the high-handed attitude, I thought, inwardly raising a brow.

"Do you intend to purchase this beauty for a mere hundred gold coins? You must really be underestimating me," I said, adding all sorts of gestures to emphasize the point.

I heard the sixth head's voice from the Jewel. "Good, just like that. You're doing better than usual. Keep showing composure!"

"Why are you always so enthusiastic when it comes to these things?" the fifth head said with a sigh.

I stared Ralph straight in the eye as I named my price. "One thousand gold. If you don't offer that much, it's not even worth discussing."

Ralph's rage grew to palpable levels. Shannon clung to Miranda.

"Oh, no need to be so angry. You're frightening poor Shannon."

"You've got spirit, I'll give you that. But do you honestly think you can get that much money out of me?"

"Of course I do."

"Two hundred gold. I won't pay any more than that."

"That's very stingy of you. We were told it was a hippogryph hunt when we went out, only to come face-to-face with a gryphon. Considering the fact that this was your mistake, I'm sure you can put out a little more. Nine hundred gold."

"I'll admit my fault. But I went forward with the information I had. I thought it was a hippogryph at the time; everyone makes mistakes. Am I wrong? Two

hundred fifty gold coins.”

“Do you think I know nothing? You’re terribly brazen for someone who sent his own daughter to die. Eight hundred fifty gold.”

Our figures were gradually approaching one another. But Ralph was the first one to reach breaking point.

“Three hundred gold coins... I won’t play along with your games any further.”

A grin spread across my lips. “Eight hundred gold.”

The moment I said that, Ralph snapped his fingers. “Get rid of them.”

He was expressionless.

The retainers of House Circry burst through the windows. A number of them broke through the roof as well to make their entrance. They were all clad in black, and to blend in with the darkness, they first targeted our fire. But that was all well within expectations.

“How short-tempered!”

Aria moved swiftly, catching them off guard with her staggering speed, and knocked a handful unconscious with the butt end of her spear. Then Sophia raised her hand high, causing the remaining combatants to fall to their knees.

Ralph’s eyes widened ever so slightly.

“Renaldo, do it,” he commanded.

“Yes sir.”

As the retired butler came at us, Miranda threw her knife. He deflected it with his cane—and then proceeded to draw a blade from the same cane. A hidden weapon.

“Lyle,” the seventh head spoke up, “Auntie Milleia used pistols. I’m sure he’s got one hidden on him.”

I drew my saber to intercept his first strike. His swordsmanship was so sharp I could hardly believe he was an old man; his blow was so heavy it had me momentarily reeling. And just like that, he launched into a flurry of consecutive swings, all of which I was forced to parry.

“Your skills are commendable,” the butler said.

“Compliment me all you want, but I have nothing to offer you.”

When I took a horizontal swipe with my saber, Renaldo backed off just enough to barely avoid it before coming at me again.

“My Art isn’t working?!” Sophia exclaimed.

Sophia’s Art was an Art that altered weight. The first stage allowed her to change the weight of anything she touched. The second stage allowed her to change the weight of everything around her.

While his body was supposed to be so heavy he could barely stand, Renaldo seemed perfectly unfazed.

“Arts are not omnipotent, madame. You should remember this—your Art is less effective on those who are stronger than you.”

Taking distance from me, Renaldo held out his left hand.

“Monica.”

Monica immediately got between us, bracing her massive hammer like a shield just in time for the sound of the gun going off. But Renaldo didn’t panic. He immediately shifted to his next attack. However...

“Wh-What?”

Threads drifted through the storehouse air. What’s more, these were soft, light threads that would fly from the slightest breath.

On contact, they would burn and disappear. And the fuel they used to burn was mana—these were special threads produced by Miranda’s Art that would sap the strength of whoever touched them.

Renaldo quickly sensed the danger and tried to back away, but his legs wouldn’t move. The ground had been carpeted with sticky threads.

Miranda stepped forward.

“Renaldo, I’m sorry, but I’m going to have you stand down.”

“Milady? I see, so this is your Art.”

With a horizontal swing of her hand, Miranda sent her stuck threads flying, pinning down the retainers of House Circry. Unable to move, they struggled to break free, but to no avail.

In the depths of the storehouse, Porter's engine started to hum. The lights flickered on, lighting up the storehouse in its entirety. Clara was in the driver's seat.

Sheathing away my saber, I said, "Is it over already? That's no good. At times like these, you need to at least come with greater numbers. Otherwise, it hardly feels like a challenge at all."

Ralph clenched his fist.

"You're acting stuck up for a brat hiding behind a woman."

"Hey, I'll give you that one," I said with a laugh. Then I resumed the negotiation. "Now then, the retainers of House Circry have become hostages. What say you we add them to the negotiation table? How does a thousand gold sound?"

"Whelp!"

"Oh, are you sure about that? There's no real reason we need to sell this monster to you. Yes, what's preventing me from simply going to another faction?"

Ralph gritted his teeth. But now that he knew that his retainers weren't going to help him, he quickly changed his policy.

"Eight hundred gold is the limit of what I can provide."

"That's lower than I expected. Well, so be it."

The sixth head said, "That's two hundred gold higher than expected. That kid must not be used to these situations. I guess he's a typical civil official."

"Eight hundred!" the fourth head couldn't contain his laughter. "What a steal!"

"We'll seal the deal at my estate," Ralph assured me.

"Yes, I'm fine with that. Please make sure you have all eight hundred coins

accounted for.”

Eva had retrieved the weapons of our assailants. Their restraints were undone and they were promptly deposited outside by my comrades.

As Miranda stood on guard at the storehouse’s entrance, Ralph spoke to her.

“Miranda, do you have any intentions of coming home?”

Miranda sharpened her eyes, but since Shannon clung to her, she let go of the weapon she’d immediately grasped for.

“I’m not coming home... And I see you’re not going to ask Shannon.”

Ralph looked at Shannon. But quickly, his eyes returned to Miranda.

Shannon strengthened her grip on Miranda’s shirt; tears had surfaced in her eyes.

“Don’t just stand there. Say something,” Miranda urged him.

Ralph spoke in a cold tone to his daughter. “I need you for the sake of the house. If I have to, I’ll take Shannon in too. If you wish for an apology, you may wish for it when you are back at the estate.”

“Do you really think I’d just go along with it when you put it like that?”

Her father had changed ever since her mother had passed. That was something Miranda found incredibly frustrating.

“Ever since mother died, you started to work for the house and the house alone. There were times I was worried about you, I’ll admit. There were times it hurt to look at you. I thought that my gentle father would return someday. But I was wrong. How long are you going to drag this on?!”

Ralph sent her a mocking smile. “So you wanted kindness? You were reeled in by an outrageous man for something so petty... You will both come to regret this. Perhaps that whelp would have been better off if he’d been taken out by me.”

“What do you mean?”

“Think about it yourself. You’re out of my hands now. Do as you please.”

Up to that point, Shannon had managed to swallow her voice. But it had finally gotten the better of her, and she began to sniffle. Ralph never once turned to his crying daughter.

Miranda held her.

“Sis, I... I...”

“I’m sorry, Shannon. It’s all right. I’m here, with you.”

Suddenly, there were footsteps racing toward them.

“I heard everything!”

Appearing before them while striking a pose, Lyle had completely failed to read the mood. He was smiling from ear to ear.

Even Miranda was bothered.

“Lyle, can you give us a moment?”

“Read the damn mood,” Shannon angrily scolded him. “Why are you smiling?! Is it that funny to see us thrown away like that?!”

Although Miranda for one didn’t think Lyle was mocking them, this was a delicate problem for her and Shannon both. She didn’t have the composure to smile even if he was trying to lighten the mood.

And to them, Lyle said, “Don’t be stupid. You weren’t thrown away.” He lightly beat a fist against his chest. “You chose me—Lyle Walt. Now be proud. The man you chose is going to be the best man in the world!”

Shannon looked at Miranda’s face before pointing at Lyle.

“Sis, are you seriously planning on following this guy? I’m starting to get worried.”

Miranda smiled. “Right. It’s worrisome, so we need to get a grip on things.”

Shannon had stopped crying now. She began berating Lyle. “And you, just how long are you going to stay like that? Turn back already! It’s starting to get annoying!”

“What? Are you bashful? What an adorable one you are.”

“I’m not bashful! Keep that overinflated ego of yours in check!”

“Overinflated? That’s where you’re wrong, Shannon. I am amazing, and that is a fact. And I’ll definitely make you both happy, so just stay by my side.”

When she saw Lyle strike another pose, Miranda’s smile widened. “I can’t wait for tomorrow. Lyle, I’m never going to forget what you just said for as long as I live.”

“Fwa ha ha ha!” Lyle burst into laughter. “Just what I want! After all, I, Lyle, am a man who never tells a lie.”

Shannon grimaced, her discomfort clear to see. “No, you were doing nothing but lying back there.”

“Hey now, when did I tell a single lie? I never said I was selling a gryphon, not once. So it’s not a lie.”

And hearing that, Miranda let out a light chuckle. “It’s certainly not a lie. Still, it sure is cold today... Oh?”

As the three of them stared up at the sky above, snow began to drift down toward them.

The next day, Ralph and his men were standing in a warehouse on the Circry estate.

Ralph’s eyes widened as he took in what he’d purchased. The frozen monster wasn’t a gryphon at all.

Once the block of ice had melted, what emerged was—a hippogryph. A very similar monster with the same eagle head... The beheaded hippogryph had fur pelts wrapped around its legs to make it look more gryphon-esque in the frosted ice.

As Ralph quivered in rage, Renaldo handed him a soaked letter.

“Master, this was included in the ice.”

Ralph violently snatched it and read through the contents.

“This is the hippogryph your daughter defeated. Display it with pride! Oh...did you think it was a gryphon? Too bad!”

As he crumpled the letter in his fist, Renaldo shook his head. “I questioned the servant who did the check. Although he researched a gryphon’s characteristics from literary sources in advance, he had never seen the real thing, neither living nor stuffed, before. Our unit is specialized in antihuman combat, you see.”

They were trained to fight humans, and so they were a bit dim when it came to monsters. In the royal capital protected by sturdy walls, some even grew up having never seen a monster before.

What’s more, a gryphon was a very rare beast, and a large majority had only ever seen it in books.

“That whelp!” Ralph tore apart the letter in a fit of rage.

The look on Renaldo’s face turned stern. “Master, the young man Milady chose is a formidable one.” And implicitly he asked, *Do you really want to fight him, knowing that?*

Ralph steadied his breath. “There is no need. He won’t be able to go anywhere, after all.”

The snow that had started only yesterday had begun to accumulate in the capital. It would hinder all trade routes, and this meant that Lyle and his party members wouldn’t be able to leave the capital for the time being.

“Relish in your victory. It won’t last,” Ralph said before leaving the warehouse and making for the manor. Renaldo followed along behind him.

“You chose me, was it?”

“And weren’t you going on about everyone wanting to see you naked?”

“This was a fun one.”

“Nothing too impactful, but we got to enjoy ourselves for a decently long time.”

“That’s the Walt wonder child for you.”

I holed myself up in my room at the inn, shaking beneath the blankets.

“Wrong... That wasn’t me. That was anything but me!”

I’d exposed myself in front of everyone. I also got the feeling I’d said embarrassing line after embarrassing line the entire time.

How was I supposed to look my party members in the eye after this?!

“No matter how much you deny it, it won’t change the truth,” the fifth head coldly told me. “That aside, you should have started to get a little used to Growths, but you’re still just as terrible.”

His words were like a knife staving straight through my chest. I thought I was going to drop down to the floor unconscious.

Everyone was so mindful, so warm, so accepting ever since I woke up the next morning. It was agonizing.

Miranda and Shannon would look at me with a grin. It felt like Clara would give a somewhat relieved smile whenever she saw me. Surely she was thinking: *You’re just like me.*

“It’s not my fault. It’s the Growth’s fault,” I tried to convince myself.

But the third head maliciously said, “Huh? Are you sure you should be saying that? Sure, you were in a post-Growth, but you did in fact cause trouble for everyone. Like telling everyone to look at your body, or saying you’d make them happy... You could go and tell them it was all a lie, but I don’t think that’s going to work.”

I was crying.

And as I suffered, the room to the door opened—even when I’d made sure to lock it. The girl who showed absolutely no consideration was Monica.

“Damn chicken, your three-o’-clock snack awaits.”

“I don’t need it.”

That was the least of my worries.

Even though I was writhing in shame, Monica seemed delighted.

“Oh, look how embarrassed you are. Still, that was a nice one. I managed to record every nook and cranny of your naked body. Putting aside whether or not you have a greatsword, I’ll at least concede it was no dagger.”

“Pfft...” I heard from the Jewel.

That was definitely someone trying not to laugh.

Apart from that...

“A greatsword, he says.”

“Exaggeration, much?”

“Yeah, not a dagger sounds about right.”

“You’re still a growing boy, Lyle. You’ve got a future.”

“This brings me back to when Lyle was still a baby boy.”

I was so embarrassed I wanted to cry. No, I was crying already.

“Please forget about it,” I pleaded.

Monica looked at me, her smile brimming with compassion. “That’s impossible. I’ll never forget. It’s my precious treasure.”

“Don’t call my naked body a treasure!”

“I won’t forget as long as I live!”

While Monica was so happy she started dancing on the spot, I pulled the covers over my face and rolled into a ball.

“Goddess dammit! Why does this have to happen to me?!”

Chapter 81: The Miracle of Remelrandt

Snow had begun to accumulate in the capital. Though there were clear days, they would quickly be followed by long spells of snow.

On the first floor of the inn where we were staying, the peddlers chatted with concern.

“We can’t go anywhere like this.”

“This year is going to be a cold one.”

“Look on the bright side. We don’t have to worry about being pelted when we’re on the road.”

The snow alone was trouble enough. We were in pretty much the same position—we wanted to leave the capital, but couldn’t.

Soon the inn’s door opened, and in came Aria and Sophia.

I went up to them. “How was it?” I asked.

Aria shook her head as she brushed the snow off her clothes.

“It’s hopeless. The roads are so buried up that I can’t even see them. Some places, I can barely make out what might be roads, but it’s too dangerous.”

They’d gone out to check the situation, and now they were shivering a bit from the cold.

“The wagon trains aren’t running either,” said Sophia. “The merchants around the gate all said they didn’t recommend going out.”

I shrugged. “So we’re stuck here.”

And as I resigned myself to the fact that there was nothing we could do about it, Clara came down from the second floor.

“Did you just come from outside? Then could you tell me if the shops are open?”

Sophia smiled. “The bookshop was open. Most of the stores are doing

business as usual. The capital seems to be full of hard workers.”

“But no one’s setting up street stalls anymore,” Aria added. “Are you heading out?”

Clara gave a light nod. “I finished all the books I brought, so I thought I’d restock.”

“All of them? Didn’t you have almost twenty?”

“I have thirty. Anyway, I will be going shopping.”

You read that much? I thought, startled. But before Clara could leave, Sophia stopped her.

“It’s dangerous to go alone.”

We’d only just finished our dealings with Ralph.

The sixth head cackled. “That brat might be considering vengeance.”

I know this was strange for me to say, given I was the one who cheated him and all—but it wouldn’t be strange if he tried to get back at us. The original plan was for us to leave the royal capital as soon as possible, but the snow prevented it. We had to avoid acting alone, keeping wary of anything Ralph might do.

I looked at Aria and Sophia and saw that neither seemed very keen on returning to the cold world outside. Although I considered calling someone else down...

“I’ll go with you,” I said.

Clara’s expression softened ever so slightly. “Thank you. Then let’s go together.”

Given that we were going to a bookstore, she seemed to be in a very good mood.

“Clara’s a real bibliophile,” I heard the third head say. “I’d love to have a good chat with her one of these days.”

Will I ever be able to introduce my ancestors to my party members? I thought a bit before concluding that no one would believe me. I gave up on the idea. Though he said he wanted to talk, my ancestors didn’t have any intentions of

revealing their existence to anyone either.

They seemed to think it was unnecessary, seeing as they were going to disappear anyway.

We stopped by three bookstores before we finally began to make our way back. The bracing cold had us ducking into a warm-looking café on the way, however.

The snow was coming down fiercely, and it seemed we weren't the only ones who couldn't endure the cold. The shop was considerably crowded. At a nearby table, a couple sat across from one another, chatting as they held hands over the table.

"It's almost here."

"Hmm? Oh, you're talking about that again."

The mention of "that" seemed to cause the man to remember something. He shifted the topic.

"I hear that she's still staying in the capital, you know," he said.

"She doesn't know when to give up. As a woman myself, I'm not sure what to think about her."

"I know, right?"

I didn't know what they were talking about, but it seemed to concern a woman. But, as I wasn't too interested, I turned my attention to my warm drink.

A good sip did wonders to warm up my freezing body from within, but it also made me feel too sluggish to leave the café. For a while now, Clara had done nothing but read books at the seat across from mine.

"Is it interesting?" I casually asked.

Clara lifted her face and nodded. Then, she raised the book so I could see its title.

The cover read *The Truth of Remelrandt*.

There was a region named Remelrandt. Banseim Kingdom had waged and won a war to secure this contested land as a new addition to the kingdom's growing territory. Additionally, it was close to the territory of House Walt.

"Is that a history book?"

Clara shook her head. "Technically, it's historical fiction. It's about the Miracle of Remelrandt. The book was only published recently, and I heard it was popular, so I bought it. It's not completely unrelated to you, right, Lyle?"

This hefty book was apparently about the decisive battle known as the Miracle of Remelrandt. It didn't exactly have anything to do with me—it more concerned my ancestor Sley Walt.

The third head of House Walt earned himself the title The Hero General and carved the Walt name into the annals of history.

However...

"The Miracle of Remelrandt? That wasn't a miracle. Far from it."

The man himself sounded disgusted.

Clara had evidently taken a liking to the book as she spoke with enthusiasm—well, as much enthusiasm as the listless girl could muster.

"The author did their own independent research into the Miracle of Remelrandt. It happened at a time when various nations were fighting fierce wars to expand their territories. The Warring States period, as they called it. It's a popular era to set stories, and all sorts of people have looked into it. However, this book is especially intriguing."

"The Warring States period, huh."

"Apparently, the Miracle of Remelrandt was the battle that put an end to the entire era. The author postulates that there may have been far greater significance to that battle than we realize."

Really? I thought. The third head, who was alive at the time, offered a rather dubious response.

"Yeah, there were a lot of wars. I guess you can call it the Warring States period... But if you want to get to the crux of it, it was all Banseim's fault."

...Huh?

It seemed the fourth head wasn't too knowledgeable. "Was it?" he asked curiously.

"I mean, all Remelrandt did was sweep away the sparks that had been scattered all over the place. The reason that specific war even started was awful. It was all from false accusations, and they knew it. I was absolutely appalled."

Clara looked at me. "U-Umm..." she bashfully said, "also, the author suggests that the king at the time and...your ancestor...had a *special* relationship that went beyond lord and retainer."

"What?"

"What?"

The third's voice overlapped with my own.

Clara went on, "Banseim had decided on a strategy of encircling the enemy and wearing them down. The Remelrandt side retaliated, opting to focus all their forces on one point to break through. That was when your ancestor, Sley Walt, led a mere handful of soldiers and charged at the enemy army. They laid down their lives buying time for Banseim's army to regroup and defend the main camp."

"They did? I didn't know that."

"It's rare for even knights who have sworn loyalty to His Majesty to go that far. Apparently, homosexuality is rampant among the knights and soldiers, and...err, the author suggests this was even more so the case back then. That was possibly the norm. So perhaps they had that sort of relationship."

She couldn't even hear the man, but the third screamed anyway. He was usually all smiles; he usually enjoyed teasing people, yet now he screamed with rage from the depths of his soul.

"There's no way I'd ever get into a relationship with that bastard! Quit it! I won't accept these baseless rumors! What's more, what do you mean homosexuality was the norm?! Are you high?! And lord and retainer?! To hell

with that!”

As he flew into a rage, there really was no use in talking to him. I ignored him and listened to Clara instead.

“According to the author’s findings, the king showed a great deal of favoritism to Sley’s son. The Walts were swiftly promoted from baronets to barons.”

“That’s right,” the fourth affirmed. “And I went through hell because of it.”

“But that wasn’t all; the author confirmed several other instances of preferential treatment, such as when the king found Sley’s son a lovely bride.”

I couldn’t give her a clear answer. “I...think I may have...heard about that before.”

“Is that so? Then the contents of this book may be true.”

“Lyle!” the third head pleaded to me. “Do whatever it takes to correct this misunderstanding. At this rate, she’ll think I was together with that piece of shit. These baseless, nonsensical claims are going to spread. That’s something I’ll never accept. Please, protect my honor.”

No, err... I don’t know what happened either. You never told me.

“Umm, I don’t think the third head—Sley Walt—was in any sort of relationship with His Majesty.”

“Is that a fact only passed down through House Walt? Then could you please tell me what parts I’ve gotten wrong?”

Her eyes lit up. She straightened out her glasses as she took out a notepad. She seemed overjoyed.

“I-I’m sorry... Please give me a bit of time to remember.”

“Certainly! I’ll be waiting.”

Though she seemed a little disappointed, she quickly put on a delighted smile.

The third head wailed, “Stupid Lyle! Hurry and resolve Clara’s misunderstanding! This is just cruel. Nuts to all you future historians!”

Incidentally, the author was a woman.

After we returned to the inn, the third head told me to stop by the Jewel at once. So I did...

The third head was standing in front of his room of memories—the door behind his chair.

“Let’s go,” he immediately said.

The soft look in his eyes was gone. His eyes were sharp, lifeless.

“I need you to know everything, Lyle.”

“Umm... Is it *that* different from the story?”

The other ancestors wouldn’t say a word; they were too put off by how different the third was from his usual self.

Only the fourth head had it in him to speak up. “I don’t know the specifics of what happened either,” he said. “You’re making me curious. Can I come too?”

“Sure. Now let’s go already.”

Without his usual composure, the third head led us into his room. I passed through the open doorway to find myself on...the battlefield. It must have just rained, as both armies were covered in mud as they exchanged volleys of arrows.

At times, magic would be unleashed. The air was filled with explosions and screams. And on the ground, I could see the fallen. So many fallen.

The fourth head squinted. “This isn’t Remelrandt.”

With a nod, the third turned his attention to himself—the version of him riding a horse and taking command.

“That piece of shit would proclaim it was for the noble goal of expanding the territory, and he’d wage war. War, after war, after war. We were at war with everyone. Banseim was relatively large at the time, see. We successfully invaded our neighbors one after the next.”

The war that the third head—that Sley Walt fought in was one of those invasions.

From atop his horse, Sley held his sword high as he issued instructions.

“No need to do anything drastic! As long as we can buy some time, it’s our win!”

He led around a hundred and fifty soldiers, though rather than professionals, they looked more like enlisted farmers. Granted, there were a few knights among them.

The third head explained, “The second head had everything in order when he passed over the reins. Thanks to that, I was able to develop the territory with ease. At first, at least. We got new settlements, and new life was breathed into the land around the estate. There was a monthly market, and people started putting out stalls too.”

At the time, he apparently had just over a thousand villagers.

“It was all so laid-back before we became barons,” the fourth head reminisced.

“Fourth, I don’t know if you feel indebted to that bastard or not, but from my perspective, what he did for you was only natural. To be blunt, I hate war.”

Sley’s army continued to stall an invading army until reinforcements arrived to defeat them. He watched from his horse. Then the memory shifted, and Sley was walking among the fallen enemy soldiers. One of them still barely clung to life, writhing and gasping in pain.

As Sley approached him, the soldiers cried out, “Foul dog of Banseim! Go to hell!”

Then, he coughed up blood and fell limp.

The third put a hand over his face. “It really was hell... There were valid reasons to grow the territory. Banseim’s population had grown too large at the time. Too many bad harvests in a row and we’d face famine and death. It happened too often. We needed to steal if we wanted to live.”

Food was scarce, and with one wrong move, Banseim’s own nobles would be at each other’s throats, only exhausting the nation’s forces. It was in such times that the king came out with a new policy—expansion.

If the nobles were going to fight for resources within the territory, then they might as well snatch them from the outside instead.

“Vice, our homeland, was blessed. We wouldn’t starve to death even when the harvests were foul. But other places in Banseim weren’t so lucky. If I didn’t help them with the wars, then maybe our territory would be next in line for invasion. Those other Banseim nobles could have taken everything from us.”

Banseim was made up of feudal lords big and small who all begrudgingly followed the strongest feudal lord of the bunch—it just so happened that the mightiest lord was the king. There was hardly any loyalty to speak of. The king’s political power was derived from his military and financial might.

There wasn’t a strong national consciousness. People of one region did not feel any kindred to those of another. And so, the lords who all belonged to the same nation had no qualms with fighting one another.

“Not joining the war simply wasn’t an option. But when he inherited the throne, that piece of human filth just didn’t get it. He didn’t understand.”

A young king had inherited a war that had started as a battle against starvation. In his rush for glory, the original intent was forgotten, and the expansion itself became the war’s main driving force.

“War costs money. It exhausts the soldiers—the same men who till the land. All the manpower that would have gone to cultivation was invested in war. Sure, there were gains, there were rewards, but I hated every second of it.”

The scene changed to one of Banseim’s soldiers assailing the villages of an enemy nation. Even in the urban areas, the knights and soldiers plundered to their hearts’ content. It was one atrocious sight after the next. It was painful just watching it play out, and Sley gazed from a distance.

One of his men made a proposal. “Lord, are we really not going to take part?”

His men had been ordered not to take part in the plundering, but there were those among them who weren’t satisfied with his decision.

Sley glared at the man. “I gave my order.”

“But everyone’s doing it. Can’t we earn just a little bit of—”

Sley swung his sword, sending the soldier's head flying. Bathed in his blood, Sley turned to the rest of his men. He didn't even flinch as he restated his orders.

"Stay here on standby. Any and all who take part in this travesty will be mercilessly cut down."

Unlike the third head I was used to, Sley was a terrifying man on the battlefield. The third head stared at himself with lament.

"I could only stand back and watch. I did not stop them. I did not save them. Anyone who calls a guy like that the Hero General, well, they'd have to be a damn fool."

"I think it's noble that you didn't join in, at least," the fourth head offered.

"Noble? Hardly. It was all a calculated move. I'd strip invaders of all their valuables in a heartbeat, but this was different... I knew if I took part, I'd eventually want to go to war myself. I'd want to fight to steal."

Those who learned how profitable it was to plunder would gradually lose their sense of guilt. They'd grow crueler with each battle. Each time they stole, they'd desire even more.

"It was madness. Everyone had gone mad, and they finally failed with Remelrandt."

Once again, the scene shifted. This time, we were in a tent.

A man even younger than Sley sat in an extravagant chair. He wore dazzling armor and was surrounded by knights. I could also make out what seemed like the other feudal lords taking part in the battle.

Sley seemed to be only there as an attendant of one of the barons taking part in the meeting.

"We were not lord and retainer, or anything of the sort. A local baron who I was greatly indebted to was roped in, so I reluctantly joined."

The baron was the benefactor of House Walt at the time. This meant he was a powerful noble who ruled the greater region that House Walt's territory was a part of. House Walt was subordinate as a vassal house to the baron.

The fourth head's glasses let off an ominous glint as he inspected the baron. He stared with a sharp glare.

"You seem quite close."

Although the third head seemed to pick up on something, he indifferently explained, "My grandpa was a dragon slayer, and my dad was feared for all the monsters and bandits he took down. I think they gave the baron the impression that House Walt would be reliable on the battlefield. He always called on me whenever he went to war."

The meeting in the tent commenced.

Holding the command baton, the young king in gaudy armor looked down at the map as he explained the plan.

"We shall cleanly wipe out those Remelrandt fools who insult us as heinous fiends. Our forces outnumber them three to one. We'll surround them and annihilate them."

All the knights around him sang praise of the man.

"A wonderful plan."

"Those Remelrandt cowards must be quivering in fear of our numbers."

"I'm just worried they might run away before the battle begins."

But the lords taking part were less than impressed. It was like the tent had been divided in two, and one side was clearly more enthused than the other.

"Umm, what is this?"

"Hmm? Oh, everyone around that piece of garbage is from a court noble house. He had a habit of handing any land he gained over to his favorite vassals. There were a few feudal lords who followed him too... But most of them had already washed their hands of him by then."

The baron whispered, "Sley, what do you think?"

"We're exhausted from too many consecutive battles. It's hard to say our equipment's in tip-top shape either. Even having three times their troops isn't enough to give me confidence."

“I’ve heard the enemy’s morale is high.”

“Yes, they’re fired up over their absolute hatred of Banseim and all it stands for. We’ve done enough to deserve it.”

The other lords voice similar opinions.

“Are the court nobles just going to take command from the back?”

“We’re always the ones being worn away.”

“And they’re the ones taking all the achievements.”

I was only just seeing the guy for the first time in my life, but even I could tell that the king was growing conceited. He’d won far too many times, due in no part to anything he’d done. His ears only went to the compliments from his closest yes-men, while the opinions of the lords were disregarded.

“You’re being too negative,” he’d say.

“You just need to follow orders.”

“Damn coward.”

Not a single one was heard.

Finally, the young king said, “Our army shall encircle those Remelrandt fools and send them to their deaths!”

Sley watched with cold eyes.

As soon as the battle began, the Remelrandt army charged straight toward Banseim’s main camp.

Inside his tent, the king was losing his mind.

“Why?! Why are they headed in our direction?! How long until our reinforcements?!”

He must have thought that the enemy would falter once completely surrounded, but instead, they had made a mad dash straight for a now-understaffed main camp. Since the bulk of the forces had been distributed all around the encirclement, there were few left to defend.

Although the allied forces were engaging in battle, Banseim's main camp would likely fall before the enemy was taken out.

Something occurred to me at that moment... *Is this guy just an idiot or something?*

But the third head spoke to the contrary. "Encircling the enemy wasn't a terrible plan. But underestimating them was. The king must not have been aware of what he and his men had done."

I thought it was stupid, but the third head didn't refute the plan itself.

From the enemy's point of view—Banseim was a land of pillaging, plundering demons who would find any excuse to invade and destroy anyone who had the misfortune of sharing a border with it.

"Losing just wasn't an option for them. I mean, if they lost, what awaited them was death and destruction. They were desperate... Well, I was the same, in that regard."

Into the tent came a mud-covered Sley and his benefactor baron.

As soon as he recognized the baron, the king screamed, "What have you come back for?! Hurry and fight! I-If I lose, then Banseim is defeated!"

His tagalongs were panicking, while the feudal lords glared at the king. And then, at that moment, Sley pushed the baron aside and hammered his fist into the king's face.

The fourth head's mouth was agape.

"What are you doing?!" I cried out.

The third grinned. "That one was refreshing!"

The king flew through the air, then collided with his chair and tumbled to the floor. Although his followers were momentarily stunned, they quickly picked up their weapons.

"Y-You insolent wretch!"

"I don't know who you are, but you won't die an easy death!"

"Pin him down!"

They didn't know Sley's name, and neither did anyone else. At the time, Sley was nothing more than one of the many small-time lords.

However...

"Huh?"

When the feudal lords and their knights drew their blades, they sliced not through Sley, but through the king's court noble followers.

The king pressed his right hand to his bleeding nose, trembling. His face paled now that he had no allies around him. He was on his hands and knees as Sley approached him, stooped down, grabbed him by the hair, and lifted him up.

"D-Don't think you'll leave in one piece after this..."

The king's voice was quavering wildly, and by contrast, Sley spoke coldly and calmly.

"Yes, that's right. Because of you, I'm probably going to die here. But rest at ease. You're going to die here too."

The lords and knights approached, still with their swords drawn. Unable to bear it any longer, the king soiled himself.

"Did you think everyone here had sworn their loyalty to you? That's not it at all. The only thing we need is the seat you sit on. We swore our loyalty to the king's authority, and we haven't the slightest bit of it to spare for you. Now, do you really think there's any need for an incompetent king who has plenty of replacements?"

The king wept. "S-Spare me. I'll do anything! Please, just spare me!"

"I see." A cold smile crossed Sley's face. "In that case, why don't I turn you into a splendid king, then?"

As his eyes gave off a faint light, the king began to tremble.

"Is that your Art?"

"That's right. You should figure out how to do that pretty soon."

He began to act strange, His teeth began clattering, and it was like he simply couldn't stop shaking.

“If you direct any ill intent toward my family or my territory, then from that day forth, you will be visited by unending nightmares. The same will happen if you try to punish any of the lords gathered here. The moment you try to mete out even the slightest penalty, you shall fall into your worst nightmares, whether you be awake or asleep.”

Once Sley released him, the king began to wave his arms around, as though he was fighting off beings only he could see.

“No! Don’t come any closer! Save me! Someone, save me!”

“Oh dear,” Sley giggled. “It looks like you really were planning to get back at us when all was said and done. If you don’t want to be tormented forever, you’d better keep your hands off of us.”

Soon, the king had lost his will to resist. He fell down on the spot, crying.

The baron approached. “Sley, what are you going to do now?”

“I’m going to buy some time... Please take care of this idiot. And my family too.”

“Got it.”

“How ironic,” the fourth head muttered.

Sley then directed his voice to the surrounding lords. He told all of his plans to buy time and was met with praise and encouragement. And with a bitter smile, he left the tent. The moment he was struck by the outside air, his face turned to one of resolve.

Once he arrived at where his knights and soldiers awaited him, Sley declared, “Sorry, but you’re going to have to die with me. If you’re a young brat, or if you’ve got young brats, stay behind... Everyone else, you can resent me all you want.”

Once he’d given that brief explanation, a man with white-speckled hair stepped forward. I recognized his face.

“That’s the same guy who was complaining to the second head.”

The man had been unable to understand the second head's troubles, his feelings. I glared at him, but...

"Your predecessor has done a lot for me. Young master, I hope that joining you might help atone for my sins."

Sley gave a slight laugh. "So you're going to keep calling me *young master* to the end, huh."

Though Sley said he didn't want anyone young, the next to come forward was a young knight.

"Milord, a-allow me to join you too."

The third head looked upon him fondly. "That kid's the first of the Lundberg name. I heard about it from the seventh head, but it's a very curious feeling, knowing that the line of the kid I knighted continues on to this day."

"Back in my day," the fourth head happily said, "he was a very reliable knight. Looking at it like this, it's like my loyal retainer was a gift from you."

The Lundbergs were some of House Walt's most distinguished vassals. Even now, the house was known for producing capable knights one after another to support House Walt.

The knight I looked up to...was also from House Lundberg.

Sley smiled wide as he gifted the first Lundberg with a solid punch.

I had my hunch when he punched the king, and this time I was sure of it. He was using our founder's Art to enhance his physical strength, allowing him to exhibit tremendous might. However, this time he had held back even more than when he'd punched the king.

"You're staying behind."

Another soldier tried to call out to the first Lundberg, only to get no reply. "Oh, he's unconscious, Milord."

"That works out perfectly. He's too earnest for his own good. Once he wakes up, send him back to the territory to deliver the news... Well then, we're off."

Taking along a few dozen soldiers, Sley charged at the approaching army of

Remelrandt.

He swung his sword from atop his horse and pressed on. One after another, enemy knights were felled.

Brandishing the blade, he shouted, “Advance!”

In the next instant, orbs of fire rained down from the sky far and wide, covering everything around him in hellfire.

The Remelrandt soldiers looked up and cried out in panic.

“Is that an illusion?” the fourth head weighed in.

The third nodded. “Correct. That’s the next stage. All it does is show illusions. Oh, and one more thing...”

As Sley and his soldiers charged, all of a sudden, the enemy forces began to fight among themselves. Using that opportunity to make it deep into enemy lines, he could finally see the enemy commander.

The commander waved his spear to parry Sley’s blade.

“It’s an illusion! Find the Art’s user and kill him!”

He was older than Sley. A muscular man who gave off the impression of a brave warrior.

They exchanged a few more mounted blows, sword against spear, until finally, the general pounced on Sley and grappled him to the ground.

The battle resumed with both sides smeared in mud.

“Banseim filth. I can’t let you get away with any more atrocities.”

“I wholeheartedly agree. But—I can’t let you get past me either.”

Sley’s swordplay was slippery and fluid. His ever-changing illusory style gave the proud commander a run for his money.

Watching the battle, Sley explained, “He was very strong. And noble. I’ll bet he took a stand in righteous indignation the moment he heard of Banseim’s misdeeds... I didn’t want to fight him.”

The commander's spear lopped off Sley's left arm. As the arm flew through the air, the general widened his eyes. For Sley had dived into his bosom and plunged his sword through his chest.

"I see... So you were the one...showing the illusions."

As he pulled his blade from the flesh, his left arm was certainly there. What the commander thought he had cut had been nothing more than an illusion.

But Sley was nearing his limit. His face was pale. His mana was running out and it seemed like he would collapse at any moment. His allies around him were being taken out one after the next.

"Young master!"

A soldier with a spear impaled through his stomach brought Sley his horse. He spat up blood as he helped Sley into the saddle, and gave the horse a slap on the rump to send it galloping.

The soldier was then met with several enemy spears through his back—but through it all, he smiled.

"Why... In the second's time, he was...!"

During the second head's time, he was a villager who did nothing but complain and bring trouble. But in the third head's time, he risked his life to save his lord... I couldn't understand.

"Even if he didn't understand at one point, maybe he thought back on it later and realized my dad was correct. It happens. And perhaps he felt a sense of guilt because of it."

As Sley fled, an arrow stabbed into his back.

The enemy chased. The enemy nearly caught up. And then—allied reinforcements finally arrived from the encirclement.

The third head told me, "My territory was close to the battlefield. If Banseim lost, my land was the one they would trample underfoot. So I couldn't lose. I knew it was all Banseim's fault, but I couldn't tell my family to die."

"Third..."

“Lyle, you should remember this. There are exceptions, as you’ve seen, but most of the soldiers didn’t fight for my sake. They fought for the families they’d left in the territory. If we lost, they knew...all the sights burned into their eyes would happen again, and this time it would happen in their homeland.”

The fourth head stayed silent all the while.

“Man... I really hate war,” the third muttered.

Chapter 82: The Hero General Sley Walt

A scene of a battlefield changed to a tent. There Sley Walt lay, the field medic tending to him shaking his head.

Sley's breathing was already weak as he absently stared at the ceiling. The light was fading from his eyes, and it was hard to tell if he was even conscious.

"I never wanted to die in battle..."

The fourth had stayed silent for a long while. Finally, he removed his glasses and lifted his face. "Third head— Dad. Can I show Lyle my memories?"

The third head nodded. "Go right ahead. I want to see too."

The fourth concealed his eyes behind his hand. "Thank you."

Again the scene shifted—it was taken over by the fourth head's memories. We were in the old estate of House Walt.

On that day, Marcus Walt was in the manor worrying about his father who had marched off to join a rather large battle.

"Do you think dad will be all right?"

He recalled how his father, Sley, would always return safe. "How I'd love to leave the rest to you and retire," he'd say. It was always the same joke each time.

"He'll be fine this time too... Right?"

At fourteen years of age, Marcus wasn't yet old enough for the battlefield, and so he watched over the house. He'd gradually begun to help out with the territory's internal affairs, and in only a few years, he was set to fully take on a role as Sley's assistant.

The plan was for him to inherit the status of lord once he was thirty years old.

Marcus was studying in his room when he heard a commotion brewing in the

manor.

“What’s going on?”

He exited the room and climbed down the stairs to find a knight breaking down in tears at the front door. The grime-covered knight cried out on his knees.

“Our allies emerged victorious. However, Lord Sley was heavily injured... The doctor says he doesn’t have long to live.”

The young man was a knight personally appointed by his father. His haggard face made it clear he had come as fast as he could to make his report. He shed tears of anguish and frustration, and his body was covered in wounds.

Marcus stood there, stock-still.

“You’re lying.”

The woman receiving the report was Pasette Walt—Sley’s wife, and Marcus’s mother. She heard out every word with a completely expressionless face. She remained like that until the knight was finished and collapsed unconscious, having done his duty.

“Wipe him down and let him rest,” Pasette ordered. “And gather up the men we have left.”

She put on a courageous act, but her face was pale. Although Pasette’s marriage to Sley had been an arranged one, the couple maintained a good relationship. She would sigh whenever she saw how unmotivated Sley could be, but she would still tend to him with a smile.

“Mom...”

Pasette turned...and said, “Marcus, make your resolve. You must hurry to Sley’s side. From today forth—you are the head of House Walt.”

Since there was no official transfer of powers, he was not strictly a feudal lord. But to House Walt, this was irrelevant. Someone had to drag the territory along—a lord was necessary.

Marcus hurriedly readied himself and flew out the front door. He jumped aboard the horse prepared for him and set off for Sley’s battlefield with a

handful of guards.

The horse galloped down the well-maintained roads. And in Marcus's mind, he thought, *Faster. I need to go faster!*

His impatience in this moment caused his Art to manifest. Suddenly, the horses were picking up the pace, taking all his guards by surprise. But Marcus did not care. He didn't think. He continued to speed on.

As he raced down a single path, gradually, the battlefield came into view. The soldiers of House Walt were waiting for him, and Marcus was quickly guided to the tent where Sley lay.

The boy entered, dripping in sweat. The knights and soldiers within were crying.

Sley gave a painful smile, his hand clutching the blue Gem—the treasure of House Walt. He extended that Gem-clutching hand to Marcus. And Marcus grasped that hand with both of his own.

“Dad! Dad!”

“Marcus... I'm sorry. The rest is up to you,” Sley said.

And with one final, deep breath, Sley closed his eyes for the last time.

Marcus was shaking.

The nearby doctor said, “I'm surprised he held on for this long. I'm sure he was waiting for you—his son.” But not a single word entered Marcus's ears. He wept and gripped Sley's hand.

The blue Gem seemed to give off a faint light.

Having seen the memories of the third and fourth heads, I was left standing in a daze. I couldn't muster a word at this truth—a truth so far removed from the books.

And I also understood why the third head couldn't accept his title as the Hero General.

The fourth head was the first to speak. “After that, His Majesty took good

care of me. I didn't know the circumstances, so I felt a great debt to him. My benefactor, the baron, didn't tell me anything."

He was frustrated, only learning the truth long after his own death.

"If I knew, I would never have felt grateful to that man," he muttered.

"I think you did your best. You became a baron, and the territory suddenly grew, right? I doubt I left you with nearly enough manpower to manage that much land, and you definitely didn't need any additional distractions."

The fourth was promoted off the back of the third's accomplishments. For barons, the territory more than doubled in size. Sure, you could see it as House Walt climbing up in the world. It had a nice ring to it, but the fourth head had inherited his title while young and unprepared. I couldn't even begin to imagine his troubles.

"The truth is cruel," the fourth head said. "You're the one who took the enemy general's head, but that achievement went to the king, you know."

The king was said to be the one who slew the enemy general.

"That piece of shit," the third raged with a smile on his face. "I should have put in a few more punches."

"Right. I should have put in a good one myself."

They both laughed.

They laughed—and then they looked at me.

"You get it now, don't you, Lyle? What was going through our heads as we fought, Hero General? There was nothing heroic about it. I was selfish, heinous, and self-calculating."

"Aren't you going a little too far?"

"You can't be a feudal lord if you're not a villain. If there exists any form of universal justice in this world, then lords are fundamentally against it." He was gradually returning to his usual self. The third looked at me with a sad smile. "And that's why... Lyle, you shouldn't fixate on some noble title. You should live for yourself."

For the time being, my objective was to become a first-rate adventurer; however, I didn't have anything that I could call my life's goal. The third head was telling me to be free. But the fourth head had a different perspective.

"Personally," the fourth said, "I'd like it if Lyle took over the territory. I mean, he's the legitimate heir... And we've all got some emotional attachment to it."

It was only the fourth head, and those who came after him, that wanted me to inherit the territory. I could tell the seventh head wanted me to reclaim it in some heroic fashion.

But the third head went against all that. "There's no real reason to obsess over it. The territory's got nothing to do with Lyle's happiness."

"It's something we've built up for all our lives. If only it was that easy to throw away."

With each passing generation, the fondness for our motherland grew. *What would the first or second heads have said if they were still around?*

The next day. We sat on the sofa on the inn's first floor. There, I told Clara the truth, but...

"Huh? Why do you look so doubtful?"

Clara was looking at me with palpable suspicions. She had even stopped taking notes.

She clearly wasn't taking my word for it.



“Honestly, your words lack credibility. How should I put this... It’s questionable that he wasn’t punished after punching the king, and even if there were a few Arts at play, you’re really trying to tell me your ancestor was the one who defeated the enemy general?”

I’d told nothing but the truth, and yet she wouldn’t believe me.

This was outside of my expectations.

“Why?!” the third head screamed. “Believe us, Clara! Don’t make it sound like that sham of a history book is more reliable!”

Clara mulled over it a bit before reaching her conclusion. She laid out her suspicions, and she seemed to suspect every piece of it. “Granted, it’s also dubious that His Majesty would be intimate with House Walt when they were only baronets at the time. It would be more plausible for him to simply be one among the many small-time lords. I’m sure it’s true that he charged at a sizable army to buy time, but I’m not sure if I should believe that he’s the one who killed their general. It’s also strange that House Walt wasn’t destroyed after their head punched the king.”

Certainly, any normal person would see it as an unbelievable tale. I myself would have suspected it had I not seen the third’s memories.

“It’s all...true.”

“I understand why you’d want to believe it, Lyle. But it’s not like you saw it personally...”

I did! And it’s painful that I can’t just say that.

My ancestors were a secret, even from my party members. Thus, no matter how hard I insisted it was the truth, I lacked any real evidence...

“I’ll record it as the testimony of a direct descendant.”

Clara didn’t believe me.

As my shoulders drooped, someone approached us—Eva. She seemed especially cheery so early in the morning.

“Oh, it’s Lyle! With a side of Clara too! How are you doing?”

Having been treated as a sideshow, Clara turned expressionless. “I’m doing perfectly fine, you lying elf.”

They were at odds. So early in the morning.

They both shared in their love of stories, but their differing personalities made them utterly incompatible. Clara believed that the truth should be passed down with complete accuracy. Eva, on the other hand, felt that a bit of exaggeration was good to rile up a crowd. To her, the truth was the truth—while a story was meant to be enjoyed.

Yeah, they’re never going to get along, are they?

“Well, I don’t really care about Clara. More importantly, what were you talking about?”

When I told her about the Miracle of Remelrandt, Eva showed a strong interest. She plopped down next to me, bringing her face close as she keenly took in the tale.

And then...

“Wonderful.”

“Huh?”

“I love those sorts of stories. The part about him punching the king was splendid. The king’s loyal Hero General actually hated the king more than anyone! Yep, that’s going to draw a crowd!”

Even though Clara—the girl who sought the truth—didn’t believe me, this teller of tall tales took to it like a charm.

“Huh...?” The third confusedly stammered.

Eva grabbed me by the shoulder. “Hey, tell me more. I’d love to hear all the colorful stories you have. Yes, let’s talk the day away.”

I could see it in her eyes—she was serious. I’d heard that elves shared a strong interest in fresh news and unknown tales. And looking at Eva, I knew it to be true.

Clara stood and started off to her room.

“Well then, I’ll be on my way.”

“You should go out now and then,” Eva called out to her. “It’s not healthy to coop up reading books all day.”

“I’ll have you know I went shopping yesterday,” Clara said as she climbed the stairs. I got the feeling she was a little mad.

But why?

The fourth head sighed. “You truly are hopeless, Lyle. After all the Growths, your handling of women is just as bad as it’s always been.”

“How young and pure!” the sixth head chuckled. “Well, let’s just watch over them for now. The problem is Eva.”

Eva looked at me restlessly. “Lyle, hurry and tell me a story. C’mon, hurry!” Her cheeks were red with excitement.

I could feel my heart skip a beat.

“Well, you see...”

And just as I was in a spot of trouble, Shannon arrived with a bag of sweets in hand.

“Hah, so this is all I have left? I’d love to buy more, but it’s cold outside, and I’m too old to play in the snow.”

Despite what she was saying, she was playing in the snow with Monica just the other day. Okay, I joined in a little too, but... She played for an entire day and tried to play the next day too.

“You just do whatever you want.”

Perhaps she didn’t want to hear my voice so early in the morning. “Ick!” she exclaimed.

“Why are you carrying sweets around with you?” Eva asked, looking at Shannon. “Can’t you just eat them in your room?”

Shannon’s shoulders dropped. “Sis started compounding medicine. And she was furious at me. She said I’ve been getting crumbs everywhere, lately.”

“Well, of course she’d get mad about that.”

I said something perfectly sensible, and yet Shannon glared at me.

“How do you manage to be so annoying?”

“You’re just an idiot. Don’t make me tell Miranda.”

“Erk... Got it. I’ll share some candy, so let’s talk this out.”

“Don’t think you can bait me with sweets.”

After watching my exchange with Shannon, Eva started to giggle.

“What’s wrong?”

Eva turned to me and smiled. “You’re like a child, Lyle. For some reason, it feels like that’s the real you. Yes, I’d say you act like siblings around the same age. It’s like you’re both a lot younger than you look.”

I was just about to protest, but my ancestors shared her opinion.

“Ah, I get you.”

“Certainly, Lyle acts young for his age.”

“He’s full of spirit whenever he’s competing with Shannon.”

“Maybe they have a similar mental age?”

“You need to be the adult here, Lyle. Be kind to Shannon. She’s like a little sister to you.”

I detest little sisters.

“If anything, I’m Lyle’s big sister!” Shannon complained. “Age’s got nothing to do with it; I’ve got a far better grip on things than this guy!”

“You keep calling me gigolo this, gigolo that, but if you ask me, you’re the real gigolo! Now, you’re making it sound like I’m worse than you!”

Our eyes locked in a fierce glaring match, and Shannon set her sweets down on the table. All of a sudden, she took on the savage swallow stance.

“You’re...actually serious. You seriously want to have a go at me!”

Shannon *was* serious.

We’d both learned our martial arts from Monica, technically making us peers.

And precisely because we were peers, I could immediately tell when Shannon was serious.

“Come at me,” I said with a stern face. “Today’s the day I crush you.”

As I took on my own form of the stance, Eva started cackling aloud and smacking the sofa.

“You’re the best! That serious face is the cherry on top. It looks so stupid, but that serious act is earning you some points.”

Shannon and I turned to Eva.

“I *am* serious!” we both cried.

And as soon as she heard that, Eva began cradling her stomach as she laughed.

“It’s no good. I’m hurting!”

By the time I realized it, the inn staff and guests were looking at us and laughing. I glared at Shannon; the match was about to begin when— “What do you think you’re doing, Milord?”

Novem spotted us as she descended the stairs.

“Novem!”

“Lord Lyle, you’re being a bother to the other guests. Please don’t make a mess here.”

“Err, right. Then outsi—”

I looked out the window and saw it was snowing yet again. The winds were so strong it appeared the snow was falling sideways, making for terrible visibility. This...wasn’t the best weather for an outside brawl.

I released my stance, and Shannon followed suit. Evidently, she was just as apprehensive about heading outside as I was.

Novem let out a weary sigh. “Eva, don’t just watch next time. Please stop them.”

With Novem scolding her, Eva offered an apology... But still, she laughed. It hardly looked like she was repenting at all.

“Sorry. It was just too funny.”

“Even so, please stop them.”

“I mean, I haven’t been able to go outside lately, and it’s just so boring. Aaah, I want to go *somewhere*.”

She lay on the sofa and griped her heart out, only for Novem to scold her again—this time for her attitude.

So Eva stood. She looked at Shannon and said, “That’s right! How about you two head out with me? I just know it’ll be fun if I take you both along.”

“Aww. Me and him? Well, I guess we could at least hold the bags.”

“You can hold your own bags.”

“Is it really so hard for you to be kind to me? Aren’t boys supposed to be kind to girls?”

“I’ve never once in my life thought of you as a girl.”

A vein rose on Shannon’s brow, and she kicked me in the shin.

“Ow!”

“Stupid!”

Her kick had evolved—it was sharper, more painful. Not long ago, she lacked the strength to do anything, but now she’d learned how to carry herself well. I saw her off as she retreated to the second floor with her sweets.

Novem scolded me. “Milord, please try to get along with her a bit.”

“No, I mean...”

For some reason, I just end up fighting with her. Maybe we just have terrible compatibility?

“Well, isn’t it fine?” Eva said. “They fight *because* they get along well.”

That was something I definitely didn’t agree with. I shot Eva a doubtful look.

“Oh? Are you doubting me?”

As I averted my eyes she sent me a look as if to say, *What am I supposed to do with you?*

“Just look at you now—you rarely show your real self around us. You’re still stiff. I’d say you only open up with Novem and Shannon. And maybe Monica.”

Even if you tell me that, err... Well, what am I supposed to do?

That night, Novem stopped by the residence of the capital’s own House Walt. She’d heard that the same property that House Walt had lived in for generations had been put up for sale, so she went to have a look.

The building was already partially demolished and partially rebuilt, giving it a completely different impression from before.

“I should inform my house.”

Novem had run from home to chase after Lyle, but some things simply couldn’t be left alone. She decided she’d contact them anyway.

She wore a hooded robe as she walked through the falling snow. The snow beneath her would let out a crunching sound with every step.

“They’re all Walts, but to think they would be this different. It’s not even worth discussing,” she muttered to herself as she expressionlessly trod over the snow.

In an alley near a pub in the royal capital, Lionel was being beaten up by three men.

“Dickhead!”

“Lousy cheater! All’s fair to win, huh?!”

“And to pick a fight after that? Are you stupid?”

Lionel was the one on the receiving end of the violence, but there was a reason for that. He’d played poker with the other three, and Lionel cheated. His tricks were uncovered all too easily, the other three protested, and Lionel was kicked out of the pub.

After that, Lionel lay in wait for his three opponents to leave the pub and ambushed them. All three of them had been marked by his fists.

“Let’s go.”

“Isn’t this that knight who’s gotten a terrible reputation lately?”

“Now that you mention it. I remember hearing something about that.”

The three gamblers left him there, face up in the muddy snow, staring at the stars.

“Dammit...”

He’d cut the inside of his mouth, and there was blood trailing from the corner of his lips. His tattered clothes were ones he hadn’t changed out of for days now.

His money had been squandered at the casino, and his rewards from the subjugation party were gone. He’d sold his house, and pawned off his medals...and the money from that was gone too.

Even with his family condemning him, Lionel couldn’t stop gambling.

Ever since he got back, everyone would tell him he’d changed. He no longer had any friends who would strike up a conversation with him—but Lionel smiled.

“Aww man, I lost. What to do now?”

He grinned as he considered turning to theft next, when someone called out to him.

“Hey, aren’t you...?”

Lionel sat up to see Aria, a shopping bag in one hand.

“Huh? Err...”

“Are you hurt? Give me a second.”

After taking out a handkerchief, Aria wiped away Lionel’s blood. Behind her, Sophia cocked her head curiously.

“Do you know him?”

“Yeah, from the subjugation force. We were on the same team.”

“Oh, that explains it.” Sophia seemed to accept it. She hadn’t yet realized it

was Lionel.

Aria had a sad look on her face. Although Lionel had been a part of the hippogryph subjugation force on Aria's team, he had fled in the face of the enemy.

And for Lionel, Aria was the one person he didn't want to see him like this.

"You reek of alcohol, and your clothes are filthy," Aria said with concern. "There's a lot I'd like to say, but put in an earnest effort. You're a survivor. Others weren't as lucky."

Aria handed her handkerchief to him and took her leave.

"W-Wait!" Lionel called out.

Aria and Sophia turned.

He stood, the handkerchief clutched in his fist. "I may look like this now, but I'm sure I'll... No, I'll definitely make it big. I'll get promoted! I'll be someone!"

Aria smiled. "Glad to hear it. Do your best."

She turned her back and waved her hand as she headed off. And Sophia chased after her.

Lionel brought the bloodstained handkerchief to his nose and took in a whiff.

"Aria's smell... Wait for me. I'll come for you someday."

With a dark smile on his face, Lionel stared at Aria's back until she was completely out of sight.

The snow was stopping us from leaving the capital. Although we were on our toes, waiting for Ralph's retribution, there didn't seem to be any movements from his end.

He hadn't placed any surveillance, and he didn't attack us even though we'd swindled him.

"On the contrary, it's uncanny."

I kept vigilant as I walked through the snow-piled streets, but it was quiet as

could be.

Walking beside me, Monica was beaming. She seemed delighted to be going out with me.

“What could be better than a date with my chicken? And how romantic—a snow-covered medieval city. A wonderful addition to my happy memory bank.”

“Happy memory bank?”

“Please, just think of it as a record of our unbroken love.”

“Hmm, good for you.”

“Cold! You’re colder than the snow! But that’s what I love about you!”

She seemed to rejoice no matter what I told her. What could I do but sigh?

I decided to change the subject.

“Damian’s still in the capital, right?”

“You changed the subject. Well, fine... Professor Damian is still staying in the royal capital. Apparently, the tools he needs are still being made. He is camping in his Porter, just outside of the city with his mass-produced junk bot.”

The Porter Damian made was far larger than mine. According to Monica, his *Dump Truck* was mainly completed by Lily. Lily and Damian, they were both incredible, having completed it barely after I’d given them the blueprints.

“I’d like to have a look at it, one of these days.”

“Hmph. It won’t be nearly as great as Porter, the culmination of our love. Still, this royal capital is quite strange.”

Monica warily scanned her surroundings.

“Strange?”

“Yes. I’m gathering rumors each time I head out—apparently, the crown prince of Banseim has annulled his engagement with a foreign princess. And according to the rumors, he immediately found a new partner—”

“There’s no way,” I muttered.

My ancestors were similarly dumbfounded.

“Annulled? Did something happen?”

“That’s usually unthinkable.”

“Things are going to get turbulent.”

“That they are.”

“Hold on. Back when I was alive, I remember the top candidate to marry the crown prince was the princess of Fonbeau.”

The Kingdom of Fonbeau. A massive nation to the west of Banseim, and a nation that Banseim had fought many fierce battles with. I didn’t know what led to the engagement of the royal families of both sides, but this annulment didn’t seem sane to me.

“Hey, are you sure that’s true?”

“It’s true. But the strange part is what comes next. The residents of the capital seem to wholeheartedly accept the decision. There hasn’t been an uproar, and it’s only the merchants who come from the outside that seem in any way startled by it.”

It would be perfectly understandable if the capital’s residents grew anxious from this state of affairs. It wasn’t completely irrelevant to them—after all, the annulment could become a cause for war.

“Come to think of it, Clara said something felt strange...”

Monica went on about the other information she gathered, “This part’s not certain, so I didn’t pay it much attention, but apparently, the princess of Fonbeau is still in the capital. Her marriage was already broken off, so isn’t it strange that she’s still sticking around?”

“That’s strange... I think?” I hesitantly said.

But the third’s response was immediate. “Of course it’s strange. There’s got to be something underlying it.”

“I’d love to look into it,” the fourth head said, “but given his current standing, it would be impossible for Lyle to arrange a meeting with a royal princess.”

The sixth head spoke with a dubious tone, “Oh, you should give up on that.

It's probably better if the Walts...stay well away from the princesses of Fonbeau."

"Right," the seventh head agreed.

As I gripped the Jewel, the seventh head burst into laughter.

"Lyle, the sixth head and I... We fought in the war against Fonbeau."

That's...certainly not good.

That wasn't where it ended, apparently.

"Their previous king—or maybe it was the one before that—he was like a national hero... And I slew him on the battlefield," the sixth head said.

"Incidentally, I beat up his son and sent him running home. I made off with a good chunk of his territory while I was at it."

They both spoke fondly of it.

"He was a strong one. Their Hero King advanced upon Banseim, taking out our famed knights one after the next. He nearly made it all the way to the capital. He was a man who deserved his hero title... Unfortunately for him, I was stronger."

I held my head.

"Yes, in my time too, they were the aggressors. I attacked them as they rejoiced over reclaiming their land, and I took even more of it. How about that, Lyle? Isn't your grandpa amazing?"

Ignoring the seventh head who was bragging to his grandson... House Walt had throttled Fonbeau over two successive generations. *I definitely can't meet them like this. Rather, I don't want to.*

—Vice Territory. A noble-led convoy left through the gates of the metropolis House Walt called home.

A number of extravagant carriages were surrounded by numerous wagons and soldiers. There were a large number of mounted knights as well, and the civilians were there, seeing them off from the gate.

The eighth head of House Walt, Meisel Walt, sat in the most luxurious carriage of all as he chatted away with his precious family.

“Good grief, how bothersome it is to come and go from the capital.”

His wife, Clare Walt, placed a hand on the clothes of her daughter, who sat beside her.

“Yes, it’s frustrating that the palace keeps calling for us. Come now, Ceres, stay put. You’re creasing your dress.”

Meisel smiled as he watched a heartwarming scene of his wife proudly straightening out his daughter’s clothes.

“It won’t be long before you’re both freed from this annoyance. Just endure for a little longer.”

Ceres Walt had been looking adoringly at her mother, but then she turned to Meisel with a tilt of her head.

“Just the two of us?” she asked.

Meisel disappointedly nodded. “Yes, unfortunately, I can’t leave the territory unattended. I’ll have to return after I deliver you to the capital, Ceres. But don’t worry. Clare will be with you. I rebuilt the Walt estate in the capital for you, so you’ll live in incredible comfort.”

Celes pouted. “I don’t want that. I want to be with you, father.”

His daughter’s sulking left him at a loss, but he was happy to hear it too. Still, Meisel admonished her.

“I can’t just abandon the territory, can I? Oh, don’t worry. I’ll stay for a while in the capital with you. I can’t pass up a chance to see my precious only child on her big day.”

Clare put a hand to her mouth and smiled softly. “Yes, you’re our one and only daughter, after all.”

By that point, Ceres was their only child as far as they were concerned. The topic of Lyle never came up.

Ceres was arrogant, audacious, but when she was in front of her parents, she

was their lovely little girl.

She sorrowfully hung her head. But finally, she said, “You need to stop by whenever we have a celebration, okay? I can’t stand being away from you, father.”

“You really know how to please your father... You have my word, Ceres. On every auspicious occasion, I will rush to your side. No matter what happens.”

As she smiled, she carried a face befitting a girl her age. The attitude she directed toward Lyle, and the one she had for everyone else, would never be turned against her parents.

Theirs was the epitome of a loving family. But within this inner circle, there was no place for Lyle.

Chapter 83: The Princess of Fonbeau

Why does nothing ever go the way I want it to?

I'd received a summons to the mansion used by Fonbeau royalty, and there I sat drinking tea, Miranda and Novem beside me. Monica stood behind us in wait.

The woman sipping tea in front of me was Lianne Fonbeau—a princess of the Kingdom of Fonbeau, and the former fiancée of Banseim's crown prince.

The princess sported long, deep pink hair, braided and bundled. Her skin was pale, and she stared at me with eyes that were the same pink as her hair.

She wore a regal-looking dress that exposed her shoulders and gave off the impression of a rather adorable well-to-do lady. Her somewhat protruding chest was neither small nor large.

However, she looked a little emaciated—and she was probably worse off than she looked. She was doing a good job hiding it with makeup.

As for why I was sitting across from the Fonbeau princess, it all started with Miranda.

Princess Lianne turned her eyes to Miranda and smiled.

"Long time no see, Miranda. It looks like even someone as perfect as you has one defect—you have terrible taste in men."

"The princess is already making snide remarks," the fifth head said with a sigh. "Doesn't she hate us a little too much?"

I found her hatred perfectly understandable. House Walt had done enough to warrant it.

Miranda shrugged. "Believe it or not, I consider myself a very good judge of character. That aside, I was shocked when I heard the rumors."

"I was shocked too—I didn't know you'd dropped out and become an adventurer."

They shared a laugh, but I wasn't having fun at all.

Miranda had apparently become acquainted with Princess Lianne in the capital—rather, they were so close that the princess had invited her out to tea a few times. Owing to their connection, they got in touch as soon as Miranda began to look into the rumors.

The knights and servants stationed around us were glaring daggers at me. They directed their murderous intent, knowing I was a man of House Walt.

My stomach ached.

“Now then, even if you were disowned, you carry the blood of Walt,” Princess Lianne said, turning back to me. “Are you aware of the bond you share with Fonbeau?”

She chuckled to herself as she dragged the conversation in a sinister direction. I wanted to run, then and there.

“I heard that various things happened with our previous head, and the head before that,” I replied.

“Right. Various things. My grandfather was killed by your ancestor Fiennes Walt. What an amazing man he must have been, to kill the Hero of Fonbeau.”

My hands quivered.

From the Jewel, I heard a carefree laugh. “You’re making me blush,” the sixth head said.

But the sixth head was quite a problematic person, having had secret kids out of wedlock and fleeing out of terror from his wives. He also took mistresses to his heart’s content. I...didn’t know what to say about him.

“Then, there’s your grandfather who chased my dad across the battlefield. Dad still has nightmares to this day; did you know that? To top it off, they both snatched a good deal of Fonbeau’s land.”

“That whelp already has a daughter this big...” the seventh head reminisced. “I can really feel the flow of time.”

Back when the king of Fonbeau was still young, the seventh head of House Walt had personally taught him the cruelty of war. When I checked with the

sixth head's Art, everyone in the mansion—save for Lianne herself—were all displayed as bright red. They were hostile to me.

Only Princess Lianne was an uncertain yellow. Not an enemy, but not an ally either... What exactly was she thinking?

Novem spoke up. "So what did you call us here for?"

"I really must commend the loyalty of House Walt's dogs. You can't stand it when I tease your master?"

House Walt's dogs—that was a common insult directed at Novem's home, House Fuchs. It was said that they had sworn their loyalty to House Walt rather than Banseim's king, and evidently, that disparaging title had even reached foreign lands.

Novem didn't object.

After taking a sip of tea, Princess Lianne began, "I just wanted to see it. What sort of man is that woman's brother? I was surprised when I received the letter from Miranda."

I turned to Miranda. "I'm surprised you managed to become friends with her. I mean, don't you also..."

She also carried Walt blood.

Miranda sent me a cynical smile. "That's right. That's why Madam Lianne would go out of her way to invite me to tea—just to mouth off complaints. That's where this lovely friendship began."

"This woman's the worst!" the sixth head angrily complained.

And the seventh head chimed in: "And this man's the worst too."

"That's how it started." Lianne smiled. "But I found her quite intriguing once we began talking, and I thought of us as friends after that. Not that I know what Miranda thought of me. Now then, let's get back to business."

I was bothered by what she'd called me. *That woman's brother.*

"Lyle, now that I've met you, I'm sure of it. You haven't been taken by the madness yet."

“Huh?”

“To be more precise, that woman, Ceres, hasn’t twisted you.”

Miranda’s eyes sharpened. “As I thought. It must be terrible in the palace.”

“Terrible indeed. The knights of Fonbeau lost their spines after just seeing her once. Ceres is incredibly popular in the capital too.”

“Then what the founder mentioned,” the fifth head muttered. “Her being a Heretical God’s Child... Maybe he wasn’t completely gone.”

Someone possessed by a heretical god. Thus, a Heretical God’s Child. They appeared at the turning points of history and brought chaos to the continent.

“A Heretical God’s Child...” I muttered.

Lianne seemed taken aback. “Oh, you knew about that? Right, you could certainly call her that. That kid—that woman seduced Rufus right in front of me.”

The promising future king of the nation—His Highness Prince Rufus Banseim had apparently been seduced by my little sister. I was hit by a spell of dizziness as I processed this information.

But in the midst of it, Novem was more startled by me than by Ceres.

“Milord, where did you hear about that?”

“Huh?”

“I’m talking about the Heretical God’s Child. Who told you about that? You usually wouldn’t connect that tale to our current situation.”

“Oh, well... Where was it again? Maybe I heard it from grandfather.”

Novem stared at me.

“I’ve only heard of the Heretical God’s Child from fairy tales, though,” the seventh head objected.

Even so, if I knew about it, I had to have heard it from him—that was the only explanation I could give.

“It’s a fairy tale isn’t it?” Miranda said, sounding a bit perplexed. “I’ve heard

of it, but... What does it have to do with Ceres?”

Princess Lianne explained, “The Heretical God’s Child from the fairy tale received power from a heretical god to commit many misdeeds. However, I’ve heard that Agrissa, the vixen who brought chaos to the continent, was also called a Heretical God’s Child. You are very knowledgeable, Lyle.”

“I can see how that links up.” Miranda nodded. “According to the fairy tale, at the end of all the mischief, the child was tricked by the heretical god and died a foolish death. That is presumably where Agrissa got the name.”

And Novem looked at me. “That’s right. That’s why I was surprised that Lord Lyle would use that name for Lady Ceres.”

I think she’s suspicious...

“I-I may have read it in a book...” Novem continued to stare at me, so I turned the conversation back to Lianne. “So, what happened after she seduced him?”

There was silence. Gradually, Lianne’s hostility toward me grew. The sixth head’s Art laid it out clearly; on the map of the mansion in my head, the dot right in front of me shifted from yellow to red—and then to an even deeper, stronger red, almost like it was on fire.

Her bloodlust was rising.

I could sense that Monica was about to move. And at the same time, all the knights around us placed their hands on their hilts.

Finally, Lianne took a deep breath. “Rufus did exactly as she said and broke off his engagement with me. How many times did it take? How many banquets? Each time Ceres came to Central, Rufus’s heart was thrown astray.”

The first time they met, he only developed a slight interest. But from the second time onward, the crown prince was apparently madly in love with Ceres.

On the third time, he proclaimed his love for Ceres right in front of Princess Lianne.

To be blunt, it was abnormal.

“After all I’ve seen, I’ll praise him for resisting her twice. I remained here, waiting in the hopes that Rufus might open his eyes someday. But even that

must come to an end. I'm out of time."

"Out of time?"

"An order came from my country: I am to return. Things are going to get busy from here on out."

The fifth head's words caused my chest to ache.

"This won't end with a skirmish," he said. "There's no telling how many people will die for the sake of Ceres alone."

War was about to break out on our border with Fonbeau. Thanks to Ceres, a great many people would die.

Princess Lianne stared at me—she stared with lightless eyes possessed by something pitch black and sinister.

"I'm amazed you weren't twisted. No, perhaps I simply can't tell, and you've been twisted all the same. There isn't a single sane person around Ceres."

At her words, the seventh head seemed to realize something. "So you're saying even Meisel and Clare were driven mad..."

I had vague memories of them from when I was much younger. I had harsh memories from right before they'd driven me from the house. Then and now, such a stark difference. Was it because Ceres had gotten a hold of them?

As I clutched at my chest, Miranda placed a hand on my shoulder.

"Are you okay?"

Novem was the same. She showed concern for me and showed greater caution to everyone around us.

Princess Lianne hung her head with a slight chuckle. I could only see her mouth, but the way she curled her lips carried none of her adorable charm. I felt madness.

"Oh dear. It seems I've made you wary of me."

Her hostility slowly faded, her marker reverting from red to yellow.

"Oh, I wonder how they'll treat me once I return to my country. Will I be the foolish princess whose marriage was stolen right under her nose? If there's one

thing I do know, it's that I won't be getting a warm welcome."

She'd be treated harshly if she returned, but there was no point in staying.

"Let me tell you something interesting," she went on. "It's about the last time I returned home. I've been telling them about Ceres's oddities since the first time I saw her, but no one believed me. Apparently, what I was saying was impossible, even for someone who had an Art that let them deceive people."

"You're kidding me," Miranda said suspiciously. "I mean, when it's gotten this bad—"

"Amazing, isn't it? Even the country right next door doesn't notice the oddities. There are nobles who insist my engagement was broken due to my incompetence, but it seems they don't consider Ceres a threat. They recognize her beauty, but that's about it. At most, my nation recognizes that there's profit to be had if Banseim's national power drops."

Despite all the abnormalities Ceres had brought with her, no one felt any sense of danger. Not the surrounding nations, or even the people of our own nation.

The fourth head pensively said, "Is Fonbeau underestimating her? No, that's not it. In this situation... Does Ceres have a special ability? Does she naturally charm whoever she meets? Is she simply that captivating? The story may change whenever it's passed down. Secondhand information won't be trusted, and if they hear the story from anyone who's actually made contact with Ceres, that person will always speak in her favor."

"Hmm, that's troublesome," the third head summed it up.

Lianne cracked a faint smile. "It's going to get messy in Banseim," she said. "If you're going to flee, I'd recommend crossing the border. Otherwise, you'll be in a lot of trouble."

"I wouldn't doubt it if it's coming from you, Lianne," Miranda said. "So what do you plan to do now?"

"I'll leave this place as soon as the snow melts. If I ever do come back, it will be on the day that Fonbeau's army marches upon this city."

The sixth explained it so I could understand. “To summarize, Fonbeau is going to sit back and watch the chaos Ceres causes. If they see their chance, they’ll invade and go for the capital.”

“The countries we share a border with won’t stay silent,” the seventh frustratedly added. “It will be dangerous to linger around the border.”

“Forget about the court nobles. I wonder what the feudal lords think of this. Lyle, ask for some specifics.” The fifth head showed some strong interest.

“Princess Lianne, do you have any information about how Banseim’s feudal lords are taking this?”

“Are you curious? I don’t think there’s any point in you knowing, but it’s interesting so I’ll tell you anyway. First off, there are lords who adore and devote themselves to Ceres. There are also many who underestimate her. Those two camps are the majority. A small portion took precautions and protested to the palace.”

There still seemed to be some sane lords, but the palace’s current stance seemed to be to disregard their protests.

“There are plenty of lords who don’t move even though they know that something’s off. Those opportunists are waiting to see how it pans out. If you’ll let me have my say, it will be impossible to rally the nobles to take Ceres down.”

“I’ll bet,” the fifth agreed. “I’m sure many are hesitating to make a decision.”

The third added, “When the time comes, there’ll be lords who turn coat and join up with other nations too. This is going to be nasty.”

My heart was overtaken by an indescribable feeling. I felt a peculiar pain in my chest.

“Do you think Ceres might have something to do with Lyle’s lost memories?” the fourth asked.

The seventh strongly supported the notion. “It’s more than possible. If even Meisel and Clare were twisted, then there’s no telling what she’s capable of. But that does leave one curious point. Didn’t Ceres detest Lyle?”

The ancestors knew how Ceres hated me. I'd told them everything.

But then that begged the question. Ceres seemed to do whatever she pleased—she was the sort of girl who seduced the crown prince to her side. So why did she leave me alone?

I'm sure she hated me enough to kill me. Did she not want to sully her own hands?

No, when I fought her, I had felt her intent to kill me. And she was never the sort to hesitate to kill.

Then why did she leave me alone? Is it related to my missing memories?

I didn't know anything.

The smile vanished from Princess Lianne's face, and she shot me a slightly sorrowful look.

"Once I return to my nation, I will start taking matters into my own hands. I cannot forgive Rufus for abandoning me, but I cannot forgive that woman even more. There, I'll be treated as a has-been rather than a princess, so I have much to do."

Lianne wasn't to blame for her broken engagement, but that wasn't how others would see it. A has-been—a woman who was supposed to bring peace only to return empty-handed. There would be those who scorned her.

I didn't know if she would find any peace after returning to her homeland. No, Lianne herself didn't intend to find any. She apparently planned to take action while her heart burned with a vengeance.

"I'm glad we got to talk today. I won't say, 'Let's meet again,' but let's at least avoid reuniting on the battlefield."

The conversation was over. We left the mansion.

Inside the Jewel, the ancestors were holding a meeting without Lyle.

The fourth head fretfully wiped the lenses of his glasses. "Now then, what do we do about this?"

“Before, Lyle couldn’t do a thing against her.” The sixth head folded his arms, a serious look on his face. “Can the current Lyle win? That’s the issue.”

Pressing a hand to his brow, the seventh head spoke with anguish: “I don’t want siblings killing one another, but I know it’s not that simple.”

From the seventh’s point of view, they were both his dear grandchildren. He didn’t want to even think of Lyle and Ceres fighting—of them killing one another.

“Getting involved with her will cause nothing but problems,” the third head said with a shrug. “Leave the country; problem solved.”

As soon as the third head mentioned leaving the country, the first place the fifth head thought of was Baym. Baym was situated east of Banseim, and there were a few other countries sandwiched between the two of them. It seemed like an appropriate place to flee.

“I’ve been to Banseim’s eastern regions a few times and I heard a lot about Baym,” he said. “It’s a major metropolis that’s earning a killing from trade. There are plenty of adventurers, and I’ve heard that it’s the merchants who hold all the authority.”

“Did you have any business in the east?” the third head asked him.

“My wives hailed from the east.”

The fifth head—Fredriks—was a man who kept five women by his side. History painted him as a lecherous scoundrel. His legal wife and all his mistresses all hailed from the east.

“The east is a land where martial arts flourish,” the fourth head reminisced.

The third cocked his head. The Vice Domain occupied the Banseim Kingdom’s south. He found it strange that they had any interaction with the east.

“That’s news to me. Granny came from the far north, and mom didn’t have any ties to the east. Pasette didn’t either.”

“A lot of things happened in the east during my time,” said the fifth head. “Many nobles had to evacuate.”

The fourth head glared at him. “Yes, a lot of things happened. *A lot.*”

Neither one of them wished to elaborate any further on the matter. Eventually, the third head brought the conversation back on track.

“That Ceres girl. She has a powerful influence on her surroundings, and she’s stronger than Lyle. That’s what we know for certain. Even Miranda said she couldn’t win, so I think she really is strong, but... We might be able to do something, right?”

Perhaps it was possible to deal with her if they went about it differently?

The fifth head lashed out at the suggestion. “Weren’t you the one who said not to get involved with her? We *might* have a way to fight her, but we don’t know Ceres. How are we supposed to make the call?”

All eyes gathered on the seventh head.

“Ask me however many times you want, and my answer will be the same,” he said. “The Ceres I knew was my adorable granddaughter. I don’t know anything about her Art, and I don’t know what happened after that.”

The seventh head never sensed any of the abnormal parts of her—not while he was alive.

“My memories only go up to the point I handed off the Jewel. I can only say that something must have happened to her after the cut-off point.”

What could have happened?

The ancestors were unable to answer.

It was a bright and sunny day. As we walked along the path, the snow piled up on the sides caught the light in a way that made it blinding to look at.

“It’s been a while since we’ve had weather this good,” Eva said.

In response, Shannon pulled off her muffler. “It’s kinda hot, and my eyes sting. What’s going on?”

“The snow is reflecting the light of the sun.”

“Is that how that works?”

Shannon seemed impressed by Eva’s knowledge as she cheerfully walked

alongside her.

The three of us—me included—had ventured outside simply because Eva had recalled what we'd talked about before. About our promise to go somewhere together.

It wasn't that we had any particular destination in mind. However, after we returned from Princess Lianne's mansion, I found myself with a lot more to think about.

Perhaps this was Eva's way of showing concern for me.

"Do you still have a lot going on in there, Lyle?"

I appreciated her concern. "Yeah, a lot."

Knowing that my little sister Ceres was driving the country into a critical situation, I didn't know what I was supposed to do.

Should we just flee straight to Baym? Am I really all right with this?

I didn't have an answer.

Shannon stuck out her chest. With absolutely no protrusions to speak of, her unpronounced chest was a little pitiful to look at.

"I know all about it. The saying goes, 'An idiot's thoughts are no different from a sleeper's.' Monica told me."

Eva laughed. "She's an interesting girl. I never get tired of listening to her. Aah, I'm glad I joined this party."

They were both smiling.

The fourth head sounded a little jaded as he said, "Lyle, you shouldn't let them worry. Be a bit bolder; act like you're having fun."

He was telling me to smile for their sake. I wanted to tell him I wasn't in the mood for that, but sure enough, I didn't want them to worry about me.

After a bit of hesitation, I asked, "Where do you want to go today?"

Shannon waved her arms around to make her opinion known.

"Oh me! Pick me! I want to hear a song! And some stories too!"

Eva puffed out her cheeks. “Are my songs not enough?”

“Not just practice, I want to hear them in a proper place!”

Does she want to drop by a stage or something?

Shannon hung her head. “I mean, I never got to go to places like that before.”

Back when she lived in the capital and her eyes couldn’t see, Shannon had lived a life of confinement. She wasn’t allowed to walk outside.

“In that case...” said Eva, “I can introduce you to a bar where the elves gather. But it’s not open at this hour. Let’s go around and take in the sights until then.”

Shannon raised one hand high. “I’m on board! Oh, Lyle, you’re on bag-carrying duty.”

“Do you really hate me that much?”

Shannon grinned and nodded.

Together, we explored the capital. We bought snacks at the stalls, perused the stores, and bought some things on the side. That’s all it was, but it was very fun.

I fought with Shannon, we snatched sweets from one another, and...why was it? Perhaps I felt so at ease because I didn’t have to be too mindful of her.

It was evening before I knew it. It was almost time for the bar to open.

Our final stop before then was a stall that sold accessories.

Eva and Shannon peered at the wares.

“Are you interested, Eva?” I asked.

I wasn’t going to say it aloud, but this wasn’t a shop that dealt in high-quality goods. And yet, Eva had an incredibly serious look on her face, and that made me curious.

“I bring them as gifts whenever I return to my village. The little girls love this sort of thing, and this place has all sorts of designs. I never get tired of looking at them.”

Apart from rings and necklaces, they also had combs and hair clips among other things.

Shannon picked out an item and stared at it.

A broach.

Eva prodded me with her elbow. The look on her face was pretty much telling me, “Go buy it for her.”

I have to buy it...?

The moment I hesitated, my ancestors all started booing me.

“Buy it, why don’t you.”

“It’s not expensive.”

“I think...you ought to buy it.”

“Lyle, this much is nothing. Back in my day, I had to get a gemstone worth several hundred gold to please the missus.”

“Shouldn’t you be repenting a bit more, Sixth? Lyle, buy it. Rather, how could you not? In this situation? Your grandpa can’t believe it.”

Ignoring the sixth’s opinion, everyone seemed to be united. They were probably taking Shannon’s upbringing into consideration.

I took some money from my coin purse.

“I’ll take one—”

“Stupid! Stupid Lyle!” the third head cautioned me. “Eva’s here too. You should at least buy the item she was looking at too.”

The fourth added, “Buy something for everyone else too—at a later date. You can’t buy the same thing for them either.”

The fifth head had gotten fussier than usual. “Make sure your presents all cost around the same amount. Don’t let them establish a hierarchy. Also, make sure you consider what would be the best fit for each girl before buying them. Before considering whether something’s a tasteful present in general, it’s more important to buy something with a specific person in mind. If you hear them chatting about wanting something or another, you should write it down.”

Why is he being so detailed?

I decided to purchase the bracelet Eva was looking at too.

“I’ll take the brooch and the bracelet.”

“Pleasure doing business with you.” The shopkeeper looked at me with a grin.

“You’ve got some cuties with you. Is the charming elf girl your girlfriend?”

He...seems to be misunderstanding something. I should correct him.

“No, she—”

“That’s right. So make it cheap,” Eva said with a smile.

“Well, can’t argue with that,” the shopkeeper said as he cut down the price a bit. It really was only a very slight discount.

“Umm.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it. Those shopkeepers are just looking for a chat. You don’t need to be serious with them all the time,” Eva said as she gazed at the bracelet I handed her.

Shannon looked up at me. As I handed her the broach, I expected her to say something like, “Looks like someone knows how to be tactful,” or “Fine, if you insist...”

“Th-Thank you,” she awkwardly stammered, clutching the broach in her hands.



“Huh? Why are you so happy? This is where you usually give a bit of snark.”

“All right, now I know what you think about me. Get bent.”

I felt a little relieved as I saw her go back to being the usual Shannon. I smiled, and she must have thought I was mocking her as she began drumming her fists against me.

“Don’t laugh!”

Chapter 84: Fellow Student

Business was booming in the elven tavern. There was a small stage by the bar, where the performers unveiled their craft. Every so often, an elf would step up to sing a song.

The bar was filled with live performances, and it seemed to be quite a fun place.

“Are we allowed to be here?” I asked.

Eva was scarfing down her food.

“We welcome all guests,” she said. “If you’ve got any specific requests, tell the waiter. They’ll arrange something if you’re willing to pay... It’ll cost you a pretty penny, though.”

Shannon watched the show with clenched fists, a serious look on her face. She’d only barely tasted the food, and now it wasn’t even registering to her.

There were cheers and applause as an elf stepped down from the stage, having finished up their act. As the song was replaced by a calming musical melody, a waiter came up to us.

On closer inspection, it seemed to be a female elf dressed in a male waiter’s uniform.

“You’re really packing it in, Eva. Just know I charge my fellow elves the full amount.”

Her hair was short, and though she was quite pretty, her looks were best described as *cool*. She was a woman who pulled off men’s clothing quite nicely.

Eva wiped her mouth and put in another order. “It’s okay. I’ve got deep pockets right now. Also, are you sure you should be taking that attitude when I brought you a top-class customer?”

“Oh my, are you that right? Then would you like to make a request? Today, we have a popular singer backstage.”

Once the show ended, Shannon began sipping at her juice. Her eyes lit up as soon as the waiter brought up requests.

“Lyle,” the fourth said. It was just one word—my name. And at that moment I knew: *It’s happening again*. Anyway, I decided to ask for their services.

“How much?”

“It comes to one gold coin, sir. Well, we have some less-pricey talent in the wings, so one silver could—”

Clearly, she thought it wasn’t going to happen as she began lifting off other elves too. As soon as I produced a gold coin from my wallet, her attitude changed.

“Sir... Would you care to replace Eva with me? I may not look it, but I am very good at singing and dancing.”

“Enough with the sales pitch. Get working already.”

The woman reluctantly made off, and a while later, another elf came out. The other customers were astir.

“Hey, it’s Lilim.”

“Someone must have paid a fortune.”

“Wow... She’s as beautiful as ever.”

Her long blonde hair fell just short of the ground, and she seemed to keep her eyes perpetually closed. The elven woman wore a dress and had earrings hanging from her characteristically long elven ears. She was slender with good proportions.

After an elegant bow, she began to sing. Her voice was very charming and clear; rather, it carried very well and... Well, I didn’t really get it, but I could still clearly tell she was different from any of the previous performers.

Shannon seemed to be fully absorbed in the performance. The woman truly must have a singing voice that could steal your heart.

“I’ll surpass you someday,” Eva muttered.

I did think that Eva was a good singer, but there were evidently elves who

were better than her.

As the song concluded and applause filled the bar, the woman turned toward us with a smile and a wave. Shannon responded with an exaggerated wave of her own.

But in all the delight and enthusiasm, a voice from the Jewel put a damper on it all.

“One gold for ten minutes just doesn’t add up. We should have gone for the silver option.”

It was the fourth head.

Yes, it was expensive. But I’m glad I got to listen to that voice.

“It was amazing. That’s all I can really say,” I offered my opinion. And Eva agreed...but she didn’t seem enthused.

“She’s a real veteran,” she said. “It’s not easy to fill in a hundred-year gap.”

“Huh? A hundred years?” Shannon asked back.

Eva giggled. “We elves are long-lived, and we look young by human standards. We’re able to tell who’s older and younger among ourselves, but I’ve heard that humans have a hard time.”

There was nothing strange with an elf living over a hundred years. Take Lilim, the one who’d just performed, for instance. She had over a hundred years of singing experience and was apparently an influential figure in elven society.

“I’ll surpass her someday,” Eva said, this time clearly and resolutely. “I’ll be number one. I’ll definitely pull it off in your lifetime.”

“I’ll...be cheering you on.”

I see. Even after we all die, Eva will continue to live on.

Then, Shannon seemed to come to a sudden realization. “Wait, don’t tell me. Are you actually incredibly old?”

“How rude. I’m still sixteen!”

I didn’t know what I’d do if she said she was thirty or forty. I wouldn’t know how to react. I’d been very casual with her since I assumed we were the same

age, but that would come off as rudeness if she was a good deal older than me.

Another order of food was brought to the table.

Eva spoke of her dream. “One day, I’ll find a story only I can tell, and I’ll sing it to the world. For now, I’m going to travel the continent. See with my own eyes, hear with my own ears, and sing. I’m interested in the Princess Knight of the North. If we’re heading to Baym, then I’d love to meet the Saint too. The two War Maidens are also famous, and I’m sure there are loads of heroes whose names aren’t known to the world.”

“That’s a lot of amazing-sounding nicknames!” Shannon showed some interest.

“Female heroes have been especially numerous lately. Oh, but maybe they just stand out because there are so few of them? I’ve heard of there being amazing people in the south too!”

There was a fire in Eva’s eyes. One day she dreamed of meeting these heroes and hearing their tales.

“Oh? Female warriors?” the sixth head said. “If they’re a sight for sore eyes, I’d love to meet them.”

The seventh head sighed. “Women like that are generally a lot burlier than most men.”

The three of us continued to enjoy our dinner before leaving the bar.

Miranda was on her way back to the inn. She’d just finished buying the tools she needed. But, along the way she came to an abrupt stop.

Turning, she said, “Deary me, are you finally making a move?”

Standing behind her was none other than Renaldo.

“Milady, I come bearing a message.”

“What? If you want me to go back, then—”

“No, I would like you to leave the royal capital this very instant. If you are unable to leave, then please wait in safety for this storm to pass.”

Miranda quickly picked up on what Renaldo was trying to tell her. He insisted she left despite the dangers of the season, and given the season, the word *storm* was also strange.

“So Ceres is here, is she?”

“Yes. She arrived just yesterday.”

The convoy of House Walt had traveled through the falling snow and entered the capital without issue.

“They are here ahead of schedule. I intended to tell you before they arrived; I apologize that I did not make it in time.”

Miranda endured the urge to click her tongue. *I don't want to meet her if I can help it. Either we risk it and leave tomorrow, or we hole up in the inn.*

“Got it. Still, what is she doing at the capital at this time of year?”

“About that...”

Renaldo explained what he knew, leaving Miranda at a loss for words.

We were on the way back to the inn. We had stepped off the main road and were traveling down a path lined with storehouses. This storehouse district was a shortcut to the inn.

A river ran nearby, allowing shippers to transport their goods by water. There wasn't much civilian traffic, however.

“Man, that was fun. I want to go again sometime.”

Satisfied, Shannon swung her arms wide as she walked.

“I'd like to take everyone there before we leave. It looks like you enjoyed yourself too, Lyle. That's good to know.”

“Ah, well... Yeah.”

Eva's cheeks were a little red, and when she smiled at me like that—I reflexively said yes. Not that it was a lie. I really did have fun. It felt like my tense shoulders had loosened up a little bit.

“What sort of song should we ask for next time?”

Shannon was already looking forward to her next visit. I smiled a bit, and Eva nodded.

“I knew it; a smile suits you best. You’re pretty cute when you smile, Lyle.”

“C-Cute?!”

“Yep. You’re usually a bit unreliable, but you’re cool when you get serious and cute when you smile. I consider it a compliment.”

It did make me happy, but I was a bit embarrassed too.

“Huh?” Shannon objected. “He’s spineless and stupid, and whenever he smiles, it feels like he’s mocking me. He’s hopeless.”

“That’s just you. I don’t mock anyone else,” I refuted.

Shannon closed in to smack me, but the ground was frozen over and she slipped before she could reach.

“Hey, you’re going to fall over. Look ou— Oh.”

As I caught Shannon and placed her back on her feet, I noticed a handful of figures approaching us. For a moment, I was petrified.

“Lyle?” Eva called out, noticing something was strange.

At the center of the men was Alfred Baden, once a fellow disciple of the sword. His silky black hair swayed as he walked. He was tall with a saber dangling from his waist.

He wore the somewhat gaudy clothes of a noble, with a poncho-like coat on top.

Behind him were the soldiers of House Walt. Not conscripted farmhands—professional soldiers who had received proper training.

They’d noticed me.

“Blue hair and eyes... I recognize you. You’re Lyle.”

Alfred stared at me coldly. As Shannon and Eva stepped out to shield me, I heard a low growl from the seventh head.

“Don’t take that tone with Lyle, you Baden whelp!”

“House Baden?” the third head reflected. “Oh, come to think of it, I put them in charge of the gambling house. Hmm, they became knights?”

The fourth was startled. “Huh? Hold on a second. I never heard about that.”

“Because I never told you. You know we had that gambling house, right? House Baden was in charge of it. Wait. Did you knight them without knowing that? How did you not know? Where did you think all that gambling income was coming from?”

“I didn’t know, and I never got that income in my generation! Do you know what a headache it was, not knowing who ran that damn place all those years?!”

The fifth head flew into a rage. “Hey. Wait. That place expanded into a pretty bothersome organization. You’re telling me...it was the Badens this whole time?”

“They intended to make good use of us, so they never had any intentions of causing us harm,” the sixth head angrily muttered. “That must be why my Art never caught them. You parasites!”

The seventh head’s voice quavered in rage. “No wonder they always outsmarted us no matter our countermeasures. The traitor was right in our midst. Lyle, cut him down! Crush him! You have our permission!”

I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about.

“There was—no, apparently still is—a criminal organization in Walt territory,” the fourth head explained. “They did a lot of things behind the scenes. No matter what measures I took, they’d slip away, and it seemed our intel was always getting leaked. But if House Baden was involved, I can see why.”

His anger on full display, the fifth head howled at the third. “Why did you keep quiet?! Thanks to that accursed clan, we—!”

“What do you want from me? I kinda...died.”

No one could refute that point. I heard the sound of the fourth head smacking the table.

“Back when things were so hectic with me taking over, a man from House Baden was the very first person to approach the manor, offering their help with the process. Thinking back on it now, perhaps that was to collect all the evidence at the estate.”

The third gave his excuse. “Well, someone had to manage the place, and we drew up a proper contract and everything. I didn’t know they were going to hide it and get up to all sorts of things after my death.”

In contrast to House Lundberg, a family of loyal vassals, House Baden had grown by abusing the goodwill of House Walt.

Not that it matters right now...

“Yes, there’s no doubt about it. I’d recognize you anywhere,” Alfred said. “You stain on the Walt name. You’ve got some nerve, showing yourself before us.”

I thought it best to avoid a battle. I tried to leave with the girls.

But not a moment passed before the men reached for their weapons. Alfred drew his saber while the three behind him pulled daggers, and swiftly they had us surrounded.

“Huh? What?!” Shannon cried out.

Eva got the girl in a protective embrace as she pushed her back against mine.

“Lyle, your friends are out for blood! What did you do to them?”

“I haven’t done anything...”

My words caused Alfred to furrow his brow.

“Nothing? Your very existence is a blight on Lady Ceres! The fact that we met today must be by the goddesses’ guidance—they’re telling me to kill you.”

All right, so apparently he really does want me dead.

“What’s with him? A blight? Goddesses... There’s something wrong with this boy,” the third head wearily remarked. The situation wasn’t looking good.

The soldiers surrounding us were fighters by trade.

I clenched my teeth and snapped my fingers. A magic circle manifested on the ground, and two sabers shot up from it. I gripped one in each hand.

Watching me carefully, Alfred gave a mocking laugh.

“You’ve been working on your parlor tricks? It makes me nauseous just thinking we studied under the same teacher. You lot, do whatever you want with those two behind him.”

As Alfred stepped in to close the distance, the soldiers made their move. They went after Eva.

“I’m not going down here!”

Sparks flew as my saber clashed with his. The impact caused his coat to lift ever so slightly, revealing the dagger hanging from his belt. It was a familiar blade.

“Where did you get that dagger?!”

My sudden burst of anger momentarily took Alfred by surprise. And in his surprise, he gave an honest answer.

“It was a gift from Lady Ceres. Originally, it belonged to a seedy party of adventurers. But my exalted mistress made it hers, and bestowed it—”

“What happened to them?”

“Mm?”

“What happened to those three?!”

The dagger in Alfred’s possession belonged to Rondo, an adventurer I became acquainted with in Darion. It was a custom order and a demonic tool. It wasn’t the sort of dagger one would just randomly stumble across.

Slicing at me, Alfred said, “Oh, they died. Lady Ceres graciously slew them. A lucky bunch, they were. Oh, but one of them died at my hand.”

I pushed his blade aside and took a swipe of my own. It was a slash accompanied by a deep step, but Alfred had backed off just in time. He got out with only a nick to his cheek.

Alfred reached up and felt the wound on his face and frowned. He pointed the tip of his saber at me.

“Unforgivable,” he said.

Hurrying back to the inn, Miranda spotted Sophia on the first floor.

“Sophia, where’s everyone?”

“Lyle went out with Eva and Shannon, and Aria went off on her own. They’re not back yet. Also, Miss Lily dropped by saying she needed to discuss some urgent matters with Lyle. She wants to meet him outside the city walls.”

“Aria went out alone?”

“Yes, but she just went to do some shopping nearby. She should be back soon.”

The door to the inn swung open, and there was Aria in the doorway.

“Back,” Aria said.

“Aria, we need to talk. Come with me,” Miranda called out to her.

But Aria had something to say first. “Before that, I heard that a fight’s broken out outside. Real close too.”

Sophia started up the stairs to get the others.

“A fight?” asked Miranda.

“I didn’t see it myself. But apparently, an adventurer and a knight are going at it near the storehouse district. The guy who saw it looked real rattled.”

Miranda could feel something ominous on the wind. “Hey, what sort of people were they?”

“I didn’t hear that much.”

Then, Novem came down the stairs.

“What’s wrong?”

Miranda reported what she’d heard from Renaldo.

“Lady Ceres is in the capital?”

“That’s right. Let’s have a discussion once Lyle gets back. If possible, I’d like to leave as soon as possible.”

Clara glanced out the window. “Aren’t they running late? It’s hard to imagine they’ll stay out too late when Shannon’s with them.”

“Yes, they’d usually be back by now,” Monica said with some concern.

Miranda thought back to what Aria had told her. *Is it really Lyle?*

She was about to run out to confirm it herself when the inn door opened, and two guests came in. The pair spoke with excitement.

“You rarely ever get to see a knight and adventurer fighting.”

“Like hell I’m getting dragged into that. It’s over if the nobles get their eye on you.”

Miranda stormed up to them. “Can I ask you a few questions?”

“Y-Yeah, shoot.”

“Did you see the adventurer who was fighting?”

“I did. Some blue-haired boy. There was an elf and a small girl too—”

In the next instant, Monica raced out of the inn.

“Hey! Wait up!” Aria cried out.

Miranda immediately ran to her room. “Aria, Sophia, get your weapons and go to the storehouse district. Clara, come with me. Novem—”

Clara pointed at the door. “She’s already gone.”

Miranda clicked her tongue.

While wandering aimlessly through the capital, Lionel stumbled upon the storehouse district. In a narrow gap between two storehouses, he hid and crouched, doing his best to fend off the cold. But today’s cold was far too harsh to bear, and he quivered incessantly.

“I’m freezing...”

As he was hiding and shaking, he heard the sound of metal striking against metal. He heard voices too, but the sound was the first thing he recognized. He had heard it on the battlefield, and it haunted his dreams.

“A fight?”

Poking his head out of the alley, Lionel saw Lyle.

“I-It’s him! But... Hm?”

He was protecting someone, unable to fight to his full capabilities. As he alone took on four combatants, Lyle’s body was marked by conspicuous gashes.

A vile smile spread across Lionel’s lips as he watched.

As Alfred retracted his saber, the soldiers motioned like they were about to lunge at Eva. As soon as my attention turned, Alfred immediately cut at me again.

I was struggling to put up a fight. Eva was unarmed, and naturally, Shannon didn’t have any weapons.

Alfred watched me with a grin. What he was doing was more akin to tormenting than it was to fighting.

“Dammit!”

Seeing that I couldn’t give it my all, Eva called out to me, “Lyle, I know a bit of magic. Let’s start by taking down those soldiers together.”

The soldiers smirked.

“What a strong-willed elf.”

“Magic, huh? It depends on her skill level.”

“Well, let’s see what you’ve got!”

Eva unleashed her magic at the confident men. The wind picked up around us, coming down on them in a concentrated blast. And then, one of the soldiers stepped forward in a defensive stance. As the man intercepted the spell, the other two circled around to assail her.

“No way!”

“Your magic lacks a killing edge! It’ll take more than that to take us down!”

A soldier thrust a knife out at Eva, so I stepped in and kicked him back. I used

my saber to knock the other one's dagger out of his hand.

But as I was preoccupied, Alfred's saber sliced through my shoulder.

"This again!"

The soldier I kicked was quickly back on his feet, and the other one retrieved his fallen dagger and immediately assumed his stance. They moved differently from any of the bandits and adventurers I'd seen before.

I heard a conflicted opinion from the Jewel.

"Good grief, what reliable soldiers. But they're a real nuisance as enemies," the fifth head mused. My mind was too taken by Alfred's dagger for me to even consider asking for his advice.

Eva held Shannon tightly. "They're crazy," she said. "Who in their right mind charges straight into magic?"

Apparently, the soldiers of House Walt were quite well trained.

I took a deep breath.

"Get them," Alfred ordered the soldiers.

They came at us again.

"Thunderclap."

I held my right saber to the heavens, dropping a magic bolt of lightning. There was a fearsome burst of light and sound, and all the snow that had accumulated on the nearby ground was whipped up in a frenzy.

As the clouds of snow blocked everyone's vision, I grabbed Eva and Shannon and took off.

Then Shannon, whom I'd hoisted over my shoulder, looked in Alfred's direction and screamed, "Lyle, dodge!"

Something was closing in on my back.

"What?"

I quickly activated my Arts to identify it—a massive hand. I immediately dived to the right, a hand-shaped indent appearing in the snow where we had been

moments before.

My vision rapidly cleared up.

Alfred was smiling.

The soldiers were covering their ears as they lay motionless on the ground. I'd successfully stunned them.

"And you call yourselves soldiers of House Walt?" Alfred demanded as he lorded over them and clicked his tongue. "Still, that spell took me by surprise. I guess you didn't do all that idiotic training for nothing. Even so, you're not even at Lady Ceres's ankles."

After setting Shannon and Eva down, I drew my sabers. I was about to go at it again when Shannon pinched and tugged at my shirt.

"There's something off with him, Lyle. I see the upper body of a giant person around him."

"A person?"

Alfred himself hadn't changed. But with the Arts, I could tell something was there. If Shannon was to be believed, then it seemed like raw mana was taking on a humanoid shape to protect him.

"An Art, huh...?" Alfred furrowed his brow. "That's no good. You're a bad girl—you shouldn't be telling people about someone else's Art. I should take care of you here."

He began licking his lips, getting an "Eww, you creep," from Eva.

In the next instant, the invisible giant reached out its hand.

"Die!"

I lowered my body, placing my sabers over my shoulders—then I briefly shifted into my special stance before stepping in, kicking off, and spinning in the air as my blades tore through the invisible arm.

"What?!"

I approached in Alfred's moment of surprise. He reflexively thrust out, and I knocked his blade aside. Next came his kick—this one, I took on purpose,

tumbling across the snow before I scrambled back to my feet.

I stood before Alfred and laughed. I showed off the dagger in my left hand.

“Sorry, I’m taking this back.”

My left saber was stabbed deep into Alfred’s thigh. I’d stabbed down, let go, and snatched the dagger as he kicked me.

“You’ve got quick hands, Lyle!” the sixth head chuckled. “Now what to do about him?”

Falling to his knees, Alfred frowned and glared at me.

“You worthless sideshow!”

“Eek!” Shannon shrieked. “There’s more hands! Lyle, they’re getting bigger!”

I could vaguely sense them too. The giant defending Alfred had grown bigger, and its arms now numbered four. He retrieved the saber I’d knocked out of his hand and painfully plucked my blade out of him.

“I’ll rip you to pieces,” he said as three of his giant’s arms shot at me. The last one grabbed my saber and tried to run me through.

At a glance, it looked like my saber was flying through the air, but...if I could see it this clearly, then it was manageable.

I vaulted over the hands that tried to grab me and raced at Alfred, hammering in my fist with my fingers still curled around my saber. A blow from my Art-enhanced body sent him flying through the air and tumbling across the snow.

Moments ago, I was so worried about protecting my party members that I couldn’t fight to my heart’s content, but now I could fight. I was a little worried I might have killed a soldier or two with my magic, but they seemed all right.

“Stand up. I’m taking revenge for Rondo, Ralph, and Rachel. Don’t think it’ll be over that quickly.”

The fifth head advised me to calm myself. “Lyle, stand down. You’ve saved the girls already. Now take them and run.”

I ignored his opinion and took a step closer to Alfred. I walked along the bloodstained snow, only to be greeted by the laugh of my foe.

“You fool. You’re quite the softy.”

“What?”

“You’ve never killed a human before, have you? That’s why you didn’t cut me down when you had the chance. If only you’d killed me, there’d still be hope for you.”

What is he talking about?

But as the thought struck my mind, an extravagant carriage entered the scene. It was surrounded by mounted knights and foot soldiers.

“The Walt crest...”

The carriage was emblazoned with the crest of House Walt.

With blood pouring from his nose, Alfred looked at me and laughed.

“You’re finished.”

From the carriage came a face I would never forget... Ceres. She wore a white fur coat and cap, curiously scanning the area as she disembarked onto the snow.

The onlookers—I hadn’t even realized when they’d all gathered—swallowed their breaths. It was like the area around Ceres alone was filled with a special sort of air that set her apart from everyone else.

Though it was annoying to admit, my little sister looked like a work of fine art. Her left hand clutched a sheathed rapier.

I stood there petrified as Alfred crawled through the snow to Ceres’s feet.

“Lady Ceres, I found him. Lyle is—”

In the next instant, Ceres drew her rapier. She looked down at Alfred.

“Don’t you think it’s impossible that a knight of House Walt would ever lose to that garbage?”

“Huh?”

Alfred was left speechless as all the knights and soldiers around Ceres endorsed her statement. They jeered at a man who had been their comrade like

it was nothing.

“You disgrace of a knight.”

“I believe such a knight is unnecessary for House Walt.”

“Had I been in his position, I would have killed myself on the spot.”

Alfred couldn't muster an answer.

Shannon wept.

“He's...already done for. She already killed him.”

Eva hugged Shannon and soothed her. “What's wrong? What do you mean?”

Ceres walked toward us. As she left Alfred, I could hear the sound of something dripping. His blood dyed the snow around him red.

The third was surprised. “Wait... When did she cut him?”

Though surprised too, the sixth head recalled Shannon's words. “It had to be before Shannon said it... Right?”

“Who? Who the hell is that?” the seventh head said in a fluster.

The fourth head questioned his response. “That girl is Ceres, right?”

I lightly nodded.

But the seventh head strongly denied it. “She's not! She may look similar, but her atmosphere is completely different! Ceres was never like that!”

“Lyle, run,” the fifth head said to me. “Take those two and run this instant!”

As she looked at me, Ceres's mouth curled into a crescent-shaped smile.

“Found you.”

Chapter 85: Heretical God's Child

Urgency gripped Novem as she unerringly raced toward the storehouse district. Each and every step carried as much strength as she could muster.

I need to hurry, she thought.

But suddenly, she came to a halt. The snow caused her to slide forward a bit as she stopped and raised her silver staff.

"Could you please not get in my way, father?"

Standing there was Jerard Fuchs—Novem's father.

"It has been a while, Novem."

Her weapon aimed at her own father, Novem was ready to act at a moment's notice.

"There's something I need to tell you," Jerard said.

And as he spoke on, Novem found herself lowering her staff.

I never thought I would meet her here.

"I never thought an incompetent piece of trash like you would still be alive. I guess I have to erase you properly."

My legs trembled; my breathing was erratic. I recalled the haunting fear of facing Ceres.

Even when I tried to take my stance, my body just wouldn't listen to me. Then I heard the fifth head's voice from the Jewel.

"Lyle, what's wrong?! Start moving! This one's hopeless. Don't fight her, no matter what!"

The other ancestors were also chiming in. "Run! Run!" they were screaming.

As she stood before me, Ceres smiled. "Disappear."

Before I knew it, I was flying through the air.

I tumbled across the ground, letting go of the saber in my right hand as I lay on the snow.

“Lyle!”

Eva and Shannon rushed over to me and tried to get me back on my feet.

I glanced at Ceres to see that her soldiers had swiftly retrieved both of my abandoned sabers. Holding the two swords—both finely crafted weapons in their own right—Ceres crushed the blades with her bare hands.

“What’s this dull trash? I thought you might entertain me a little bit, but you really are just a small fry.”

As I trembled, Eva spoke to me.

“Lyle, get up. We need to escape.”

“You *won’t* escape,” Ceres said, looking at me. “Oh? Are you an elf? Right, I’ve got an idea. I’ve heard that elves are good at singing. I’ll cut off your limbs and make you a tool whose sole purpose is to sing to me.”

I couldn’t understand what she was saying. To me, it seemed she had gone completely insane.

But Ceres laughed, and everyone around her supported the idea.

“What a wonderful proposal.”

“That elf must be blessed, to become a personal possession of Lady Ceres.”

“Then we’ll need to start preparing at once.”

Next, Ceres stuck her eyes on Shannon.

“Oh? And the other one is that garbage... That’s right, the garbage from House Circry. But what’s this? Have your eyes started working?”

Shannon was terrified. Stuck, unable to move before Ceres.

“What’s this, all the trash gathered itself into one heap? Ah, and come to think of it, where’s your sister? I don’t need the garbage, but I do want that big sister of yours.”

Shannon protested. “I-I’m not garbage,” she said. “We’re not trash!”

I heard the seventh head from the Jewel. “Stop her, Lyle! Don’t instigate Ceres!”

“What? Someone of your insignificant level wants to lash out at me?”

Her voice was cold as could be. And so were the eyes she used to stare us down.

It was as though she was looking at mere garbage.

“How unpleasant. That’s it—you’re all dead. Now, how shall I kill you? Oh, that’s right! I haven’t burned something in a while! It’s been so cold lately, so I’m sure that’ll warm things up. We’ll have a magnificent fire, just like when I burned that old gardener!”

My trembling stopped.

I lifted my face and interrogated Ceres, who had begun to innocently dance on the spot.

“What...have you done?”

She came to an abrupt stop, clearly displeased by my voice.

“Hmm?”

“The gardener? You’re not talking about Old Zel... Tell me you’re not.”

Slowly rising, I drew my dagger from its sheath and handed it to Eva. In its empty scabbard, I slotted Rondo’s dagger instead. Then, I clenched the Jewel.

“Who did you burn?!”

Ceres laughed at my rage.

“The gardener, I said. Was his name Zel? That shitty old man. He was almost dead already, so I burned him along with that miserable hut of his. Oh? Are you angry?” She laughed.

I heard the seventh head’s mournful voice. “Zel... Ceres, how could you...”

As I gripped the Jewel in my left hand, the metal around it shifted to take on the shape of a bow.

The third head screamed, “Lyle, why aren’t you running?!”

Zel was the man who saved my life.

“You— I’m going to...!”

And Rondo, Rachel, and Ralph—they were my friends. I couldn’t forgive her. Not to mention it would be impossible for me to run from Ceres while protecting the other two. I wasn’t strong enough.

I’d fought her once before, and I understood it well.

The current Ceres was different from how she was back then. She’d gotten even stronger.

“Hmm, that’s an interesting toy you have there.”

As I drew the empty bow, arrows made of light manifested within. Not just one. Roughly ten appeared at once, and I unleashed them without hesitation.

Their power was so overwhelming; that was why I hadn’t used them in the previous battle. But against Ceres, there was no room to hold back.

The arrows of light assailed her, only to collide with an invisible something and burst.

“A defensive Art?” The sixth head clicked his tongue.

But the fourth head was skeptical. “Is her Art not the power charming everyone around her? Does she possess multiple Arts?”

“Could it be that Ceres has...” the seventh head muttered.

Right at that moment, Ceres emerged from the smoke of the explosion. Unscathed, and grinning.

“All show, no substance. It’s my turn.”

She swung her rapier, causing cold air to amass above her head. There was white smoke and ice; the ice gradually grew larger, taking on a well-defined shape.

It was a spear. With all the intricate details she’d reproduced, it was practically a work of Art.

At a glance, I knew it was bad news. I pulled the bowstring with all my might.

Ceres aimed the tip of her rapier at me.

“It’d be such a buzzkill if you died from this. But that would be funny in its own way.”

The ice spear was unleashed.

I released an arrow to shoot it down, and the spear and arrow collided with a violent burst. But the spear must have had more power behind it as I was pushed back by the blast of wind and a burst of cold air.

The temperature around me plummeted.

Though I shielded my face with my left hand, the ice that covered my body let out a crisp crackling sound when I moved. This much, just from being exposed to the residual cold.

I would have been in danger if I’d taken a direct hit.

The road through the storehouse district was covered in white mist, and the scene I saw once it all cleared...

“Hey now, you’re kidding me.”

The sight that the fifth wanted to believe was some sort of joke—the sight of all the spears of ice floating in the sky.

It wasn’t just a dozen or so. There were over a hundred spears, their tips all pointed straight at us.

I rushed toward Shannon and Eva, who was embracing her, as the spears began falling from the sky.

“Tut, tut. You’ll be skewered frozen if you don’t start running.” Ceres chuckled, though there was palpable discontent in her voice.

Each time a spear struck the ground, a blast of wind and cold would sweep over the whole area, making for terrible visibility.

Approaching the two of them, I took out Rondo’s dagger. They were shivering from the cold, unable to escape.

“Rondo...I’ll be using this!”

Suddenly, the voices from the Jewel began to cut out. What emerged, enveloping us, was a dome-shaped wall of light.

“Ly— Ru... Run!” came a distorted cry from the Jewel. I couldn’t even tell whose voice it was.

I’d heard that Gems—and by extension, Jewels—had a terrible compatibility with most standard demonic tools, and it seemed that was true. The silver bow in my grasp had turned back into a necklace.

Shining patterns appeared across the surface of the blade. This was a demonic tool imbued with an Art specializing in defense.

As the spears came down one by one, the wall of light continued to protect us. It was only because Rondo had told me about his dagger. It was thanks to him that I managed to block Ceres’s attack.

Eva spoke from behind me. “Lyle, I’m sorry. It’s because of us—”

“That has nothing to do with it.”

“Huh?”

“It’s irrelevant. In front of Ceres, it’s all meaningless. Whether you’re here or not, our situation is hopeless. Even running means nothing—in that case, what can I do but fight?!”

I tried to encourage myself.

Ceres had killed Rondo’s party and burned Old Zel to death... I couldn’t forgive her.

Gradually, the light surrounding us faded. Cracks spread across the dagger; the demonic tool had surpassed its limits.

“I’ll buy time—use that chance!”

“What about you?!” Shannon shouted.

“Someone has to survive!” I shouted back.

And finally, one last spear of ice blew the wall away. The dagger shattered to pieces. I held the Jewel in my right hand, calling forth the silver greatsword.

The cold had completely changed our surroundings. It was a blank, featureless

world of ice, with only Ceres waiting for us down the path.

“Ceres!”

“Oh my, a sword this time?”

A pale blue light erupted from my body. With the first head’s Art strengthening my body to its absolute limit, I was able to simultaneously employ the Arts of all my ancestors barring the seventh’s.

I brandished the greatsword as I flew at Ceres. As I swung down, the impact caused the surrounding ice to shatter and scatter in all directions.

Ceres stood atop my blade.

“Too sloooow. You really are trash.”

And just like that, I was caught by her roundhouse kick, which sent me crashing into a storehouse wall. Immediately, I stood and swung the greatsword at her.

Again. Again. Ceres evaded it all and stuck her rapier into me.

“Your wounds heal fast. Is that the power of your Jewel?”

“Did that girl just—?” The sixth head gasped.

The fourth head frustratedly muttered, “I can’t believe it. Even the current Lyle is absolutely no match.”

The air glistened with radiant ice shards as the greatsword’s hefty slices continued to shatter the surrounding ice.

Ceres closed in. “Well, in the end, you’re just trash. Nothing significant, even with the Arts of the heads of House Walt. And the ancestors must be trash too, if they’re sticking with you.”

Ceres knew about the Jewel. She spoke as if she knew that the ancestors had been brought back as memories. But what I couldn’t forgive—was her insulting them.

She’d just called my ancestors garbage.

“Damn you!”

“Aha ha ha! Are you mad?”

“Calm down, Lyle! More importantly, if she knows about the Jewel, that means that yellow Gem she has must be—”

Ignoring the fifth head’s words, I sliced at Ceres and missed again. She caught my return swing with her bare hands. And in her grasp, the greatsword wouldn’t budge a single inch.

“Lyle, that’s Zenoah’s yellow Gem! I don’t know where she found it, but that thing is dangerous! If it became a Jewel just like our Gem, it has existed since before the founding of Banseim!”

I exerted even more force, yet the greatsword remained motionless.

“So you’ve got a Jewel like me,” I muttered.

Ceres raised an eyebrow in displeasure. “Like you? Don’t be ridiculous. Unlike that defective product of yours, mine is a true, genuine Jewel. The fake you have can’t even be compared.”

Defective. Fake. Her insults fueled my anger even more. It felt like she was mocking the first and second heads who had disappeared for believing in me.

“There is only one person inside of my Jewel,” Ceres said.

She kicked up the greatsword, then closed in as I staggered back. I forcibly swung down, and this time she swung the rapier to meet it.

The blade of the rapier emitted heat, the blade glowing a fiery red. Against the blade, my greatsword was torn to shreds. Destroyed.

“Did you think you could do anything with that paltry weapon?”

She grabbed my head with her left hand, slamming me against the wall; she began to run alongside the wall, dragging my head against it.

“Come. Endure this!”

She used me to wildly shave away at the surface. Try as I might, I couldn’t do anything to resist Ceres’s might.

“Even when I’m using our founder’s Art...”

Ceres slammed me into the wall of another storehouse. After smacking into

the wall, I bounced off and fell onto the ground. A ground of snow and ice, the chill stabbing into me like needles.

As I tried to crawl back to my feet, Ceres stepped on my head. She ground her boot into my skull, and I couldn't push back.

"How pathetic! How fitting of you!"

The Jewel had fallen nearby. The greatsword had already vanished. I lay there, unable to stand or push her away when suddenly, I was freed.

"Now die!"

Ceres pointed her left hand at me. She was about to shower me with flames.

I scooped up the Jewel, clenching it in desperation. *Is this the end?* I thought, half resigned to my fate when Ceres was caught off guard by a bolt of magic.

Ceres's fiery spell ceased, fizzling out before it struck me. I glanced in the direction the blast had come from and saw Eva standing with her right arm held out.

"Why?!"

Eva smiled. "I made sure Shannon got away."

That wasn't the answer I wanted. I wanted them both to get away.

Celes turned her left hand toward Eva.

"I'll slowly burn you to death. Oh, what sounds will an elf make while they're on the pyre?"

Although she was expressionless, there was anger in Ceres's voice as she was about to cast magic again. I had to hurry to my feet, but my body wouldn't obey. Using the greatsword had taken too much out of me.

"Why now?!"

That was where the situation took a turn.

Thwap—a sound echoed through the air. The knights who were watching from a distance cried out, "Lady Ceres!"

Ceres glared at the flustered knights. "You shall not move! Don't get in my

way!”

“Y-Yes ma’am!”

A chunk of ice rolled at my feet, just big enough to rest in the palm of my hand. It had struck Ceres on the head, denting her fur cap before falling next to me.

Ceres had been unable to avoid it. Silently, she shook. She seethed. Eyes wide and bloodshot, she scanned her surroundings and found Shannon behind Eva, her breathing a little disorderly. Shannon had seemingly used her orphic eyes, as her pupils gave off a golden glimmer.

“Shannon, why didn’t you run?!”

She was smaller and weaker than me, but Shannon boldly replied, “I swore to myself! I promised I’d get back at that woman! How could I run away?! If I left you people behind, I’d regret it for the rest of my life!”

The ice she threw wasn’t particularly large. Ceres had essentially taken no damage whatsoever.

Yet still, Shannon had managed to land a hit on Ceres. The sight of her bravery made me force myself to stand. I had to pin Ceres down while her attention was still on Shannon.

But just before I could touch her, she vanished from the spot. Now without a target, I stumbled forward and collapsed.

In an instant, Ceres was standing right next to Shannon.

“Shannon, run!”

I knew shouting wouldn’t change anything, but I had to shout anyway. It was so frustrating... I never thought it would be this frustrating, knowing there wasn’t a single thing I could do.

I couldn’t protect anyone.

“Not on my watch!”

Eva attempted to cast a spell, only for Ceres to turn her left hand on her.

“Yipes!”

Eva was sent flying. She crashed into a wall and promptly fell unconscious.

“Eva!”

My body wouldn’t move.

“Shannon!” the sixth head screamed.

“Is she a monster? None of us expected her to be this strong.”

Her strength greatly surpassed anything the ancestors had anticipated. Even they were perplexed.

Ceres grabbed Shannon’s throat. “It looks like you have some special eyes.”

“L-Let go of me!”

Ceres watched Shannon’s suffering with a sinister smile. “They’re wasted on rubbish like you. So I’ll torture you after I gouge those eyes out. Slowly. I’ll take my time killing you.”

What can I do? How can I save Shannon?! I thought over it and quickly reached my answer.

A smile naturally spread across my lips. “Who’s angry now?”

The third head panicked at my words. “Lyle, don’t provoke— No, I see. You’ve made your resolve.”

By the sound of it, he’d accepted my decision. I clenched the Jewel to give him my answer.

I looked at Eva before returning my eyes to Ceres with a mocking sneer.

“After all that confidence, all that conceit, you take a blow to the head! What a comedy! How does it feel to take a hit from Shannon, the girl you treated like garbage?!”

I laughed at Ceres. I mocked her.

As she turned toward me, she threw Shannon aside.

Even with the overwhelming power she wielded, she was still a selfish child inside. She would constantly change her target, always prioritizing her emotions over anything else. I knew she would come at me.

Ceres charged at me with her rapier; I instinctively guarded with my left hand, only to be thrown back. I collided with a storehouse wall.

Ceres's rapier pierced my left arm and pinned me to the wall.

"Gah!"

She ruthlessly wriggled the blade back and forth, causing waves of pain to shoot through me. Again and again, she kicked at me like she was trying to stomp me flat.

"Trash! Worthless! Incompetent! Don't mock me! The draff! The dregs! Someone like you has no right to laugh at me!"

Unlike before, Ceres had lost herself in her rage.

That's right... This is perfect.

Once her kicks had broken my right arm, she stopped. Her breathing was ragged. She wriggled the rapier and simply watched, expressionless, as I suffered.

"It is simply inconceivable for me to be mocked by you. It's something that should never happen. That's why I—"

"Gaaah!"

I could do nothing but pray that Eva and Shannon got away. In order to keep her focus on me, I smiled through the pain.

When I lifted my face, I saw her left hand held high, lifting up a large ball of blazing fire. The flames that burned in black and red were melting the surrounding snow.

I could no longer move.

"Die, you trash! If Novem wasn't around, you'd be—"

Why is Novem's name coming up?

In the next instant, Ceres glanced briefly at the yellow Gem embedded in her rapier. Then, she pulled the rapier out and swiftly backed away.

"Don't touch my chicken!"

A massive hammer came down right where she had been standing.

It was Monica, in a rage.

“Monica...”

“Don’t speak. Everyone will be here soon. Leave this to me.” She readied her hammer, never taking her eyes off Ceres.

“An automaton? Hmm, those dolls the ancients made. It’d be fun to dismantle you,” Ceres muttered to herself as Monica charged at her.

She hit dead center with her hammer, but Ceres simply caught the blow with her left arm. I had no idea where she was getting all that strength in her slender arms, but this was the first time I’d ever seen Monica losing in a battle of strength.

“Even Monica’s not enough? Lyle, can you move?”

To the fourth head, I replied, “I doubt it.”

My mana had run out and my body was too battered.

“I can’t believe she’s really human. So this is the Heretical God’s Child—the first head was right. We were underestimating her.” The third head’s voice oozed with frustration.

Slamming her hammer into Ceres, Monica said, “Looking at you fills me with a sense of hostility. Are you truly human?”

“What a rude doll. But very well; I admit, I am far beyond human!”

Ceres kicked Monica away, sending her crashing through a storehouse wall.

“Monica!” I could taste blood in my mouth as I shouted.

Monica emerged, bursting through a different part of the wall. She circled behind Ceres and took a horizontal swing with her hammer.

“You’re sturdy. I’m getting a little interested.”

“Well, I’m not happy to hear it. I’ll never forgive you, especially for trying to kill my worthless chicken!”

Having regained consciousness, Eva came to me with Shannon to treat my

wounds.

“This is bad. You’re losing too much blood,” Eva said, panicked.

Shannon wept. “Why did you save me?!”

“Shut up. I said I’d protect you.”

If only they’d run away... But though I wouldn’t say it, I was genuinely glad they were by my side.

A blast of magic from Ceres blew Monica away. Falling to the ground, Monica had lost her right arm, and her clothing was scorched. The hammer hit the ground a beat later. It was severely burnt with clouds of smoke billowing from it.

Looking at Ceres, I saw that the snow and ice had vanished around her. The temperature had skyrocketed to the point that it felt unbearably hot.

Monica stood, holding her hammer in her remaining left hand.

“Monica! Why aren’t you regenerating?!” Shannon wailed at the tattered automaton.

Monica had the ability to repair herself.

“My repair function requires that chicken’s mana. If I repair myself now, the chicken will die. That is the one thing I won’t do. I refuse!”

Even though she was always messing around, why, at a time like this...?

I forced myself to use the first head’s Art. Limit Burst—on top of enhancing my body, the Art allowed me to ignore the strain placed on me and had a healing effect.

“Lyle, don’t push yourself!” Eva said out of concern, but if I did nothing, I’d just die. I wouldn’t accomplish anything.

“We need to stop her, somehow.”

Just as Ceres was about to attack Monica—this time, a battle-axe came flying at her. She deflected it with her rapier, then pinched the spear that was thrust at her, catching it between her fingers.

“Oh, you’re fast.”

“You’re kidding me!”

Aria had accelerated with her Art, thrusting at speeds unperceivable to the naked eye. However, Ceres effortlessly intercepted her attack. Ceres lifted her rapier above her head just as Sophia swung down with her battle-axe.

The rapier was a slender blade specialized in thrusting attacks, but it had managed to stop the might of an axe.

“No way!” Sophia stared in disbelief.

Ceres grabbed the spear and used it to toss Aria at Sophia, sending both of them tumbling over one another.

“Weak, weak. Truly nothing but small fries. Since these pieces of trash came to save you, I’m guessing they’re your allies? They’re the perfect comrades for a useless lout.”

They stood, their weapons at the ready, but Ceres had no interest in dealing with them.

“Men, take care of these two. I’m going to start incinerating the trash.”

The knights and soldiers armed themselves and surrounded my two comrades.

“Sophia, seal their movement,” Aria said, holding out her spear.

Sophia shook her head. “I’ve been trying this whole time. I have, but...”

Apparently, it was ineffective. The soldiers were moving somewhat sluggishly, but they were still moving. I couldn’t see any visible effect on the knights.

The seventh head bemoaned, “The knights that should have originally been protecting Lyle have become our enemies.”

Then, a massive black tiger charged in, scattering the knights and soldiers along the way. Miranda and Clara, riding on its back, retrieved Aria and Sophia from the encirclement.

“Miranda!” the sixth head cried out. He sounded glad to see them.

The fifth head was gradually regaining his calm. “That should raise your chance of survival a little.”

But still, he wouldn't say we could win. That was simply how great the difference in power was.

Coming over to us, Miranda hopped down from the tiger's back and drew a weapon on Ceres. "Clara, you escape with Lyle."

Shannon looked at her. "Sis!"

"Go! I'm not sure I can buy much time."

Ceres looked at her disinterestedly. "Do you know what it means to take his side?"

"I'm well aware."

"What a shame. You were a favorite of mine."

Miranda took a glance at Shannon's teary face. "I, on the other hand, despise you."

"I see. Then disappear."

The black tiger Miranda had conjured was a golem. She sicced it on Ceres, only for it to be sliced to pieces, reverted to dirt in an instant. In that same instant, Miranda threw her knives in quick succession. The throwing knives were shaped like arrowheads, the tips of each made of clay.

Scattered all around Ceres, the knives began to explode one after the next. Meanwhile, Miranda crafted a golem for us. It was a cute, cartoonish spider this time, with a rather large back.

"Get Lyle aboard and ru—"

The golem was crushed flat by Ceres, who descended upon it from the sky. "Too bad. No escape for you!"

Aria and Sophia attacked her only to get kicked away. Monica tried to capture her, but she was sliced through by the rapier. She slid to the ground, her left arm and left leg lopped off.

Flames erupted from Clara's artificial left hand as she extended it toward Ceres. "This is Lyle's little sister?"

I could understand why Clara would be so surprised.

Ceres walked straight through the flames, not even showing any signs of slight burns. She grabbed Clara's left arm and crushed it in her grip.

"Hmm, so this is a prosthetic?"

"Urgh!"

As Clara was immobilized with fear, it was Eva who moved to save her. She barged in between Ceres and Clara and thrust out the dagger I'd given her.

"Take this!"

But Ceres fended her off far too easily, and Eva toppled to the ground.

"Eva!" Clara cried, reaching out to her.

Ceres reached out to grab Clara in turn, only for Miranda's threads to entangle her arm before she could.

"C'mon, hurry!"

Before she could finish that thought, Ceres gave the threads a forceful tug. She spun Miranda in a circle before slamming her into a wall, then severed the threads with her rapier.

"Sis!" Shannon raced over to her, desperately calling out for her sister.

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't touch me. Hah, and you've sullied it nonetheless. This coat was my favorite... Oh, that's right! There was that knight who got married. I'll give it to him as a present; every night, he'll embrace the coat instead of his wife. Now wouldn't that be interesting?"

It was in terrible taste. I struggled to understand how I could have a little sister like this.

I hated Ceres. She had stolen everything from me, and gained everything I couldn't—now, she was destroying everything I finally managed to obtain.

As my comrades went down one by one, tears streamed down my face.

Seeing me like that, Ceres flashed a disturbingly cheerful smile. Her face of utter delight looked incredibly repulsive in my eyes.

"That's a good face! That's what I wanted to see! This is the best. I'll kill you last. Until then, I'll slowly torture these girls to death in front of you. Oh, I can't

wait. I can't wait."

She had a look of ecstasy on her face. And I...I stood, taking a painful step forward.

"You! How could you!"

Suddenly, Ceres leaped back as if fearful of something. She had lost the composure she'd carried and was now stealing frequent glances at the yellow Gem embedded in her rapier.

This was a side of her none of us had ever seen before. And at the end of her line of sight was...

"Novem."

Holding her staff in her left hand, Novem slowly walked toward us. Her face carried none of her usual kindness. She was expressionless, and after taking a glance at us, she furrowed her brow ever so slightly. She walked past me and stood before Ceres before opening her mouth.

"This *isn't* what we agreed on, Lady Ceres."



Ceres looked at her yellow Gem before continuing the conversation.

“Was it now? I’ve forgotten.”

“I said it, didn’t I? That I wouldn’t forgive you if you laid a hand on Lord Lyle.”

“Hmm... And what are you going to do about it? I’m Ceres Walt. The heir of the same House Walt you all held so dear. Are you really going to hurt me?”

“I will if I have to. What is precious to me is Lord Lyle. You fall just one short of him on my priorities.”

Novem’s tone was terribly cold, and I could tell there was anger behind her words. I knew she was trying to protect me.

I knew that—*but what?!*

“Novem, what’s the meaning of this?!”

Novem didn’t turn to my voice.

Ceres seemed hesitant to fight her. Ceres—the girl who had shown off an overwhelming gap in strength when she fought us—appeared to be deep in thought.

Finally, she said, “I’m stronger than you now. Do you think I’ll lose to the likes of you?”

“I doubt I’ll win. But do you want to test that theory? I might not be able to win, but you will not come out of this unscathed, Lady Ceres.”

A bitter look crossed Ceres’s face, but she didn’t lash out in anger. She frequently glanced at her yellow Gem. Just who exactly was contained inside of it? I grew curious.

Ceres bit her lower lip before sheathing her rapier away.

“Fine, I’ll stand down. Is that good enough?”

“Yes. I won’t chase you. Also, I have a question.”

“What?”

Ceres had turned her back to us. She was about to leave, only to turn around again and stare Novem in the face.

“Are you still Lady Ceres? Or are you Septem?”

Ceres immediately flew into a rage. “Don’t call me by that name!”

I thought a fight might break down again but Ceres, fixated on her yellow Gem—or rather, Jewel—proceeded toward her carriage.

Novem watched Ceres leave with the knights and soldiers of House Walt before coming over to us. I was struck with relief, alongside a host of other emotions.

“Milord, I’m going to administer treatment right now.”

Novem came to my side.

Just as she began to slip, my consciousness began to fade away. I collapsed, my last memory the sight of an approaching carriage.

That crest isn’t House Walt’s. It’s...the crest of Fonbeau royalty.

Ceres was truly vexed as she sat in the Walt carriage. To anyone who didn’t know the circumstances, it would have looked like she was muttering to herself as she stared at the yellow stone embedded in her rapier’s hilt.

“Oh, shut up. Yes, yes, I know. I understand. Good grief, why do I have to listen to her?”

Even in her irritation, Ceres noted that the carriage was losing speed. The coachman said something, and the surrounding knights and soldiers were dealing with it accordingly.

A knight came to her to deliver a report.

“Lady Ceres, err...”

“What?”

“A man named Lionel Walt is demanding to see you.”

A knight who was usually composed seemed bewildered, and Ceres mulled over it for a moment. She was most intrigued by the name of her visitor.

“Walt?”

She glanced down at the yellow Jewel.

“Hmm,” she mused.

Ceres smiled.

“That sounds interesting. Bring him in.”

“Yes ma’am!”

The knight brought the man, and Ceres, though momentarily surprised, began laughing so hard she had to clutch her stomach.

Chapter 86: Truth

That day, a visitor dropped by the manor owned by Fonbeau royalty in Central—Professor Damian. He lazily kicked back on the sofa in front of Lianne.

“It is a great honor to meet the renowned Professor Damian. You truly live up to the rumors,” Lianne said.

Lily, standing reservedly behind Damian, lowered her head. “The master has no interest in anything outside of his own research.”

Though Lianne had expected an apology, she got an excuse instead.

“Automatons are truly a mystery. Is this rude behavior a standard feature?”

“Who knows?” Damian disinterestedly replied. “But that one with Lyle... What was her name again?”

“Boinga.”

“Right, that,” he confirmed with Lily before going on. “Yes, Boinga is even worse. Perhaps the ancients simply designed them that way? Not that I’m interested, but surely the ancestors were very tolerant. More importantly, Lyle’s here, isn’t he?”

Lianne felt a bit weary, dealing with such a free spirit. “Indeed, we’re sheltering him in the manor,” she said. “But I’m not sure he—or his comrades—is in any state to talk to anyone right now.”

“Oh? Is it serious?” Damian asked, taking off his glasses.

Lianne shook her head. “The injuries aren’t the issue. It might be over for them. It’s not easy to regain trust after it’s been broken.”

Continuing to speak, the princess began to tell Damian about what had happened.

My party had all gathered in the manor, taking up residence in the room I’d

been recuperating in. I was wrapped in bandages as I sat in a chair. Novem seemed quite concerned to me, but Miranda was undeterred.

“Novem can’t be trusted,” Miranda flatly stated.

The Jewel hanging from my neck remained silent. No one defended Novem.

Like me, Miranda had bandages wrapped around her limbs, and Shannon was silently hugging her, hanging her head.

“Oh, I wonder. Just what sort of relationship does she have with Ceres?”

The only reason Ceres backed down was because she didn’t want to fight Novem. Also, it was clear as day that there was some sort of agreement between Novem and Ceres.

Novem looked at me. “Milord has only just woken up. Please save this conversation for another time.”

“Is that how you’re going to worm your way out of it?” Miranda did not relent. “What are you hiding?”

Eva stuck up for Novem. “Hey, hold on now. It’s thanks to Novem that we’re still alive.”

“Right,” Miranda conceded. But she added, “Ceres was a foe none of us could hold a candle to. And she retreated because Novem arrived. Now, dear Novem, all this time you’ve been hiding your strength, correct? And what for?”

Sophia shook her head. “Miranda, please calm down. What are you trying to accomplish by condemning Novem?”

Ignoring Sophia’s opinion, Miranda turned her eyes to me.

“Let’s have Lyle decide,” she said. “It’s impossible for me to continue on with Novem as a comrade. It’s not just that she’s hiding something—we all have secrets. I fundamentally can’t trust her.”

This time, Aria rose to defend her. “Hold on. Novem’s always acted in Lyle’s best inter—”

“That’s another suspicious point. Back then, do you remember? Novem left the inn right after Monica. But she arrived after us. Did we overtake her?”

Novem listened silently.

Clara added to Miranda's point. She spoke while staring at the broken prosthetic that had been placed in front of her.

"I highly doubt Novem would get lost. Even if she chose a different route from us, she arrived far too late."

Just as Aria was about to retort, Monica took Miranda's side.

"Judging by her conversation with Ceres, it's blatantly obvious that she's hiding something from us. What exactly does 'Septem' mean?"

That was the name that Novem had called Ceres. "Are you Ceres?" she'd asked her. "Or are you Septem?"

Novem clearly knew something we didn't. Aria and Sophia both looked at her, hoping for an answer that would resolve all their doubts... But Novem said nothing.

Eva stamped her feet. "C'mon, people! We would have all been in huge trouble if Novem wasn't there! Is this how you repay your debt to her?!"

"Yes, that was ungrateful of me," Miranda replied with incredibly cold eyes. "Novem, thank you for saving us. Does that work for you? In the first place, I can't work with someone I can't trust. I can never know when she'll stab me in the back."

"A valid point," the seventh head commented from the Jewel. "Novem cannot be trusted right now."

The other ancestors didn't say anything, but their silence essentially affirmed his statement.

"Lyle, it's up to you," Miranda said, urging me to make a decision. "If you don't cast Novem out, I won't stick around, and neither will Shannon."

"Huh?!" Shannon cried out, surprised.

I pressed my right hand against my face and said, "Novem, I feel fine. My health is not an issue. Tell the truth."

Novem closed her eyes, then slowly opened them. "Yes, Milord."

And so it began.

“Let me start by making one thing clear. I do not live for Lady Ceres, or even for House Walt. I live for Lord Lyle alone. I am your ally.”

“Oh, I hope so,” Miranda muttered.

“To understand what happened six years ago, and how that event led to the present, I will first need to go even further back. This story begins at the fall of the Centrus Kingdom, and the start of Banseim as a new nation.”

Miranda wore a smile as she listened to Novem’s tale, but it wasn’t a welcoming one whatsoever. Rather, it seemed to be a smile that barely veiled her hostility.

“My, quite an old story... Do go on,” Miranda said. She crossed her arms, taking on an attitude like she was doing Novem a great honor by hearing her out.

“The Centrus Kingdom once ruled over the entire continent, but the birth of a single woman sent it down the path of destruction. Her name was Agrissa. She was a princess who declared herself queen after having all the other royals executed, and committed all manner of atrocities. You must know of her—the peerless beauty that ruined the continent.”

Aria shot her a sullen look. “Even I know that much. But what about it? I don’t see where this is going.”

Yes, as Agrissa’s name came up, I couldn’t see how that connected to me whatsoever.

“Agrissa was indeed defeated. But to preserve her bloodline, Banseim confined Agrissa’s child to a desolate land in the middle of nowhere.”

Surprise filled the air.

In all the stories, and even in the history books, Agrissa’s children and grandchildren were supposed to have all been hunted down and killed. I’d casually dismissed the fact when I first heard the story. But now...

“A noble’s blood is a magician’s blood. The Centrus royal lineage boasted the finest blood of the era and Banseim wanted that power.”

“I don’t understand why they hid it,” the third head said, sounding curious. “If Banseim wanted to proclaim themselves the new rulers of the continent by the legitimacy of their bloodline, then it wouldn’t make sense to hide. Even if they planned to imprison them and absorb that blood into the new royal family, it’s Agrissa’s blood, right? It’s far too risky. Was it really so powerful that they’d go so far to take it in?”

The risk in question here would be the legacy of the villainess known as Agrissa—a subject of fear for a majority of the population. If word ever got out that her blood once again ruled the continent, the royals would be seen as the descendants of a ruinous witch.

The fifth head looked at it from a different perspective. “According to our founder, she was a tried-and-true monster. I don’t understand why anyone would want the blood of someone like that. They’re the ones who vanquished her, aren’t they? Why go after her blood? It’s almost like there was something even scarier than Agrissa herself.”

For the time being, it was unclear why they wanted to take in Agrissa’s blood.

Clara’s glasses were slightly askew, but she seemed too preoccupied to care. “W-Wait a minute. The history books state that there are no surviving descendants of Centrus royalty,” she protested. “And I don’t see why they would be kept alive. If they wanted to take in the blood of the old royals to give legitimacy to their reign, there would be no point in hiding it.”

Miranda was the one to answer that one: “History can be freely manipulated by the victors. It’s not strange if they hid a few inconvenient truths. And Novem said it herself. Banseim wanted the bloodline—wanted its power. Personally, that’s another questionable point.”

Novem nodded and went on, “The family was placed under strict supervision and confined to a desolate territory as marquis in name alone. Originally, a reconciliation and marriage were planned a few generations down the line. But perhaps the times had changed, as it was ultimately never implemented.”

Once the dust had settled, they’d intended to reincorporate that blood into the new royal family. But apparently, after Centrus fell, nations started popping up all over the place. Countries would rise, and countries would fall. It was a

time of intense war. And by the end of it, the Banseim Kingdom had forgotten to incorporate the blood of Centrus.

“All the time Banseim spent twiddling their thumbs and searching for the right opportunity ended up becoming a long period of neglect. The marquis house started to believe that Banseim had sectioned them off just to torment them for generations for the sins of their ancestors.”

“This is becoming quite the pain,” the fourth head said with a sigh.
“Reconciliation was the least of their worries.”

The sixth head agreed, “Yeah, it only added to the resentment. Honestly, we’d given up on reconciliation at that point.”

Novem continued, “As time passed, and as Banseim entered a fierce war with Fonbeau, the marquis house rebelled. They took the challenge to Banseim as they were greatly weakened by the war.”

“I’ve never heard of this before,” Eva said, perplexed.

“That’s because the rebellion was resolved in its early stages. It was thanks to the then head of House Walt, Lord Brod—Milord’s grandfather.”

By the time the seventh head’s name came up, Shannon was nodding off. Miranda tucked her to bed on the room’s sofa before the story continued.

“The marquis house was defeated by Banseim. It all came down to Lord Brod ending the war with Fonbeau far quicker than anyone had anticipated. It was a splendid victory.”

Now with strength to spare, Banseim had caught on to the rebellion and quelled it before it could escalate. The marquis house barely had any military strength to begin with and was purged as a result. However...

“After the rebellion was suppressed, there was only one survivor—one girl was all that remained. House Walt knew of the circumstances and, at the time, served as advisors to the royal family. Lord Brod spoke with the king about the nation’s future and took in the surviving girl.”

Everyone’s eyes—save for Aria’s and Sophia’s—gathered on me.

“Huh? D-Did something happen?” Aria asked.

Sophia nodded. “Is something wrong with Lyle?”

The two girls seemed confused.

“Oh? You couldn’t figure it out from that?” Monica explained with a mocking smile. “Very well, let me enlighten these poor, ignorant souls. In short, our damn chicken carries the blood of Centrus royalty!”

Aria cocked her head. “Huh? How do you figure?”

Monica had struck an arrogant pose, but now she was looking a little troubled. “It seems... She was right to start from the beginning. A good decision, coming from a vixen.”

“At first, it was decided that the Centrus blood was too valuable to perish there,” Novem kindly explained. “The royal family couldn’t shelter her, so she—Lady Zenoah—was left with the trusted advisor, Lord Brod.”

“Lyle’s grandmother, right?” Miranda nodded.

And Sophia gasped. “Y-You mean...!”

Aria seemed to finally catch on as well. She looked at my face, startled.

The seventh head seemed to think back on those times with a hint of regret. “I never thought it would come to this...” He sighed.

“This is the important part,” Novem went on. “Lord Brod and Lady Zenoah were wed. Banseim had its misgivings with House Walt taking in the blood of Centrus, but Lady Zenoah’s immense rage was directed at the royal family. House Walt would act as a buffer zone for the time being, and in a few generations, their blood would be incorporated into the Banseim royal family. That was the decision.”

“Sounds familiar...” the fifth head muttered in a mocking tone. “So they did the exact same thing again, and Ceres was the result. It’s not even funny.”

“Originally, I did not hold adequate status to be engaged to Lord Lyle. The plan was for Milord, or for his son, to wed a daughter of Banseim’s royal family’s main branch, and for House Walt to rise to a ducal house in the process.”

In another few generations or so, a daughter of the ducal House Walt would

marry the king of some era, and that was how they intended to incorporate the bloodline of Centrus. A tedious, generation-spanning plan that dragged on pointlessly.

“There was a certain item that Lady Zenoah brought with her when she married into House Walt. A yellow Gem—no, rather, a demonic tool known as a Jewel.”

Aria held up the red Gem hanging from her neck. “Huh? This thing? W-Wait, is this why Ceres is so strong?!”

Novem shook her head. “It’s quite different from a Gem. A Gem is purely a tool to record Arts. In fact, Gems were made as an inferior imitation of Jewels.”

The original form of a Jewel. That had been what Ceres was talking about.

“Generation after generation, the yellow Jewel was safekept by the women of the family. It had the personality of a single individual stored within. You see, that’s the difference between Gems and Jewels. A Jewel stores more than Arts; they store personalities and memories.”

Miranda narrowed her eyes. “Agrissa, huh?”

“Yes,” Novem affirmed. “The yellow Jewel Ceres holds is the same yellow Jewel that Lady Zenoah brought into House Walt.”

The seventh powerlessly agreed. “That’s right. Zenoah was looking after it. If everything went without incident, she was supposed to pass it down to Clare or Ceres, but...”

His memories had apparently cut off before it happened.

But if Ceres has it, does that mean that grandma ended up giving it to her?

“Lady Zenoah sealed the yellow Jewel away. She died without passing it on to anyone.”

“And why do *you* know that?” asked Miranda, who was still skeptical.

“Because Lady Ceres obtained it. I don’t know the details, but ever since that day, Lady Ceres changed.”

Sophia glanced at Aria’s red Gem. “Did she change because she gained

immense power?”

Novem shook her head. “Zenoah’s yellow Gem is not merely a tool to use Arts. It directly reproduces Agrissa’s power In other words, it is a tool to resurrect Agrissa.”

“This is getting even more bothersome,” the third head said with a sigh.

The fourth head, astonished, added, “Wait, don’t tell me the real purpose of a Jewel...”

To eternally preserve personalities so they could be transferred to new bodies?

With one surprise after another, Aria was starting to lose her cool. “W-Wait,” she stammered. “There’s no way—”

“It’s not impossible,” Monica immediately cut in.

The mood was taking a strange turn.

“This is like a cheap occult story,” Clara muttered.

“If you’ll let me have my say, the fact that magic even exists here makes it an occult fantasy to me. Now then, if you’d continue.”

It was then that Novem finally spoke about me.

“Milord has no memories from before he turned ten years old. Or perhaps they are incredibly vague.”

Again, their eyes gathered on me.

“Wait,” I said. “They’re vague, yeah. But I do still have memories of my childhood.”

Novem shook her head. “The current Lord Lyle is a completely different person from how he was before. On the day Lady Ceres obtained the Jewel, she set out to steal everything from Milord and destroy it.”

Destroy... Something felt off about that.

“Then the reason Lyle’s occasionally so oblivious—” Sophia suggested.

And Novem nodded. “Having lost everything, Milord was initially unstable and mentally immature. He was unable to leave the mansion and was deprived of

opportunities to learn about the world. With most of his memories lost and being forced to live a life like that, it was inevitable that he grew up unfamiliar with how the world worked.”

The reason I was mentally immature and oblivious lay with Ceres. I suspected she’d done something to me, but I never thought she was capable of that. I hadn’t even considered it.

“What do you mean by destroy?” Miranda tried to clarify. “You don’t mean kill him, do you?”

“Lord Lyle was a child of great expectations. He was called a genius, a wonder child. Lady Ceres aimed to take it all away and cripple him.”

“Is that even possible?”

“That is one of the effects of her Art.”

“Wait. Isn’t Ceres’s Art the thing that’s charming everyone around her? Are there even more Arts in that Jewel?”

There was only one individual recorded within the Jewel, but there were multiple Arts. It was certainly different from the blue Jewel in my possession.

“There are definitely multiple Arts,” I confirmed. “And not Arts alone—it’s possible it can reproduce Agrissa’s powers as well.”

“We’re getting off track,” Novem muttered. “Ceres stole Lord Lyle’s memories and mana, among other things. She couldn’t take it all at once, so she did it gradually. The atmosphere around House Walt started changing from then on. By the time I noticed, it was already too late.”

My everything...was stolen by Ceres? My memories, my strength... Even my place was taken?

“W-Wait a second, Novem. Why would Ceres do that to me? Was I that hated before I lost my memories?”

I thought Ceres might be getting her revenge on me, but that didn’t seem to be the case.

“Certainly not. You were kind to everyone, and you doted on Lady Ceres. I can only say that Lady Ceres was born with that disposition. At this point, I suspect

it was her innate nature that prevented Lady Zenoah from passing the Jewel on to her.”

The eyes that fell on me were filled with sympathy. It would have at least been a little understandable if there was some reason behind it. But I had everything snatched away on a whim. There was nothing to address. What was I even supposed to do about it?

“Isn’t it because that villainess called Agrissa has already taken over her body?” Monica suggested.

“No, she hasn’t. On that day, I met with someone from House Fuchs. From what we discussed, it seems that Ceres still maintains her sense of self.”

“If she’s that bad on her own, she’s dangerous regardless of Agrissa and whatnot.”

Novem looked at me. “After noticing the change in House Walt, I negotiated with Lady Ceres. She promised not to raise a hand against you. At the time, Lady Ceres was far weaker than she is now... There was still room for someone of my level to negotiate with her. She also agreed to take care of you at the mansion until you came of age.”

“And after that, Lyle lived a life of confinement, and was kicked out as soon as he became an adult,” Miranda said, planting a hand to her hip. “Some parts may be true, but I still find it hard to accept.”

Eva glared at her. “Hey, don’t you realize just how much Novem cares for—”

“That’s precisely why. That’s what makes her so untrustworthy. Novem, are you with Lyle purely out of obligation? Answer me.”

Novem shook her head. “It is not out of obligation. It is what I want to do. It has nothing to do with House Walt or my family.”

“Then let me change the question. What do you want from Lyle—from us?”

For a while, Novem hung her head in silence. Finally, she lifted her head and said, “Milord is the only one who can stop Lady Ceres. Lord Lyle is able to resist Lady Ceres’s charm. Everyone else is hopeless. Especially members of the opposite sex—if Lady Ceres went at it seriously, any and all men would

immediately be at her beck and call.”

The reason Novem was surrounding me with women to an unnatural degree. Yet again, it had to do with Ceres.

“Then the reason you keep recruiting girls is—”

“Whether we fight or run, you will need strong women who can’t be charmed. Indeed, on that day, not a single one of us was charmed by Ceres. With men, it would not have gone the same way. You can occasionally find some who can resist, but there are far fewer among men than women,” said Novem.

She continued, “I cannot defeat Ceres. At most, I can wound her. And if I fall, she will be after you next, Milord. That’s the one thing I can’t allow.”

I didn’t know what to say to her.

It was at that moment that the name Septem crossed my mind.

“Then what does Septem mean?”

“It is another name for Agrissa. Agrissa proclaimed herself to be the incarnation of Septem, the seventh goddess.”

It seemed the third head was unaware of this. “You sometimes get people who proclaim themselves goddesses, but the vile and heinous Agrissa said she was the seventh one, huh? Was she trying to be ironic, taking the name of the gentlest goddess of the bunch? But that’s a bit strange, right? Seeing as Ceres seemed to despise the name.”

“Now then, Lyle,” the fifth head sighed. “What are you going to do?”

With all eyes on me, I was unable to come to a decision.

“Please give me some time,” I said.

And with that, the discussion came to an end.

Chapter 87: Decision

On the night when Novem revealed the truth, I sent my mind into the Jewel. Drifting in the air above the round-table room were a shattered greatsword and bow. They were both broken beyond use.

“I suspected that Novem was hiding something,” the third head said with a troubled look, “but that was heavier stuff than I was expecting. I wish she could have talked to you about it a lot sooner.”

The seventh head lowered his shoulders. “I didn’t think that Zenoah’s yellow Gem was a real Jewel containing Agrissa’s memories.”

The fourth head shot him a sharp glare. “Things have gotten rather absurd thanks to someone accepting the blood of Agrissa.”

“Who could have foreseen something like this? In the first place, everyone here underestimated Ceres, did they not?”

The heads of House Walt did not deny that fact.

Scratching his head, the sixth head said, “Don’t be like that. The important thing is that you live to fight another day. We’re starting to see a goal to work forward to as well. The rest will work itself out.”

The sixth’s words took me by surprise.

“Will it really work out?”

“Hmm? Yeah, of course it will.”

He sounded so reliable. For a moment, I thought he knew of some way to counter Ceres.

“Don’t get involved with her. Keeping your distance will be your best bet. For the time being, we should head to Baym, as planned. It could be a good idea to earn enough money to leave the continent.”

“Huh?”

The third head went on following the same premise. It was practically like he'd given up on beating Ceres altogether. "If you want to bring happiness to all the girls who chose to follow you, then you really ought to earn money and build a mansion somewhere. Live a nice, relaxed life."

The seventh head had also given up. He was always going on and on about how he wanted me to inherit House Walt, yet he'd seemingly changed his mind the moment he witnessed Ceres's strength.

"Why not enlist as an officer in another country?" said the man. "You can become the progenitor of a whole new House Walt."

"Sounds nice," the fifth head enthusiastically chimed in. "It's not a bad idea, being a small-time lord in a relatively peaceful country."

The fourth head thoughtfully added, "Being a merchant is also a viable option. Oh, but if you're going to enlist, they'll value you a lot more if the country's a little *less* peaceful. Especially if they're fighting at a disadvantage."

Then came the sixth head's booming, hearty laugh. He always looked so dependable to me, yet today, something was different. "You'll be a key player in no time! Oh, but make sure you judge things right. Otherwise, you'll be hated by the enemy and envied by your allies. That's not a life anyone wants to live."

The third head added, "Well, I would recommend against a place with too many wars. For starters, why don't you head to Baym and think about it after that?"

They were all acting differently from usual. They'd given up from the start.

"Wait a minute. Are we just going to ignore Ceres? Are we going to leave her to this nonsense?!"

"That's right," the third head immediately replied.

He folded his hands behind his head and looked at the silver bow floating above him. It had shattered, broken so badly its original form couldn't even be discerned. He stared at it expressionlessly.

"You can't beat her. Even if you win, then what? She's a favorite of the crown prince, right? Let's say, by some stroke of luck, the brainwashing is lifted... What

happens to House Walt after that?”

The fourth head took off his glasses. “The nation’s relationship with Fonbeau has already soured. We’ll be lucky if we get demoted; worst case, they’ll put an end to our bloodline.”

The fifth head quickly shut down these hypotheticals. “That’s only if we *can* beat Ceres. I won’t say it’s completely impossible to beat her. She’s a living creature, so she can be killed. In fact, I find it curious that Shannon managed to land a hit on her head—she might have a weakness. But how many sacrifices do you think it’ll take before you get there?”

The sixth head dropped his shoulders. “There’s no telling how many of your comrades will die. You could be completely annihilated. Even if you do win, you gain far too little.”

The seventh head crossed his arms. “Lyle, you have something to protect. Bring happiness to the girls who follow you. Honestly, Miranda might be the better choice here.”

“What do you mean by that?”

The third head unamusedly responded, “Personally, I’d be fine with Novem too, but it’s up to Lyle. If you chose Novem, then Miranda, Shannon, and even Clara won’t go with you.”

The fourth head chuckled. “Third Head, you really like Clara, don’t you? On the contrary, Eva won’t join if you choose Miranda. Meanwhile, I’d say Monica, Aria, and Sophia will follow you regardless of your choice.”

I shook my head. “Why? Don’t you have a solution like you usually do?”

Though they usually acted so unreliable, my ancestors would always come through when push came to shove. But now, they wouldn’t even look me in the eye.

The fifth head returned the question. “What will winning get you? You sacrifice everything to win and... What will you have left?”

“You saw Ceres, didn’t you?! If we leave her be, I can’t even fathom how many people she’s going to kill!”

“That’s right. So?”

“Huh?”

“I’m asking, what of it? Loads of people will die. What does that have to do with you? Is it because you’re Ceres’s brother? So what? Why is that your problem? Meisel is to blame for naming Ceres as the heir. Banseim is to blame for accepting Ceres. The surrounding nations are to blame for underestimating her. Where do you fit into the picture?”

As I struggled to come up with a response, the sixth head spoke up.

“Lyle, this is not your responsibility; you are more of a victim here. Besides, no one is hoping for you to stop Ceres. Only Novem, perhaps. And even Novem is giving you an option to not fight.”

The seventh head had a grim look on his face. “Let me rephrase it. Lyle, no one is expecting anything from you. Responsibility is to be carried by those in the positions to bear it. You have no responsibility.”

The fourth head nodded. “Prioritize your own happiness. Otherwise, you won’t make the girls who follow you happy.”

I shook my head. “No. I don’t want that! I can’t... Knowing what I know, how could I just throw everything away like that?!”

Back then, Ceres had killed her own knight without batting an eye. Whatever she did next, it would surely cause much more blood to flow. There would be massive wars all over the continent. In fact, due to Ceres’s actions, war with Fonbeau was already inevitable. Such tragedies were set to continue and repeat. And if Ceres was taken over by Agrissa, perhaps the continent would tread the same path it did three hundred years ago.

“If we don’t stop Ceres, then thousands, tens of thousands of people will die.”

“Wrong,” the fifth head said. “You have to start thinking in the hundreds of thousands. Millions, even. Ceres is still young. Perhaps ten million people will die for the sake of Ceres alone.”

“Then why?!” I demanded.

“Your chances of winning are incredibly slim. Even if you do win, only

misfortune awaits you. Anyone who fights under those terms is an idiot.”

Putting his glasses back on, the fourth head added, “There is no need for you to fight, Lyle. I’d even say you’ve done very well holding on for this long.”

The seventh head covered his face. “You’ve done enough. Lyle, you’ve fought more than enough. You endured isolation in the mansion. Ceres stole so many things from you, but you’re still alive. We were wrong about you. A lesser man would have broken by now. You’re a splendid Walt.”

Right now...I can't feel happy hearing that. That's not it—those aren't the words I want to hear! I... I just...!

“I want to stop Ceres.”

The sixth head looked at me. “As revenge for her killing your friends and the gardener?”

I clenched my fist. “There’s that too. I won’t deny it—but all sorts of people are going to suffer because of her! Can I just look on, saying it has nothing to do with me?! I can’t!”

They said I couldn’t win. I thought so too. Even so...would I be happy if I let things go on as they were? As more and more people fell to misfortune because of her, could I be the only one living in happiness?

“Give up,” the sixth head told me. “It’s not gonna happen.”

All five of them said I had no chance of winning against Ceres. The opinions of my ancestors were correct. I couldn’t imagine myself winning either. I felt a painful, suffocating tightness in my chest.

Looking up, I saw the floating silver debris of the busted greatsword and bow. The first and second heads’ faces crossed my mind. It felt like I could hear their voices.

“I think you’re the only one who can stop her.”

“I know you’ll do just fine...”

“I will fight Ceres.”

I heard someone click their tongue.

The third's eyes were far colder than usual. "How disappointing. I thought you were wiser than that. Aww man. All those poor kids. Are they going to die following you? What a pity."

The sixth head grew angry at me. "You have no power and no wisdom. Not even any determination. It's impossible for you."

I got all five of them into my line of sight. I met all their gazes. Slamming both hands on the table, I stood and said, "I have the determination!"

The fourth head, not looking at me, removed his glasses and started polishing the lenses. "You're lying. Lyle, back when you fought the men of House Baden, why didn't you kill them? With your skill, you should have been able to kill those knights and soldiers in no time at all. If you'd ended things quicker, you wouldn't have run into Ceres."

"Th-That's...!"

The fifth head pointed out my flaws. "You're too soft. Are you perhaps under the assumption that you just have to defeat Ceres and Ceres alone? She's going to become the crown princess. Do you really understand what it means to fight against the country?"

He was right. I hadn't thought that far ahead. I didn't know how I was going to fight either. I didn't, but...

"Like I care about that. I don't know the meaning. But... But!" I glared at them. "I decided that I'm going to do it! If you're just going to keep nagging, then shut the hell up for once and stay out of my way!"

Their gazes suddenly sharpened. These were looks they had never given me before, and they carried such intensity it was like they could kill a man with their eyes alone.

The sixth head was scarier than usual. It was intimidating enough when someone of his imposing build glared at me, but the man had something more to him than that.

"Don't get carried away, kid. If Miranda and Shannon die because of you, I'll use whatever means I have to destroy you. Don't think there's nothing I can do to you."

I laughed.

With a smile on my face, I said, “You want me to live the rest of my life cowering in fear? Oh, what a clever way of life my esteemed ancestors are teaching me. I’m so happy it’s bringing tears to my eyes. If I can’t win, I just have to run forever? By the time Ceres gets too powerful for even Novem to control, who’s to say she won’t chase me down?! If I’m going to fight, I should do it while I still have a chance.”

The fourth head laughed back. “Not that I trust Novem, though. What if she secretly has a connection with Ceres behind the scenes? What if they’re getting together to laugh at you when you’re not looking? You heard it from Miranda, didn’t you? There’s no telling how much of what Novem says is the truth.”

The third head snapped his fingers. “Can you say the same after seeing this?”

The scenery within the Jewel changed. Beneath a dark red sky—on the barren earth, there the girls lay. Novem, Aria, Sophia, Miranda, Shannon, Clara, Monica, and Eva. Cold and dead.

Trying to convince myself it was an illusion, I glared at the third head. Though he was usually a man of many emotions, his face was completely blank.

“You look pale. If you’re flustered by such a simple illusion, this doesn’t bode well for what’s to come. Lyle, this is the result of your wish. The kids who go along with your selfishness will die. Even if, by some luck, you win, you will be feared and deposed for sharing the same cursed blood as Ceres.”

The corpses gathered at my feet, grabbing at my ankles. Blood oozed from their mouths, and from the spears and arrows stabbed into their bodies.

“Milord. Why didn’t you...save me...in the end?”

Miranda looked at me and wept. “Shannon died. My sister. Now I’m like this... Why did you have to fight Ceres?!”

Aria and Sophia grabbed my legs.

“I should have never followed you,” Aria sobbed.

Sophia moaned. “I didn’t think it was going to end like this.”

Monica looked at me, now nothing more than a severed, broken head. “Oh,

chicken. I finally found...my chicken. Do you know where...my body is? I cannot tend to you like this. I must find it...right away."

Clara loomed over my back, her arms and legs all missing. "I need some new prosthetics, Lyle. I can't do much without hands or feet."

My heart rate skyrocketed. Even though I knew they were illusions, these were sights that made me want to cover my eyes.

Eva clutched at her sliced throat, squeezing out a voice that was barely more than a breath escaping her. "Give me back...my voice..."

And Shannon: "Ah, I'm so hungry. I've got to eat something. But Lyle...how am I supposed to eat with my stomach like this?" She laughed, looking at me over the large hole in her abdomen.

"How pitiful they are," the third's voice echoed from somewhere beyond my perception. "A miserable life, all because they got involved with you. They all suffered because of your decision."

I took in a deep breath to steady my heart, and by the time I realized it, the illusion had faded.

"Even so, I will fight Ceres."

Knowing my opinion hadn't changed, the third shook his head. "Your determination hadn't wavered after seeing that? Impressive. Yes, go on. Just like that. Keep bringing misery to everyone who comes into contact with you."

I pounded my fist against the round table. The sound echoed through the room as I poured out my mind.

"Am I supposed to be satisfied as long as I'm happy? I have—everyone I've gotten to know and care for! Am I just going to pretend it never happened?! Close my ears, cover my eyes, and live regretting every second of it?! In that case, I'm better off fighting!"

The fifth head closed his eyes. "Are you going to close your eyes to the people who suffer because you chose to fight Ceres?"

The fourth head mocked me. "The road to hell is paved with good intentions. The more someone thinks they're doing the right thing—the more they think

their actions are just, the crueler, the more inhumane they can be. It's all for the *greater good*, right? You have real talent for this, Lyle. That's Ceres's brother for you."

"I don't think what I'm doing is right. Still—even then, someone has to do it."

"Why not leave it to someone more suitable?" the fourth head replied.
"You're not fit to be a hero, Lyle."

If there was a hero, I'd gladly leave it to them. If there was a hero, I'd gladly help them in any way I could. But now, at this moment...

"Who's this *more suitable* guy, then? If you know him, bring him to me! Should I abandon the task because someone, somewhere might do it? I'm saying it because no one's doing anything! If someone does it, I'll help! But there's no one. I can't even hope for anyone. Wait for a hero who might appear someday? Be serious for a second!" I screamed, letting my emotions do the talking.

Steadying my erratic breath, I continued, "I'll do it. I'll fight Ceres. Not for anyone's sake. I don't claim to be on the side of justice. I'm doing it because I want to do it! If you're just going to complain from the sidelines, just shut up and watch!"

The round-table room suddenly filled with light.

"Not because I was told! Not because I was asked! I decided on my own to fight Ceres!"

The floating shards of the shattered greatsword and silver bow let off a radiant light as they returned to their original forms. One of the many gemstones embedded in the ceiling gave off a powerful glow.

It was from my Art. The second state of my Art had been unleashed.

"What is this?" the seventh head said, staring behind me. Indeed, there was light pouring from somewhere behind me too, and when I turned, I saw a door of memories that hadn't been there before.

As I was startled by the creation of a brand new space, the third head closed his eyes. "Has the Jewel acknowledged Lyle? Good grief, I don't understand why

he has to choose such a bothersome path.”

The fourth head looked up at the repaired weapons. “It’s almost like our first and second heads have recognized his will.”

The fifth wearily grumbled, “At least mull over it a bit more before making a decision. You don’t have to force yourself to fight—and that’s a fact. I’m still against it.”

The sixth head shot me a troubled smile. “You’ve finally got a goal of your own, and it turned out to be quite an ambitious one.”

The seventh had a hint of tears in his eyes, which he tried to hide with his hand as he said, “Lyle, I wanted you, if no one else, to choose the path of survival.”

I was a bit put off by their change in attitude. “Were you testing me?” I asked.

The fourth shook his head. “It’s true that we think you’re better off not fighting Ceres. There’s nothing to guarantee your victory. If you were half-hearted about it, we would have been more strongly opposed.”

The fifth head seemed hesitant. “Determination alone isn’t enough. Ceres is still growing, right? The idea of her becoming even stronger is a nightmare. If there’s any chance of victory... It might have to involve the entire continent.”

The sixth spread out his hands. “Well, isn’t that peachy? Eighth—no, you’re the ninth head now, Lyle. As the ninth head of House Walt, you will fight with the fate of the world on the line. You couldn’t ask for a more fulfilling job.”

The seventh head looked at me, his eyes a little red. “Lyle, now that it’s come to this, you can’t do anything on your own. Banseim is a massive superpower. You’ll need adequate power if you want to win.”

“Adequate power...?”

“Simple strength won’t be enough. Right now, you have no authority to speak of. Nor assets, nor troops. Right now, you won’t even have an opportunity to fight Ceres.”

The third stood, and the remaining four members followed suit. “Now that you’ve made up your mind, we’ll do what we can. This is a battle none of us

have any experience in. I'm sure there will be many more moments where you can't rely on us at all."

I smiled. "You're all still very dependable, though."

"You think so?" the third said. "Also, there's one more important thing you should know."

What could it be?

"Lyle, are you willing to dirty your hands to defeat Ceres?"

He was asking if I was able to kill humans. I clenched my fist and returned a strong nod.

The third head continued, "From now on, you are going to bring misery to others. You will have to ruin their lives and press on. Even so, do you have the resolve to defeat Ceres?"

"Yes."

"Good. Then from this day forth, become a villain."

Their faces were all as serious as could be.

"A villain?"

"Trampling over others while pretending to be righteous is nauseating. A just cause is necessary. You can speak of justice if you want. But you need to be self-aware that you are a villain. You're far better off as the villain than someone who crushes people underfoot on the path of justice. Are you prepared to become the most atrocious villain of them all?"

I hadn't expected this, but if that was what it took to defeat Ceres...

"I'm headed to hell, aren't I...?" I asked with a laugh.

They all grinned.

"Don't you worry; we're all villains. We may be nothing more than memories, but I'm sure our real selves are all burning in hell. You won't be lonely."

The fifth head gave a cryptic smile. "And if you want to step into hell, you can do it while you're still alive. After all, your life is going to be hell from here on out. The battlefield is hell. Don't worry; we'll be there to guide you in this world

and the next.”

My plunge into hell apparently begins at this very moment... At least I've got some reliable men to guide me through it.

“And one more thing. Let's make a promise, just between us.”

“A promise?”

“That's right. A very important promise.”

It was still dark when I opened my eyes. Although I could move without too much difficulty, the gash I'd gotten from when Ceres pinned me to the wall still ached.

“This is going to leave a scar,” I muttered.

Upon further investigation, the wound had closed, but it had left a vivid mark behind. I clasped it with my right hand.

“This might be just what I need. So I never forget that humiliation.”

The frustration of being unable to do anything. The despair I'd felt, watching my comrades go down one after another... This would be a good reminder of it all.

As I climbed out of bed and stood on my feet, I noticed Monica was in the room, sleeping while standing. My movement woke her, and she opened her eyes.

“Hwaaah, silly me. I overslept.”

She couldn't even drool, yet still, she wiped her mouth and put on an embarrassed act.

“Are you doing that on purpose?”

“Heh heh, isn't it cute?” Monica asked, striking a pose. Then, she informed me, “There's still some time until dawn, you know.”

“I just woke up early,” I said before asking, “Hey, would you follow me no matter what idiotic things I said I'd do?”

“Of course!”

Her immediate response made me wonder if she even gave it any thought at all. Though the concern crossed my mind, it was nevertheless reassuring.

“Thanks.”

“Oh my! Has the tsun finally given way to the dere? Has my love finally gotten through?! Then let’s get right to it. We’ll confirm this feeling with a bit of skin-to-skin—”

I promptly hit her on the head, causing her voluminous pigtails to sway. I watched the tips bounce and quiver and recalled the first time I’d given her a name. I’d named her Boinga, much to everyone’s distaste.

“Monica.”

“What is it?”

Her eyes were teary as she pressed both her hands against where I’d struck her.

“I’m disbanding the party. I’ve got a new goal. Stick with me.”

Monica put on a serious face and offered an immaculate curtsy. “I’ll accompany you to the ends of the earth.”

“Sorry for being such a stupid master.”

She smiled. She seemed genuinely happy. “The more hopeless the master, the more worthwhile it is to serve them. That’s why I, Monica, adore the useless failure of a chicken I’ve been blessed with.”

I...honestly can't be happy about that.

Despite how early it was in the morning, Sophia’s mind was in chaos. In the room she shared with Aria and Clara, she was panicking over the news that Lyle had just brought them.

“Who could have thought...?” she muttered.

Clara was reading a book, struggling to flip the pages with only one arm.

“I think it’s perfectly understandable,” she said. “After all, there’s been a change in overall policy. We’ll still be paid, and if we still want to go to Baym,

we can stick around until then. I do not see the issue.”

“Yeah, well, did he have to drop that out of nowhere?!” Aria protested, voice taut with frustration. “What about my...?” She trailed off.

As was clear from the conversation, Lyle had informed them of his change in plans. They would still head off to Baym, but their goal was no longer to become first-rate adventurers; now, they were out to take Ceres down.

Eventually, Ceres would be a calamity upon the continent. Someone needed to do something about her. And Lyle said he was going to start working toward it.

Sophia hung her head. *Hell is all that awaits us*, she thought. *There’s no telling if we’ll even receive any proper rewards for what we’d face. I mean, I understand what he said, but he didn’t have to disband the party...*

“What will you two do?” Sophia asked the other two girls.

“I’ve already decided,” Clara immediately replied.

Judging by her attitude, Sophia was pretty sure she would leave after the party disbanded. Aria seemed to think the same.

“You’re as cold as ever,” Aria said with a sigh. “But I understand where you’re coming from. Anyone would hesitate to challenge that monster again.”

But while Clara had made her choice, Aria and Sophia weren’t able to come to a decision so easily...

In the courtyard of the Fonbeau manor, Eva was exercising her body. At least she *was*, but then Sophia had come to her with an extremely pressing question: what was she going to do now?

“What am I going to do?” Eva asked in reply. “Well, that’s obvious.”

“You answered very quickly.”

“There’s no point in mulling over it. Sophia, you should come to your own decision. If you just let yourself get swept away in what others say, then you’ll think back and regret it. You’ll think this isn’t how it was supposed to be.”

“Y-Yes. So, err, what exactly are yo—?” Sophia let out an alarmed *eep* when Eva poked a finger into her ample cleavage. “H-Hey, what are you doing?!”

“For crying out loud, don’t worry about what I think! I’m not going to tell you what I’ve decided. Go and find your own answer.”

And with that, Eva went back to exercising.

Sophia entered the room shared by Miranda and Shannon to find the former busily preparing something. The girl kept her back to Sophia, arranging tools and taking notes. Shannon, meanwhile, was nervously looking between Miranda and Sophia.

Sophia hung her head, hesitating to pose her question to Miranda.

Finally, the older Circry breathed out a sigh. “Oh, out with it already. Can we win against Ceres? Is that what you want to ask me?”

“U-Umm...”

Miranda turned to Sophia. She seemed a bit sterner than usual.

“Not now, no. Not with what we have. At the very least, it will be quite difficult with a frontal attack.”

“Even you won’t be able to win, Miranda?”

“Not on my own. Even with all our members together, our chances are low.”

Sophia looked at her and thought aloud, “Miranda, you always get straight to the point.”

“It looks like that wasn’t the answer you were hoping for. Well, do what you like. No one will hold it against you if you run away.”

Sophia sighed and left the room.

After Sophia had left, Shannon turned to Miranda. “Sis?”

Miranda stood, folding her arms beneath her chest. “You look like you have something to say.”

“I was just thinking... You were a little cold.”

“Did you want me to gently persuade Sophia to come to our side? It will be a right bother if she can’t make these decisions on her own. I am not her guardian, you know.”

Shannon lowered her eyes. “She seemed very lost.”

“You used those eyes to read her emotions,” Miranda said with a shrug. “Well, I could tell that much on my own.”

“Then why?”

“Why did I push her away? You see, I want Sophia and Aria to make a decision based on their own will. It’s just a nuisance if they tag along simply because the others are going. With such measly resolve, it would be in her best interest to leave from the get-go.”

Shannon felt a bit relieved to know that Miranda was showing concern in her own way.

“And if Novem is to be believed, even if we get some more comrades, it’s going to be all women. It’ll be a mess if they come along with half-hearted feelings.”

“What’s the issue?”

“Women are tricky. Right now, we’re barely pulling it off, but the balance could easily collapse at any second.”

To Shannon, it looked like Miranda was the one collapsing the balance, but she kept that to herself.

“It’s better for Aria and Sophia if they quit sticking around Lyle with those wishy-washy feelings. It looks like Lyle’s come to a resolution. If he decided on his own, I’ve got nothing to complain about.”

Shannon thought for a moment. It was her time to decide.

“I—”

“Oh, Shannon, you’re coming with me.”

“Huh?”

“I mean, you can’t even live without me. Sophia’s first-rate. Perfectly capable of making it on her own. You’re half-rate, so you’re with me.”

Shannon didn’t quite know what to think, being told that to her face.

Chapter 88: The Maddening Metropolis

Thus ended the season of melting snow, and just as spring was about to sweep over the land, a multitude of people gathered in Central from every corner of the continent. I couldn't even begin to guess how many tens of thousands had amassed in the square in front of the palace.

I glanced at the woman standing beside me, my face hidden away inside a hood. My companion was similarly concealed, and for good reason—she was Lianne, princess of Fonbeau.

“I don't see why you invited me here,” I said.

After all, I'd come at the princess's invitation.

“Don't you think it's exhilarating to witness a historic moment alongside the sworn foe of my bloodline? Well, to be honest with you, seeing you swear to defeat that woman has sparked a sense of camaraderie.”

She'd been delighted when she heard of my intention to defeat Ceres. The image of a cute, endearing princess was nowhere to be seen. With the sinister smile currently on her face, Princess Lianne quite honestly seemed a little insane.

“I'm not doing it for vengeance,” I assured her.

“As long as you take her down, I won't question you on your reasons,” she replied.

The palace gate had been restructured to facilitate a balcony. The flags that dangled from atop those walls were half to the royal family—and the other half to House Walt. The formal engagement between Ceres and the crown prince was about to be announced.

From the Jewel, I heard the voice of the fourth head. “Without Lyle, they've only got one child left. What do they think they're doing by marrying her off?”

Ceres was the sole heir to House Walt. The idea of Ceres marrying the crown

prince seemed like a joke so absurd I couldn't even laugh about it.

However, looking at the crowd...

"Lady Ceres!"

"Ahhh, I want to see Lady Ceres! I want to see her now!"

"We came all the way from the countryside to be here today!"

At this point, I'd just come to accept Ceres's abnormal popularity.

"I hear you're going to Baym after this," said Lianne.

"Yes, that's my intention. We'll use the chance to build up our strength."

"I expect great things from you. Do you need any support?"

"Right. We're good for now, but if we ever eventually find ourselves in need, I'll reach out."

Her aid was quite appealing, given my current predicament. But for now, I desired a connection with Princess Lianne. Rather than badgering her for support, it was best to let her prioritize her own affairs.

"Eventually, is it?"

"Yes... I'll definitely seek your assistance if the time comes."

"Then I'll wait, without hoping for much. Like you, I'll increase my forces by then."

Right. It's more convenient for me if she has power.

As we were having that conversation, Ceres appeared on the balcony alongside Prince Rufus. The cheers that broke out were so loud it caused my ears to ache. Princess Lianne held in her tears as her eyes followed the prince.

From the Jewel came the third's voice. "That Rufus guy looks a lot like that bastard I knew. Lyle, when you're overthrowing Banseim, give him a good punch. For me. For old time's sake."

I had no grudges against Prince Rufus, so that proposition was dismissed.

As for me, I couldn't take my eyes off my parents standing reservedly behind Ceres. Soon, they were joined by the king and the queen, a fanfare of trumpets

bringing the crowd to silence. Everyone eagerly awaited Ceres's words.

Leaving the prince behind, Ceres stepped forward, arms held wide. "Hey, everyone. How're you all doing today?"



The rather casual greeting sent the crowd into a frenzy. This, too, was unbelievable, but with so many unbelievable things happening, I didn't even know where to begin pointing them all out.

As soon as Ceres signaled with her hands, the crowds fell silent again.

Oh, how well trained they are, I thought, observing with cold eyes.

"Well, I feel absolutely terrible," Ceres went on. Facing the restless crowd, she explained, "When I said I'd become the crown prince's consort, there were people who complained. They said it would lead to war with Fonbeau. Even though I love Rufus so much! Don't you think that's terrible?"

The crowd agreed.

"That's right! It's not your fault, Lady Ceres!"

"Those blasted Fonbeau oafs need to shut up!"

"Don't forgive the nobles who oppose!"

Elated by their responses, Ceres raised her voice. "Thank you, everyone! Then let's work together to crush the opposition!"

Then came the deafening, ear-ringing endorsement of the crowd. It felt like the atmosphere itself was trembling.

"It feels so reassuring to have everyone in the capital on my side. Very well, then. As your reward, I'll take control of your nation. I'll graciously become your queen."

No one stopped Ceres. After all, any who opposed her would be exterminated. Surely there were those who just silently went along with it even if they weren't charmed. But a majority *were* charmed, which meant the entire capital was going mad.

Rufus approached Ceres and kissed her—a traditional engagement vow—as words of blessing rained down upon them from the crowd. Watching the sight with tears pouring from her eyes, Princess Lianne nearly buckled at the knees. I pulled her shoulder close to support her and glared at the balcony.

With a radiant smile, Ceres declared, "First, we'll crush the rebellious nobles

within the country. Then, we'll expand our reach beyond the borders."

The crowd resounded with high praise of Ceres.

Perhaps there had still been some decent people around at first. Here and there you could see a few looking on in disbelief. But gradually, they were overtaken by the enthusiasm surrounding them. The charm seeped in until finally, they were praising Ceres at the top of their lungs.

Beside me, a tearful Princess Lianne muttered, "Rufus... Rufus! Why did it have to be her?!"

It seemed that even though she knew that the mad-driven crown prince wasn't to blame, Princess Lianne couldn't help but condemn him.

Uneasily watching the scene, the fourth head grumbled, "It'll be quite challenging, going against all of this."

Before tens of thousands of spectators, Ceres shouted, "Now come on, the fun times have only just begun!"

The impending hell coming for Central was evidently nothing more than entertainment to her. The capital had become a maddening metropolis.

"If we compare her to Agrissa," the fifth muttered, "which one would come out worse?"

The sixth head said, "Lyle, today is a day you must never forget. This is where it begins. Your real battle with Ceres."

I nodded. We'd drag in people, drag in countries, drag in the whole continent to fight her. I had no intention of losing.

"Ceres, be prepared," I swore.

"Meisel, Clare..." the seventh head lamented as he watched his son and daughter-in-law rejoicing behind Ceres. "I never thought I would have to see you two like this."

The next time we meet, Mother, Father...you'll be my enemies.

Princess Lianne wept. I drew her closer to reassure her as, amid all the heated enthusiasm, I gazed up at the balcony. My eyes were cold as ice.

Lionel looked at himself in the mirror.

That day—the day that Lyle had fought Ceres...Lionel had seen it all.

“Lady Luck has finally given me a glance.”

He’d been enchanted by Ceres, a girl who could overwhelm even Lyle. And so, he chased after Ceres’s carriage. He knew the streets well, and so had managed to pop out of an alley ahead of them and force a meeting.

Lionel had sold himself, determined to do whatever it took, and Ceres seemed to take a liking to him. She granted him a position and status.

“Now this is splendid.”

Standing before the room’s mirror, he checked his appearance again and again. His luxurious, brand-new outfit was the same uniform worn by knights. In fact, it was the uniform of the Special Guard, which consisted of only those acknowledged by Ceres herself. It was an organization thrown together entirely on her whim.

Having earned Ceres’s favor, Lionel had achieved a massive promotion. As captain of Ceres’s Special Guard, Lionel was granted the peerage of baron. Yes, he was a captain—although he didn’t have any subordinates yet. Or anyone else for that matter. Even so, he was given the authority to order around a few of the other knight orders and was receiving considerable preferential treatment.

“Now I can stand on the same stage as Lyle. That’s right—this is the position I deserve. Just you wait, Aria. I’ll come to get you.”

Pressing Aria’s handkerchief to his nose and taking a deep whiff, Lionel left the room in search of her.

A considerable amount of luggage was being carted out of Princess Lianne’s manor. This was understandable, as the property was going to be abandoned. I gathered everyone into a room that had been nearly completely emptied.

“It’s just as I said before. From now on, I can’t guarantee your lives if you

choose to follow me.”

Everyone looked at me.

“And you said you’d bring us happiness,” Shannon quietly complained.

I ignored her.

“I’ll be fighting Ceres. I’m sure you’ve all been made painfully aware of her strength. I won’t force anyone. If you want to leave the party now, I’ll give you your share of our funds to take with you. If you want to leave the capital, you can accompany me to Baym as well.”

As I scanned everyone’s faces, Aria awkwardly scratched at her hair. “Man, you really are selfish. You bought me, right? You own me.”

“That has nothing to do with it. You’re free to leave... To be honest, I’d prefer it if you left. I’m stepping straight into hell. I can’t ask you to follow me.”

It was my decision to disband the party. Neither I nor my ancestors could imagine what was to come. Worst case, we’d all be wanted criminals after defeating Ceres. I was from the same family that had birthed her—we were brother and sister, bound by blood.

“We’ll defeat Ceres. It will be a long and arduous road, and someone might collapse along the way. Plus, even if we do defeat her, don’t expect any rewards.”

Miranda shrugged. “Why, that’s very troublesome. I’d at least like a proper reward. Right—Lyle, how about you be mine?”

At that Sophia burst out, a red tint to her cheeks, “Th-That’s a little—”

But I interrupted her, saying only this: “I don’t mind.”

All of a sudden, the room was silent.

“Hmm. You’re serious, I take it?” Miranda asked, a little surprised.

I felt just a little uneasy after the words left my mouth. In the first place, what else was I supposed to say...?

Was I too hasty?

“Let’s hear everyone’s answers.”

The sixth head stifled a laugh. “Oh, he’s embarrassed. He’s keeping a straight face, but he’s panicking inside.”

I awaited their responses, and surprisingly, Clara was the first one to raise her hand.

“I’m going with you,” she declared.

“What?!” Aria exclaimed. “Wh-Why? I mean, back then, you said...”

“I don’t see why you’re shocked. All I said was that I’d already decided.”

Aria cocked her head. “Could I ask why?”

“I want to record the truth I see with my own eyes.”

The reasoning was very Clara-like. When she looked at me, I nodded.

Next up was Eva.

“Me, pick me! I’m going too. My reason... Well, unfortunately, it’s the same as Clara’s.”

Clara’s face turned sour.

Eva went on, “I want to tell the story; and so, you’ll need to get to that happy ending no matter what. That’s my condition for joining.”

A story with a happy ending, huh?

I smiled and said, “I’ll do my best.”

“Oh, I would have preferred a more firm commitment...”

Next was Monica.

“This is a little belated, but of course, I, Monica, shall naturally—”

“You’ve already told me your answer; you don’t have to repeat it.”

Monica crouched down on the spot and began singing a sad song. She was surprisingly good, and Eva began to burn with a sense of rivalry.

This was when Aria raised her hand high.

You know, I never asked them to raise their hands...

“I’m coming too! I’ve given it some thought, and I know I’ll hate myself if I run

away here.”

That didn’t feel like a real reason to me, but it was very fitting of Aria. I nodded.

Miranda lightly lifted both her hands. “Naturally, I’m going along. I mean, I want to become your number one, right? Ah, Shannon’s coming too.”

Shannon glared at me. “I won’t forgive you if you fail.”

Her attitude irritated me a bit, but I accepted them into the fold.

“What about you, Novem?”

Novem stared straight at me. “If it’s permitted, I’ll accompany you anywhere you go,” she said before turning to Miranda.

“I won’t complain about you being around,” Miranda told Novem. “I decided *I’m* going to follow Lyle, and if you choose to be there too, then so be it. But I don’t trust you at all.”

It was a relief that she didn’t say she wouldn’t come along if Novem was around. Which led us to the final person—Sophia.

“I-I... I joined the party to repay my debt to you, Lyle.”

I nodded. “You’ve repaid me plenty. So much, I should be the one paying you back at this point.”

“I...still don’t really know. I want to stay with everyone—that’s a part of it too. Perhaps I lack the proper resolve.” Sophia stammered, a bit flustered, “R-Regardless of any debt, I want to follow of my own will.”

“Thank you,” I said.

Then, the fourth head clapped his hands. “Well, isn’t that nice? It looks like everyone’s participating.”

“It’s going to be tough, Lyle. Be prepared,” the fifth head wearily said.

Prepared? Is he talking about fighting Ceres? No, I get the feeling he’s concerned about something else.

“What’s this? Something serious?”

Damian entered the room, and Lily followed behind him.

“It’s something that ought to stay between us. Rather, do you need something?”

With a large staff propped against his shoulder, Damian said, “You’re going to Baym, right? Take me with you. After what I saw yesterday, I realized it’s hopeless here. I’m not sure it’ll be much better in Aramthurst either.”

“The master can do his research anywhere,” Lily enthusiastically added.

Damian laughed. “Yes, so long as I have the money! So yeah, while you’re at it, why don’t you give me some financial aid too? I’m just not suited to earning money.”

Novem heaved a sigh. “He’s a reliable person, but...”

I chuckled and took him in. “Yeah, sure. In exchange, I’ll need your help in various things.”

Damian showed a bit of reluctance, but conceded, “Well, fine. It should be entertaining enough, sticking around with you. I’m sure I can procure all sorts of things in Baym.”

“Professor Damian,” Clara spoke up. “Actually, I was wondering if you could repair my prosthetic arm.”

“Who are you? What do you mean prosthetic?”

As per usual, he doesn’t remember her name.

A little relieved, the seventh said, “I didn’t think you’d get Damian on board too.”

“It’s almost spring,” the third head said with a laugh. “A fine season to start something new. Let’s leave the capital and head east.”

Our destination was the city of merchants and adventurers—Baym.

Looking over Professor Damian’s Porter, Aria exclaimed, “It’s a lot bigger than ours!”

Sophia—who was standing beside her—added, “According to Monica, it’s

apparently called Dump Truck. A vehicle closely related to Porter.”

Aria shifted her eyes to Lyle, who was staring up at the Dump Truck. His eyes were sparkling. “Lyle really loves this sort of thing, I guess.”

“It seems nice and spacious,” said Sophia. “But inside it’s crammed full of so much stuff it doesn’t feel that way. If Porter was a little larger...”

They would be able to travel in greater comfort.

“Yeah, I get that,” Aria replied.

As they talked, a young man appeared on horseback.

“Aria.”

She turned, and at first, Aria didn’t recognize who it was.

“Wait, are you Lionel?”

Dismounting, Lionel was wearing some rather expensive clothing. *That looks like something a knight would wear*, Aria thought. And so, she concluded that Lionel had gotten himself a good position.

“Looks like someone’s rising in the world. Good for you.”

“Could I...have a moment?”

Without giving it much thought, Aria nodded and followed him.

As I and the rest of the party loaded up our things outside the gates, an unexpected person came to see us off.

“Why, if it isn’t Mister Maurice.”

“You look well,” he said in reply.

Honestly, Maurice looked a little worn out. He’d apparently rushed over as soon as he heard we were at the city gates.

“Yeah, we’ve got some circumstances, so we’ve got to go.”

“Really? Then I’m glad I’m here to see you off. It’s the least I can do after you pretty much salvaged the subjugation mission.”

Maurice was a knight who had fought alongside us during the hippogryph hunt. Although he didn't stand out much, he was quite good at his job.

"Have you lost some weight?"

"Y-Yeah. I have some circumstances on my end too."

There seemed to be something going on, so I asked him about it. As it turned out, Maurice had received some land. However, he had absolutely no idea what to do with it.

"I'm losing my mind over it. I have no idea where I'm even supposed to start. Since you came from a feudal lord background, I thought you might know something so I came to ask for advice."

"I see."

I gripped the Jewel.

Picking up on my intent, the third head quickly said, "I don't have any advice."

"Oh, come now," said the seventh. "You should be the most suited out of all of us."

"That's precisely why. Now look here. You can send in a new lord all you want, but from the village's perspective, they'll essentially be an outsider. They'll get irritated if you speak up. 'You think you can do things better than us? When you don't know anything?' they'll complain. In this case, doing nothing is the correct choice."

As I struggled to understand what he was saying, he sighed and provided a more in-depth explanation.

I pretended like I was thinking as I heard him out. Then I relayed, "Apparently, you should start by sitting back and observing how the territory functions for at least a year. Why not look into if there's anything you need in advance? Also, pay your respects to the most influential lord in the area."

"Right. Umm, in that area... It would have to be a viscount house, right?"

The third head wasn't finished. He continued, "Also, if he has a son, he should get him married in the near future. He'll be the son of a gryphon-slaying hero; it's best to get him married while the spotlight's still on him. And succession

too. Succession is always a pain. It's better to get it done while you're still in the capital."

I paused for a moment. "Do you have a son?"

"Yeah, I do. He's already an adult."

"You should hurry and arrange for him to succeed you. Is your son married?"

"Huh? N-No, not yet."

"It will be troublesome once he becomes a feudal lord. Please get that arranged quickly."

"I-I see. Understood."

The fourth head laughed. "You're giving proper advice after all."

"From my point of view, that's blatantly obvious stuff," the third head grumbled.

Then, the fifth head asked, "Hey, where's Aria?"

I looked around, soon realizing that Aria was nowhere to be seen.

Some distance away from Lyle's party, Lionel closed in on Aria.

"Hey, let go of me!"

"I'm the captain of the Special Guard! I've become a man worthy of you!"

Originally, he had planned to confess his love and return to the royal capital with her.

However...

"That's all well and good, but I have to get going. Don't get in the way!"

Lionel's confession had failed. And so, he had tried to forcefully drag her back, but he met extreme resistance and was losing to Aria in a contest of strength. Indeed, when it came to brute strength, Aria had the overwhelming advantage.

"I did my best for you!"

"I don't see how any of this adds up!"

Thrust away by Aria, Lionel fell to the ground, sullyng his brand-new uniform with dirt.

“Ah. Sorry,” Aria apologized.

Standing up, Lionel patted his clothes clean. “Why don’t you understand?”

Glaring at Aria, he drew his sword. The sight of the blade startled her, allowing Lionel to get a step closer.

If I can just continue threatening her into turning back...

But now that Lionel had drawn a blade, Aria no longer showed any mercy. She smacked the sword aside with her bare fist, closed the distance, and hammered her elbow hard into his head. Lionel fell to his knees.

Aria then picked up the sword he’d dropped and tossed it far away.

“Cut it out already! You already have a lover. What’s with this infidelity?”

Holding his cheek, Lionel lifted his face and shouted, “Then what about him?! What about Lyle, then?! He’s got loads of women around him! Who cares if I take one of them?!”

Those words got a scowl from Aria. “Don’t treat me like an object,” she said before disappearing in an instant, leaving Lionel gritting his teeth.

His expression warped in frustration. “It’s him. It’s all gone to hell because of him!”

His hatred of Lyle burning in his chest, Lionel hopped onto his horse and headed straight for the city gate.

After setting off from the capital, we stopped by the side of a river to take a break. A little bit of snow remained, and the river water retained a winter chill, but still, the days had grown considerably warmer.

And so, there we were, sitting around a bonfire, and Aria was looking quite sullen.

“What? So he tried to push you, so you pushed him back? It turns out you’re a lot manlier than the average man, Aria,” Miranda teased her.

Eva chimed in, "Lionel, was it? He's lucky he didn't get the stuffing kicked out of him. I'd say he got off lightly with an elbow to the face."

They were saying all sorts of things to poke fun at her.

"Ahem," the fifth head started with a very deliberate clearing of his throat. "Lyle, find the right time to follow up with Aria. Ideally, do it when no one else is around. For now, it's about time you change the topic."

In the Jewel, it was the third head's turn to tease the fifth. "Now that's the man who had five wives for you," he pronounced. "He really knows what's up!"

"Take this seriously!" the fifth head grumbled back. "Listen, I'm not even joking when I say it's going to get harsh from here on out. Heed my words!"

"Umm, Lionel was wearing a knight's uniform, right?" I asked, changing the subject before the teasing got to Aria's head.

"That's right. He got promoted, apparently."

How exactly did he get a promotion?

Miranda joined the conversation. "Will he really be all right working in the palace when he looks so much like Lyle? I'm concerned that Ceres might have it out for him. Although not much, truthfully."

"Trying to seduce Aria when he already has Doris..." Shannon said, sounding strangely angry. "Does womanizing run in the Walt blood?"

I immediately wanted to inform her, "You've got Walt blood running through you too, you know!" but there were a handful of other men who were staging an even fiercer protest.

"Hold up. I was faithful to Pasette."

"I only had one wife too. I would appreciate it if she rescinded that statement."

"But we do have the fifth and sixth heads. Even if we wanted to deny it, their reputation makes that a bit difficult..."

"Could you please stop condemning me every single time the topic of women is brought up," the sixth head fumed.

The fifth head remained silent.

Aria stood.

“Hmm? Where are you going?” Eva asked her.

“My shift’s over.”

She seemed a bit angry, so I opted to chase after her.

When we reached a place with a good view, Aria held up her spear and began to complain.

“I was scared, but everyone kept saying, ‘Aria will be just fine.’ What’s that supposed to mean? Who do they take me for?”

She was mad, and I had no idea what I was supposed to tell her.

“Aria.”

Turning to me, Aria looked at me a little awkwardly. “What?”

“U-Umm... You’re not injured, are you?”

Aria looked down at herself. “Do I look like I am?” she asked with all seriousness.

“I think it’s that attitude that gets you teased,” I heard someone say from the Jewel, but I did somewhat understand it wouldn’t be a good idea for me to tell her that.

“Please be careful from now on.”

“About how I banged Lionel up?”

“No, that’s not what I meant. I mean, about how you didn’t think twice about following him when he called you aside. Lionel’s injuries are... Well, he pretty much did that to himself.”

Aria looked at me curiously.

“What?” I asked.

“Are you by chance...worried about me?” she asked.

I nodded, and Aria looked me over with a smug grin.

“Hmm? I see. Hmmm.”

On the contrary, it now felt like I was the one being teased—but suddenly, Aria scanned the area. She crouched down and pressed her ear against the ground.

“Huh?”

“Shush!”

She quickly picked up on something. “Hey, is it just me, or are we being chased?”

I grabbed the Jewel and invoked the Arts. There were loads of red dots moving to surround us... They seemed to be traveling on horseback.

“We certainly are.”

Aria looked me in the eye and scolded, “Get a grip, would you? Why didn’t you notice?”

Even though I possessed such convenient Arts, I’d been caught off guard by my own negligence. Aria stared at me wearily.

“Fool,” the fifth head added. “What are you dropping your guard for? Now hop to it. Ready yourself.”

Epilogue

Lionel was wrapping bandages around himself. Sitting aboard a four-horse carriage, he bellowed his orders at all who could hear him.

“Don’t let them escape!”

Using his authority as captain of the Special Guard, he scraped together any knights who could mobilize at a moment’s notice to pursue Lyle and his comrades.

A knight riding a horse right beside Lionel shouted back, “Sir Lionel, you’re certain, yes? If we slay them, Lady Ceres will personally award us, yes?!”

It wasn’t that the knights were acting because Lionel had given the command. They were driven purely by their desire to receive a reward from Ceres.

“I’ll report your achievements to Lady Ceres after this! I’ll tell her whatever you want! But don’t kill the red-haired woman, no matter what. Bring her before me!”

The knight kicked the belly of his horse to pick up speed, and the other knights quickly did the same, desperate to earn their own merits too.

These knights weren’t wearing full-plate armor, but were instead outfitted with an emphasis on speed. They wore leather armor and were equipped with swords and spears.

A flash of magic in the sky notified them that the advance force had successfully gotten ahead of Lyle’s party. Now they just had to surround them.

“I’ve found you, Lyle!”

Hatred and envy contorted Lionel’s face with unsightly emotion as he spat out Lyle’s name.

Damian’s Dump Truck followed closely behind Porter.

“Can Damian not go any faster than this?”

Poking my head out of the hatch in Porter’s ceiling, I took in the situation. Damian’s Dump Truck was larger and heavier, and this meant it couldn’t achieve the same speeds.

Eva, who was standing on the roof, stared into the distance with a bow in hand.

“There’s no denying it now. A band of well-trained knights is coming straight at us!”

The map in my head confirmed it. The knights had split up to pincer us from two sides. They were split between an advance force that was waiting for us ahead, and another unit that was chasing from behind.

It looks a little different than before.

The Fifth Head’s Art—Map—would display a map of my surroundings in my mind. When I closed my eyes and concentrated, the map I’d grown so accustomed to expanded even further, shifting into a three-dimensional map that displayed the features of the terrain as well. I had obtained the second stage.

This stage of the Art was called Dimension; it expanded the map and added an extra dimension to it.

But that wasn’t all I’d obtained. The sixth head’s Search Art had advanced to its second stage, Spec, which provided far more detailed information on the enemy.

With Spec, I could roughly discern what equipment the knights possessed.

The information load shot up all at once. So much info was flooding into my brain it was giving me a headache.

“How about that, Lyle?! How do you like my Art paired with the fifth’s?! You’d be hard-pressed to come across any Arts more useful than ours on the battlefield!”

The sixth head was gradually getting worked up. Perhaps his blood was boiling; he would always get excited whenever battle drew near.

I know this is just an excuse...but practicing new Arts is what tired me out in the first place. That's why I stopped using them during the break.

But even if we were on high alert now, with Damian's slower pace, they would eventually catch up to us.

"But this is strange," Eva pointed out. "Their numbers are far too low. Are they genuinely trying to chase us down like that?"

The fifth head began contemplating the possibilities. "Yes, it would be unnatural for Ceres to break her promise to attack us. Maybe the men around Ceres are acting out, desperate for achievement?"

They didn't have the numbers to reliably take us out.

"Now then, what to do..."

We were about to be caught. Their forces were mostly concentrated on the unit that had circled ahead to block our path.

The third head spoke up. "Being surrounded is troublesome. All right! Time to break through head-on."

"Considering Damian's Dump Truck, taking a detour will prove difficult," the fourth agreed.

Due to its size, it lacked the maneuverability. Additionally, it was frailer than Porter. From what Damian told me, it was prone to breaking down if it was driven anywhere besides the well-kept roads.

Breaking through seemed to be our best bet.

"They just shot a signal flare," Eva said, glancing up.

A ball of fire soared into the sky and burst in a puff of smoke. They were exchanging signals, coordinating to synchronize the timing of their assault.

I retreated into Porter's chassis and poked my head into the driver's compartment.

"Clara, keep on course. We're breaking through."

"As unreasonable as ever," she sighed. Her prosthetic was still out of commission, so she was driving with only one hand. Damian was making her a

new one, but she had to make do for the time being.

The knights had set up a barricade in front of Porter. We were dealing with a hastily erected wall of dirt, and roughly a dozen knights.

The seventh head said, "Lyle, I hope you've made your resolve."

Gripping the Jewel, I moved to the back to address the rest of the party.

"Sorry, but this is going to get rough. Shannon, you're on standby. Monica, stay inside."

Shannon looked relieved, while Monica lifted up her pigtails, utterly appalled.

"Wh-Why?!"

"We need someone to protect Shannon and Clara."

Aria and Sophia reached for their weapons.

"Well, that sounds about right."

"How many enemies are we dealing with?"

I double-checked the map. There were eight of them waiting ahead. Then two knights running parallel to us on both of our flanks, making for four in total.

"Best-case scenario, we'll be in the clear after we deal with twelve of them. There are more chasing us from behind, but we may be able to shake them off."

Novem lifted her staff. "Lord Lyle, I shall—"

"I appreciate it, but it would be quicker if we work together."

"Right." Miranda smiled at Novem. "We need to break through quickly, and it would be better for everyone to face them. Also, I've got one request for you, Lyle."

"What?"

"Well, just hear me out once we get through safely. Don't worry, it's a very simple request."

I had nothing but concern about what she was going to ask me to do, but I nodded and climbed my way through the ceiling hatch.

My good saber had been destroyed by Ceres, so the one hanging at my hip

was cheap and mass-produced. I drew the blade. As I faced ahead, I saw the knights with weapons in hand, waiting behind their wall.

Porter picked up speed and crashed straight into it—making it through the mounded dirt. Then Clara slammed on the brakes, causing the chassis to skid sideways before coming to a stop.

“That’s our Porter!”

Eva lifted her bow and shouted, “The enemy is coming!”

The arrow she loosed was swatted down by a knight’s sword. These were well-trained warriors.

The rear hatch opened, and Aria shot out—

“Out of the way!”

With her spear, she swiftly smacked two knights to the ground. Meanwhile, Sophia used the flat of her battle-axe to send another one flying.

“Lyle!” Sophia called my name.

A knight took a swipe at me. I dodged, kicking him away before I leaped off Porter.

The knights surrounded us.

“If we defeat you, Lady Ceres will reward us!”

The knight who’d slashed me was a man with unshaven stubble and bloodshot eyes. He looked to be in his thirties. Judging by his swordplay, he was a knight who had undergone rigorous training.

What sort of person had he been before he’d fallen under Ceres’s influence? At this point, there was no way of knowing.

No, it was pointless to think about.

With a sweep of the saber’s blade—a swing from right to left, I sliced through his windpipe.

The knight’s eyes widened as his blood erupted from his neck. He clutched at the gash, attempting to squeeze out some last words, but in that time, the other knights assailed me. Two of them attacked from opposite sides.

“Captain!”

“I’ll kill you!”

The first I kicked away. I narrowly avoided the thrusting spear of the second while plunging my saber into his chest. As I quickly pulled the sword out, a knight who’d gotten behind me tried to take a stab at my back.

But that knight was pierced from behind by an arrow from Eva’s bow, and I finished him off as I turned to meet him.

The blood that splashed onto me. The blood stuck to my saber. It all felt so sickeningly sticky. I thought I’d gotten used to the feeling with all the monsters I’d slain, but I was struck by an immediate disgust as it clung to me.

Glancing around, I saw that the other knights, some unconscious, had been captured by Miranda. They struggled to break through her sticky threads but to no avail.

Sophia warned, “Our pursuers are here!”

As the knights who’d tried to pincer us closed in, Novem stepped forward. Raising her silver staff, she declared, “Fly away.”

With those words, a bolt of lightning fell from on high, causing the ground only a few feet in front of their horses to burst. The horses reeled, sent into a frenzy by the sound and the shock wave, and the knights riding them were thrown to the ground.

Confirming that all four riders were out of commission, Miranda immediately got to work restraining them.

I headed toward one of the captured knights.

The knight glared at you. “I know you! You’re the idiotic, disowned son of House Walt! If I return with your head, Lady Ceres—”

With my left hand, I grabbed him by the head. “Just answer my questions,” I commanded.

The knight was then startled by the fact that he couldn’t muster any words from his open mouth.

The third head's Art manipulated and misled the mind. Mind—as the Art was called—possessed a second stage called Control. The suggestion of Control was stronger than the base Art, and it became possible to cause someone's body to act counter to their will.

Unlike Mind, it conveniently didn't require time to cast the mental interference. However, the target remained fully conscious and their resistance meant far greater mana consumption.

...This really is a nasty Art.

"Who gave the order to pursue us?"

The knight didn't want to speak but was shocked to find his mouth moving on its own.

"L-Lionel. Captain of the Special Guard, and Lady Ceres's favorite."

"Lionel? Why is he Ceres's favorite?"

"I-I don't know. He just gathered us up and told us we'd be personally rewarded by Ceres if we killed you."

"She's keeping him around when he looks so much like Lyle?" the third head said with a sigh. "With Lyle, she acted like she had some deep-seated grudge."

I went on to my next question. "Are there any pursuers apart from Lionel and his men?"

"Th-There aren't any. Lionel just called on any knight who had free time."

"Was there an official order to hunt us down?"

"No. The palace has nothing to do with this."

The knight couldn't conceal his surprise—surprise at himself for answering all of my questions. The sensation of speaking even when he didn't want to and his budding fear toward me had begun to carry his expression toward insanity.

"Will there be any pursuers in the future?"

"I don't know, but there may be some if Lionel commands it."

The palace and Ceres hadn't sent anyone after us. Just knowing that took a huge load off my mind.

After I parted my left hand, the knight was relieved to confirm that his mouth moved as he willed it. I kicked him to knock him out before turning to my party.

“Change of plans. We’re intercepting Lionel here.”

Aria strengthened her grip on her spear. “Are we taking him out?”

Her face paled somewhat—was it because I was covered in blood?

“Lyle, hold on,” the seventh head called out to me. “Lionel might prove surprisingly useful.”

I gripped the Jewel to ask for more information, and the answer came from the fourth head.

“He’s thoughtless and shortsighted. An incompetent worker is incredibly worrisome to have as an ally, but they’re more than welcome on the enemy side. You should get as much use out of him as you can.”

The fifth seemed to hold the same opinion.

“I don’t know why Ceres took a liking to him, but given her personality, she could have promoted him without giving it much thought at all. Sure, Ceres might kill him as soon as he returns, but I’d recommend letting him live so he can continue to drag Banseim down.”

In that case...

Going off his voice, I just knew the fourth had a sadistic smile on his face. “Use my Art,” he said. “The second stage.”

I wiped my face off with the damp towel Novem held out and changed plans again.

“We’ll wait for Lionel to get here, then start moving again.”

“Huh?” Sophia exclaimed. “Why? If we want to run, we’d better do it fast.”

I gestured for Damian to press on in his Dump Truck. This time, Porter would be trailing behind.

“They’ll never catch up to us anyway.”

The fourth head’s Art’s second stage was Differential. A simple Art that raised ally movement speed while lowering enemy movement speed. That’s all there

was to it, but it was very effective.

As long as the Art was in effect, we'd be faster in most cases.

Leaping on top of Porter, I made sure everyone got inside before waiting for Lionel and his men to come.

There they were, right in front. Lyle's party. And yet, Lionel was screaming with rage.

"Why can't we catch up, you dullards?!"

The speed of his carriage had dropped, and so, too, had the speed of the knights surrounding it. Even though he could see them, he wasn't getting any closer whatsoever.

Sitting on top of Porter, staring back at them, Lyle was smiling.

This was unbearably frustrating for Lionel.

"Go faster!"

He snatched the whip from the coachman and lashed the horses, but their speed remained the same.

As day slowly turned to dusk, "We should turn back," one of the men said.

"Special Guard Captain, this is as far as we go," said another.

"It's already night. We need to check on our comrades."

Lionel began to hear these resigned voices—voices suggesting he give up. His frustration caused his face to contort even more.

"Goddess dammit!"

His scream echoed empty.

After shaking off Lionel and his men, we arrived at a small village soon after night fell. There we got permission and set up camp in the square.

I parted from the group, heading to a deserted spot where I promptly vomited.

I hid behind the vegetation, clutching my chest in pain.

My ancestors reassured me.

“You’ll get used to it soon enough. But don’t get too used to it.”

“The first man I killed was a bandit. Even now, I can’t forget it.”

“The feeling will pass. You’re going to get used to it whether you like it or not.”

“Lyle. You need to appear more reliable than before.”

“I would have preferred it if they were bandits.”

Does he mean I would have gotten over it easier if I’d cut down heinous villains?

In my anguish, the gastric juices created a stabbing pain at the back of my nose. I was in the thralls of it when a hand was placed on my back.

I turned with a start. “Miranda...”

“I knew you’d be suffering. You’ve been looking pale ever since the battle ended.” She handed me a drink, and once I’d washed the taste from my mouth, she told me, “You don’t have to hide it.”

“It’ll...make everyone anxious.”

She didn’t deny it. Instead, she changed the topic.

“Lyle, do you remember what we talked about before the battle?”

“You mean about listening to a request?”

“That’s right. And my request—is for you to stop being so high-strung around me.”

Apparently, my behavior was an issue.

“Huh? What do you mean?”

I returned the question to her and got a weary sigh.

“You’re so open and relaxed with Novem, Monica, and Shannon, but what about the others? It feels like there’s a gap between you and us. Please try to act naturally with me—with everyone.”

“Well...she’s not wrong,” the fifth head conceded.

Miranda stared into my eyes. “I’m risking my life for you. Lyle, you should trust me a bit more.”

“I do trust you...”

“Do you really? If possible, I’d like to reach a point where you say you have faith in me. Well, that depends on you, Lyle. There’s no use in me complaining about it.”

Miranda wiped my mouth off with a towel.

It was so embarrassing I wanted to back away, but she insisted, “Don’t worry about it.”

And with that, she wiped away the stomach acid that stained my chest as well.

“This much is nothing to be embarrassed about.”

“Y-You think so?”

“Rely on those around you a bit more. Lyle, everyone followed you knowing their lives were on the line. This isn’t a game.”

“Yeah...”

“That’s right; it’s not a game. So you’d better take proper responsibility,” Miranda said with a smile.

Her smile was beautiful—bewitching, even.

“Have you calmed down now?”

“Yeah, I think I’ll be fine.”

“All right, then you should call it a day. Rest. We’ll take turns on lookout.”

“But...”

Miranda flicked my forehead. As I held my head she said, “As I told you, rely on us.”

She returned to the others. Her back looked feminine, yet oh so dependable.

From Porter's back compartment, I could hear Shannon's sleeping breath—or rather her snores. She lay on a sheet with a blanket draped over her.

But I couldn't sleep. I held the blue Jewel up, gazing at it as I remembered that day. That day I had made a promise with my ancestors.

"You want me to make a promise?"

"That's right. You'll have to honor it, or we won't be able to help you out."

The round-table room. With a serious look on his face, the third head stared at me and said, "Survive to the end."

That was all.

"Huh?" I was bewildered.

The fifth head sent me a troubled smile. "It will take some time before you understand just how difficult that is."

The third head went on, far more serious than usual. "We won't allow you to become a hero through death. Even if you're slandered as a villain, you must live to the end. That is our promise."

In many heroic tales, it wasn't rare for the hero to die at the very end. In other versions, they'd discard all worldly attachments and retire.

The seventh looked at me with concern. "Now that you've begun, many will die regardless of your wishes. The country will be worn thin, and other nations and organizations will aim to fill the gap. Defeating Ceres won't be the end of it. That's where it truly begins."

The sixth head nodded. "Someone needs to hold things together. If there was a true hero, you'd need to assist them along the way. Not just to the big bad's defeat, but through the rebuilding process after that."

The fourth had a conflicted look on his face. "There's no telling how long it will take to rebuild. It depends on what Ceres does too. Lyle, you could live your entire life, and it still might not be finished after that."

All of a sudden, they were talking about what would happen after I won. I

didn't know how I was supposed to respond to that.

And the ancestors saw straight through me.

"I won't deny the notion of fighting like victory is all that matters. But that doesn't mean you can do anything you want," the third said.

The seventh continued: "Lyle, you need to move with consideration for the postwar period after you defeat Ceres. That is our request to you."

Removing his glasses, the fourth said, "If you die as a hero who gave his life taking down Ceres, you might find yourself very popular with historians and storytellers for generations to come. But if you really want to go down that path—to kill and destroy to take her down—then you must live to save the lives that come after."

The sixth raised his voice. "Yes, live, even if you're known as the villain! Die as a hero, and you'll leave nothing. You have to live, or it's pointless!"

The fifth scratched his head. "The point being, you need to live and grasp victory. A victory beyond defeating Ceres. Discard any thoughts of Ceres being the end-all-be-all."

A storm was about to sweep over the continent with Ceres at its center. The devastated continent would become a terrible scramble of nations vying for absolute power.

"That's a harsh promise you're forcing on me. We don't even have any hope of defeating Ceres yet."

"Sure enough, I can't see a future of you winning," the third head said with a chuckle. "But you can at least set the stage for your rematch."

"How so?"

The seventh head answered, "We're talking about Banseim. Get its surrounding nations and its nobles on your side. Lead an allied army to strike Banseim down."

The sixth shot me a troubled look. "This country called Banseim has grown a little too big, you see. It will take far too much time taking it on with only a nation or two."

Looking at me, the third head put a hand to his chin. “That’s the point where you can finally expect to win against Banseim. After you’ve gotten that far, then you can think about how you’ll beat Ceres. Putting that aside for now, Lyle... A battle isn’t a victory unless you survive it.”

As I nodded, the third head reached out. Within the blue glimmer of the Jewel—within the round-table room. “Today. Today is where it all begins. Why don’t we start the tale of Lyle?”



“Was that a bit corny?” he added with a bashful laugh.

“We can’t just be here to teach Arts, surely. We were brought back as memories to meet you, Lyle. That’s the way I see it now.”

This was where it began. Up until now, I’d gone down whatever path I’d been told to, but today was the day I decided on my own path.

From now on...my story begins. It finally begins.

It felt like the third’s words had been carved deep into my chest.

“Incidentally, you’ve become quite reliable.”

“Huh?”

Unlike before, his face had turned to a gentle smile. “I remember when we first met.”

Hiding his mouth behind a fist, the fourth head laughed. “That pathetic Lyle finally made his resolve... You could have run away if you wanted to.”

The fifth looked at me, troubled and sad. “I didn’t want you to walk down the same path we did. Are you really sure about this? You can still turn back.”

“I’ve already decided,” I said with a nod. “I’m going to defeat Ceres.”

The sixth head laughed, but he, too, looked a little downtrodden. “Well said! Truly well said, Lyle.”

The seventh head pressed his right hand against his chest. He grasped at his shirt as if to contain all the emotions bubbling up in his heart. “Blame me for letting the family get out of hand. I am the cause of it all! It’s my responsibility for forcing you into such a decision.”

I shook my head and told him, “No, I’m the one who decided. Ceres and...my parents. I decided to fight my family. I don’t resent you.”

He must have been bottling a lot of stuff within. He held back his tears.

And as the seventh head wouldn’t speak, the third spoke up instead.

“Strong...and reliable. You’re a fine Walt, you are.”

On that day, for the first time, it felt like the ancestors and the Jewel had

acknowledged me in the truest sense.

By the time I realized it, it was morning. Shannon had already gotten up, as I didn't see her anywhere around. And Eva, with a blanket wrapped around her, was looking at me.

"Oh, you're awake?"

"Where's everyone?"

"They're tidying up. I was just on lookout duty, so I'm taking a break right now."

She was holding a pen and paper, and it didn't seem like she was taking much of a break at all.

"What are you writing?"

"A new song, a new story. Whatever, really. The issue is, I don't have any inspiration."

Her shoulders dropped as she proclaimed she didn't have any material to go off of. I decided to offer her a suggestion.

"Are you taking commissions for new songs?"

"What? Do you have a story?"

"Well, something like that. Actually, there are a few people whose stories I think ought to be passed down in song."

"Who? What sort of people?"

I was happy to see her so interested.

"The ancestors of House Walt."

Immediately, Eva frowned in displeasure.

"You don't want to?"

"I mean, those sorts of requests are all about showing off one's bloodline. Lionization, exaggeration, the lot of it. It all just sounds so fishy when you listen to it. And a lot of times, it's all lies too. It doesn't make for a captivating story,

trust me.”

This seemed to be a tedious request, as far as Eva was concerned.

“Don’t worry, they’re not perfect people. In fact, they were pretty awful,” I said.

“Then let’s hear it,” she replied.

And so, Eva reluctantly took on my request.

A commotion was brewing in the Jewel.

“Wait a second—Lyle is trying to turn our stories into songs!”

“Lyle, wait. What do you plan on telling her?!”

“I have a bad feeling about this...”

“On the contrary, we should use this opportunity! Lyle, when you talk about me, please cut out anything that has to do with women. Okay?!”

“Lyle, tell Eva just how amazing your grandpa was! Also, be completely honest about the sixth.”

Then, the sixth head protested, “Why are you always so persistent?!” and made a grab at the seventh. A fight broke out, making for a whole lot of noise.

Eva took out a notebook, sat next to me, and peered into my face.

“Now, go on. What sort of ancestors were they?”

“I should start with our founder. His name was Basil Walt.”

The image that came to mind was a hearty, larger-than-life man. So grand in both his joy and his anger.

“He was the third son of the court noble Walts. Though they were technically nobles, his house was at the very bottom of the court, and they were dirt poor. But then, he fell in love, you see. He volunteered for the pioneering corps to become a man worthy of his love.”

“Oh, what a rousing individual.”

“He’d never even spoken to her before, but our founder still loved her and did his best. And as it turns out, that woman loved our founder too.”

Eva paused her note-taking. “Hmm? Now that sounds shady. Let me guess, they got together and had their whole happy end. Don’t you think that’s a bit cliché?”

She was trying to say it lacked excitement.

I shook my head. “He succeeded in cultivating new land for the kingdom and returned to the capital with money—only to find the love of his life married to another man. Our founder’s love never bore fruit.”

“U-Umm...”

“He was a mess after that. Drinking day in and day out, and making a right mess. It looked like he would never get married, and everyone was always nagging him about it. When that finally got too annoying, our founder told a lie.”

“A lie?”

““House Walt has strict criteria for finding a bride, you hear?! If there’s no worthy woman out there, then I’m never gonna get married!’ he said.”

Eva’s mouth hung open.

“So, and here’s the kicker. Those precepts are still treasured and upheld to this very day. Even though House Walt’s bride precepts were all just some drunken nonsense.”

Seeing me so invested in the story, Eva looked puzzled.

“What?”

“Lyle, why are you telling the story like you saw it yourself? Usually, these stories are embellished and dramatized as they’re passed down by word of mouth. After so many retellings, the founder in your story should have become an unrealistic paragon. But when I listen to you, I kinda feel like he’s full of humanity.”

Should I play it off, or should I be honest...?

I seriously thought about telling the truth, but there was Ceres’s Jewel to consider. There couldn’t have been a worse time. If I brought up the blue Jewel now, perhaps I’d raise concerns. No, I definitely would.

“But it’s more interesting like that, isn’t it?”

“I guess so. Far better than bragging about just how amazing he was. Got it. I’ll definitely make it into a song, so tell me more.”

Just like that, I told her exactly how the first head became a dragon slayer and became feared across the lands. Eva listened to his tales of triumph and failure, and everything else in between. She listened with surprise and with smiles.

The commotion in the Jewel continued. Before I knew it, all five of them were fighting.

“Don’t pin this on me!”

“It’s definitely your fault! Back then, you were the one who—!”

“Thanks to your screwup, I... We... I’m repaying my debts here and now!”

“Give! I give! Two on one is unfair!”

“Experience the grudge of many years in the making!”

My ancestors were a far cry from the individuals in the stories passed down over the generations. That was one of the main reasons I’d thought it would be interesting to turn their ways of life into songs. One day, once they had all disappeared from my life, perhaps I would hear them and remember their stories, my mind full of reminiscences of these chaotic days.

SEVENTH

I threw open
the inn window
and yelled,

“Come one,
come all,
look and
behold this
beautiful
man!”

7


Author
Yomu Mishima
Illustrator
Tomozo

From the
carriage
came a face
I would
never
forget...
Ceres.



The woman
sipping tea in
front of me
was **Lianne
Fonbeau**—a
princess of
the Kingdom
of Fonbeau,
and the
former fiancé
of Banseim's
crown prince.





“You chose me—
Lyle Walt. Now
be proud.”

“Sis, are you
seriously
planning on
following
this guy?”

Miranda didn't have the composure to smile, even if Lyle had been trying to lighten the mood. She was relatively sure he hadn't been trying to mock her or Shannon, but this problem was a delicate subject for them both. It was in that moment Lyle chose to proclaim:



***“Did you think you could
do anything with that
paltry weapon?”***

Ceres kicked my greatsword upward, then closed in as I staggered back. I forcibly swung the weapon down, and this time she swung her rapier up to meet it.

The blade of the rapier turned a fiery red, glowing with intense heat. Against this fearsome blade, my greatsword was torn to shreds. Destroyed.













Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 78: Triumphant Return](#)

[Chapter 79: Full Monty](#)

[Chapter 80: Negotiation](#)

[Chapter 81: The Miracle of Remelrandt](#)

[Chapter 82: The Hero General Sley Walt](#)

[Chapter 83: The Princess of Fonbeau](#)

[Chapter 84: Fellow Student](#)

[Chapter 85: Heretical God's Child](#)

[Chapter 86: Truth](#)

[Chapter 87: Decision](#)

[Chapter 88: The Maddening Metropolis](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Bonus Textless Illustrations](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)



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SEVENTH 7

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