



SEVENTH

8

Author **Yomu Mishima**

Illustrator **Tomozo**

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INTRODUCTION

The fiend who drove **Lyle** from his home was his very own sister—**Ceres Walt**.

But Ceres is also the **Heretical God's Child**, and after reuniting with her at the royal capital, Lyle witnessed her might first-hand.

Ultimately, Lyle resolves to fight against her overwhelming tyranny, but to succeed, he'll need to gather more strength. To do so, he sets off for

Baym, the city of merchants and adventurers, and as he crosses the border, he hears a peculiar rumor. A nearby kingdom has been going through a sudden economic boom, and there are suspicions that they may be managing a

dungeon in secret. Lyle's ancestors are immediately fired up, and push Lyle into visiting the **Kingdom of Lorcan**. At the same time, deep within Lorcan's forests, a hidden cave is ravaged by the hands of an intruder and the soldiers on

lookout are incapacitated. They've been bested by a divine beast that races through the sky—a **legendary qilin**. Lyle and his party members are startled by this commotion.

Yet for some reason, there is a hint of nostalgia in the fifth head's eyes...

SEVENTH

First Head



Basil Walt

First Stage

Full Over

Raises physical abilities from between 10% to 20%.

Second Stage

Limit Burst

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

Third Stage

Full Burst

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

Second Head



Crassel Walt

First Stage

All

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

Second Stage

Field

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

Third Stage

Select

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

Third Head



Sley Walt

First Stage

Mind

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

Second Stage

Control

Bends foes to one's will.

Third Stage

???

Fourth Head



Marcus Walt

First Stage

Speed

Gives a stable boost to movement speed.

Second Stage

Differential

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

Third Stage

???

Arts of the Ages

Fifth Head



Fredriks Walt

First Stage

Map

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

Second Stage

Dimension

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

Third Stage

???

Sixth Head



Fiennes Walt

First Stage

Search

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

Second Stage

Spec

Provides detailed information on friends, foes, and traps.

Third Stage

???

Seventh Head



Brod Walt

First Stage

Box

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

Second Stage

Warp

Teleports people and items across short distances.

Third Stage

???



Lyle Walt

First Stage

Experience

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


Second Stage

???

Third Stage

???

Arts of the Ages	Author Yomu Mishima
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Prologue

I'd made up my mind—I was going to defeat my nefarious sister, Ceres. And before me was the result.

"A wanted poster? Seriously?"

The road to the Free City of Baym had taken us to the eastern parts of Banseim. We were in a territory that lay along the national border. From here on, we'd cross that border and pass through a few foreign countries before finally reaching Baym. There really wasn't any way around it—we had to pass through this town.

And there they were, a number of them randomly plastered across the sides of the buildings that straddled a bustling street. Posters with my name—Lyle Walt—printed on them. Right above a sketch of me, they proudly pronounced, "Wanted: Dead or Alive." My crime was listed as treason against the state.

I peeled off one of the many posters and stared at it while Monica, an automaton crafted by the ancients, looked on beside me. She sported fluffy blonde hair tied into pigtails, and wore a red maid outfit.

It was quite a conspicuous getup, and Monica was drawing a fair few eyes, but she didn't seem bothered by it in the slightest. This was perhaps understandable, as she *was* a certifiably broken maid robot who called her master a "damn chicken," among other things.

"Oh my, it looks like they've captured your features quite well. Since it wasn't printed in color, I see that they had to explain your hair and eye color with words," she noted.

"Do you think this looks like me?"

The sketch was atrocious. Not due to a lack of artistic skill; the real issue was the malice it exuded. I just knew that Lionel—a man with a grudge against me—was the one who commissioned it. For some reason or another, it appeared he'd decided to hunt me down.

Lionel was the heir to the court noble House Walt, the same house that my ancestor had branched off from. Meanwhile, I was the heir of the feudal noble House Walt—or at least, I'd used to be.

Anyway, the version of me on the poster was drawn with a nasty look in his eyes, and hair spikier than it had any right to be. The poster also labeled me as a scam artist who swindled women.

It didn't bear the slightest resemblance to me.

"As I said, it captures your essence. On that note, you've really ruffled some feathers."

"Yeah, I'd say. I mean, treason? Now that's a big one. I haven't even done anything yet."

Yet was the keyword. Since I'd decided to defeat Ceres, I was bound to end up fighting the kingdom—fighting Banseim. In a way, the wanted poster wasn't entirely off base.

"We can't afford to get caught here. We need to head out, and fast," I muttered as Monica examined the poster in further detail.

"As much as I'd love to," she said, "we have Professor Damian with us right now. You must consider that imitation Dump Truck that his junk-bot Lily made. It won't be that easy to make a break for it."

"Yeah, if it were just us, we could easily break through."

Damian's Dump Truck boasted a similar structure to our Porter. However, it was even larger than Porter and lacked the maneuverability. To make matters worse, it was liable to break down if pushed too hard. It was thanks to this that Lionel had managed to spread the word before we even got here.

Monica, still scanning the poster, said, "They mention Porter too, but there's nothing about the professor. There's only a detailed description of you and Aria."

He clearly detests me and covets Aria, I mused. *Still...*

"It doesn't feel like they're seriously trying to catch us."

First, there was the fact that the sketch with those odd leering eyes didn't

resemble me at all. Second, the only other illustration included in the drawing was a rough approximation of Porter's exterior. Surely there was far more that Lionel could have included, but he'd chosen not to. But perhaps these things were both due purely to Lionel's biases against me. The poster certainly oozed with them.

Monica thought for a moment, then mused, "Hmm, we might be able to use this."

"How so?"

"It's a secret," she pronounced, then teased: "You want to know though, don't you? Oh, my useless chicken. If you really insist..."

I rolled my eyes in frustration and then turned away, refusing to inquire further.

"I'm kidding. Kidding!" she said hurriedly, backpedaling right away. "It was just a joke, so please ask. Don't leave me hanging like this!"

Ignoring her, I gave the area around us a quick scan. I was glad I'd had the foresight to wear a hood, just in case. I'd never imagined I'd be a wanted man, but it paid to be cautious.

The town we had just entered was near the border, and as such, it was flourishing with trade. Merchants from afar had set up shops on the streetside. There were wooden dolls I'd never seen before and strangely shaped tools whose uses I couldn't even begin to guess.

The architecture had begun to subtly stray from the Banseim style ever since we entered the eastern region. It was still similar, but something was different.

"It's like we're already in a foreign country," I muttered.

At that moment, I heard the fifth head's voice from the Jewel hanging around my neck.

The fifth head of house Walt—Fredriks Walt—was a small man who gave off an air of calm indifference. He seemed most indifferent in any and everything. Yet despite that, history would have you believe he was a notorious womanizer who kept four mistresses in addition to his wife.

He didn't look like the sort. The man had narrow eyes, green hair tied back in a ponytail, and an indescribable gloom that seemed to hang over him at all times. That was just the sort of man he was. And though his cold attitude left a greater impression, he certainly had some kindness too. He was awkward and a bit strange in how he adored all cute life-forms.

"Naturally. This place was beyond the border not too long ago. You'll at least see a few vestiges."

Beyond the border? I grew curious and gripped the Jewel to inquire further.

He spoke with a hint of nostalgia. "That's how war works. You take some, you lose some. Well, Banseim's a big place. It's not strange for each region to have its own characteristics. Right—martial arts used to be booming around here."

Up until recently, the eastern region of Banseim had apparently been swept up in a chaotic era where lords were scrambling among themselves to snatch up land. Because of this, or perhaps for some other reason entirely, it became a land where martial arts prospered. This trend continued to this day.

The fifth head seemed strangely knowledgeable about the east.

Why? This is pretty far from Walt Territory.

I started walking, and Monica followed with the wanted poster in hand.

"Wait for me, chicken."

I took care not to bump into anyone as I picked up the pace.

Only I could hear the voices from the Jewel.

"It was especially bad during my time, and during the fourth's. Thanks to that, there were loads of nobles who fled from the east. Refugees, you could call them."

The families of the nobles who evacuated were taken in by feudal lords like the Walts.

House Walt was situated in Banseim's southern parts. Why did those refugees rely on some nobles in the middle of nowhere rather than turning to the king's land in the center?

I touched the Jewel, curious.

The fifth head answered, “It’s not like I took in everyone who fled. A small portion decided to seek refuge in the south—that’s all there is to it. At the time, House Walt had a lot of money. That played a big part.”

They sent their families to someone who they planned on supporting financially?

As I considered the matter, the fifth head wearily spoke up. “You don’t get it? They served a dual purpose as hostages.”

How unpleasant.

When I returned to the inn, I was met by the puffed-up pouty face of Aria. Her red hair swayed as she stormed up to me and held out a poster she’d presumably picked up on the street.

“Where’ve you been, Lyle?! I got worried when I saw this thing being passed around!”

“Sorry,” I apologized. “I needed to buy a few things. And I was pretty much fine.”

I’d worn a robe and a hood, but that wasn’t too uncommon. Thanks to that, I’d been able to shop without any hassle. Perhaps it was thanks to Lionel ruining the wanted poster with his spite too.

The room we rented was a spacious place lined with bunk beds. It had a bathroom and a shower, but the facilities were old, and not completely up to snuff.

We’d mainly chosen the inn... Well, to save money, really. Our party was a large one, and we had our scruples about booking multiple rooms in a better-supplied inn.

“We were really worried you know,” cackled Eva the elf, as she sat with an elbow resting on the room’s round table.

Today, she’d used a cord to tie back her strawberry blonde hair.

Evidently, she'd gone out too, as she also had a copy of my wanted poster—but she had another paper as well.

“More importantly, I’ve got something funny to show you. A right laugh.”

Aria’s face turned red as she tried to snatch it from Eva.

“Give it here!”

“No way.”

Eva nimbly dodged and handed me what looked to be another wanted poster.

Monica peeked from behind me.

“My word. Is this a missing person search? This beautiful woman is... Aria Lockward?”

There was a sketch of a pretty woman. Based on the description, her hair was a striking red, and she possessed beautifully clear, violet eyes, with...the compliments went on.

A stark contrast to my wanted poster, Aria’s had been beautified.

The girl bashfully hid her face with her hands.

“That idiot! What’s he trying to accomplish, humiliating me like this?!”

Lionel was in love with Aria. The feeling was not mutual, and the sketch seemed to strike a nerve with her.

“It’s amazing,” Eva said, laughing. “There were plenty of them posted around the market, you know. But no one recognized Aria.”

Aria glared from the gaps in her fingers. “What are you trying to say, Eva?”

“Nothing much. Just that there’s no point in a missing person search if the subject’s been changed beyond recognition. Is Lionel even trying to catch us?”

Indeed, I was doubtful about that.

“Yeah, I know I’m uglier than the sketch! Sue me!” spat Aria.

Eva scoffed. “I didn’t go that far. Don’t take it out on me.”

“It’s your fault for teasing me!”

They glared at each other.

I covered my face and sighed.

“We’ve been fighting a lot lately.”

Even though we’d set off from Central with renewed determination, there was a strained air lingering around the girls. Damian and I were the only men, so when the girls didn’t get along, it meant the entire group was essentially at odds.

Noting my weary face, Monica smiled and explained, “Their relationship was always tense; all that’s changed is that it’s coming to the surface. This is why real women are no good. Aren’t you glad you have me?”

“You also picked fights like it’s nobody’s business. Can’t you do something about that?”

She, too, was a troublemaker, always ready to pour fuel onto the fire.

Aria and Eva had gotten physical. They’d begun grappling with one another.

“You worthless elf!”

“Now you’ve said it, worthless woman!”

Their exchange had devolved into slinging low-level insults, so I stepped between them to mediate.

At that moment, Miranda came in, bringing Shannon with her.

Miranda returned from the outside in a very good mood.

“Everyone, get a load of this. There was a wanted poster for Lyle. And look at this! It came with an adorable poster for Aria too. ‘A delicate maiden held captive by the heinous Lyle,’ it says.”

Miranda flashed the posters with a splendid smile on her face.

With her light green hair grown out to her shoulder, she had the aura of a mature, older sister. However, at the same time, she carried the air of a mischievous brat.

A reliable older sister figure who seemed capable of everything, and yet—

“Miranda, are you laughing at me too?” demanded Aria, her hair tousled from the scuffle.

With a meaningful smile, Miranda replied, “Oh, I was merely stating the facts. They’ve really failed if they can’t catch us with so many wanted posters circulating. Personally, I was laughing at Lionel and his botched efforts, but I guess you felt like I was mocking you.”

Aria had a dubious look on her face. Perhaps to vent out her frustrations, she grabbed a spear and headed out.

“Hey wait!” I tried to stop her.

“I’m going to go practice. I feel like moving my body right now.”

With that, Aria left the room, and Eva stretched out her lips with a finger, baring her teeth as she said, “See ya!”

Miranda shrugged. “Looks like I made her angry.”

“No, you did that on purpose,” I said.

“Yes, that’s right,” Miranda conceded without a hint of guilt.

I wanted to hold my head. “Please, don’t rile her up,” I pleaded.

“It’s a right bother if she gets irritated over such child’s play. More importantly, it seems like Lionel’s serious.”

Despite his methods, and his useless posters—it seemed Lionel himself was going at it in earnest. It was uncertain if we’d be able to cross the border safely.

“He’s definitely placed some lookouts on the border,” I said. “He knows we’re heading for Baym.”

The problem was our route.

The route to Baym was fixed, to some extent. Choosing any other path would mean a lengthy detour.

Indeed, choosing another route would mean passing through a number of small countries.

As I thought and mulled, Shannon stared at my face. Shannon was Miranda’s little sister and the youngest among us. Petite with long pale-purple hair.

Her characteristic yellow eyes were known as orphic eyes. Yet, despite the incredible orphic eyes she possessed, she was a disappointing girl who wasn't even trying to use them to their full capabilities.

Incidentally, I hated her. I just couldn't bring myself to like little sisters. Their very existence was off-putting to me.

"What?"

"This wanted poster; it looks just like you."

She grinned ear to ear as she proudly showed off that nasty-looking sketch.



“You’re a nasty little girl.”

“To you, I am. Why don’t you turn yourself in?”

“Please.”

I pinched her cheeks, her eyes tearing up as she cried out, “Oww, oww.”

It felt satisfying to pinch her soft cheeks.

Although Miranda was watching over us with a warm smile, it was far from a fun situation for me.

“Quit fooling around and think seriously,” Eva interrupted. “At this rate, we’re going to have to take a detour to get to Baym.”

I released Shannon’s cheeks, feeling a bit embarrassed.

“R-Right. Umm, then—what should we do?”

With that said, I didn’t have an immediate solution.

A detour would come with its share of troubles.

Language wouldn’t be an issue, but going through so many countries would mean brushing up with just as many sets of rules and regulations. It was quite concerning, knowing absolutely nothing about the lands we’d be stopping in.

It would be easier to stick to the predetermined route to Baym.

There, the roads would be well maintained, and there were inns along the way.

Also, with Damian’s Dump Truck, it would be difficult to navigate any paths without proper roads. Even the seventh head’s Box Art wasn’t enough to store that massive thing away.

Time was also an issue.

As I thought over it, the fifth head spoke up, offering to be our guide.

“If you’re fine with a *slight* detour, let me lead the way.”

Around that same time, someone was fuming in a fort on Banseim’s eastern

border.

The border checkpoint was surrounded by high mountains and built to address the only feasible path in the area. In the nearby fort, Lionel, dressed in an extravagant knight uniform, slammed his fist down on a desk.

“Why can’t you find them?!”

“Please calm down, Captain.”

A knight with white specks in his hair didn’t quite know how to handle the man who captained the Special Guard of the new crown princess.

Lionel had the authority to give him orders and was essentially his superior.

He couldn’t simply be ignored, and so the knight in charge of the fort had to keep him company.

“We’ve already spread out wanted posters. And if they’re heading for Baym, they’ll need to pass through this checkpoint.”

“You’re certain?”

“Yes. There are other paths, but this is the one everyone chooses for Baym. It’s unlikely for them to use any other route.”

“You think so? I’d definitely choose another route. Obviously, right? Is it that hard to understand?”

What’s this guy even saying?

The knight concealed his exasperation, maintaining his diplomatic attitude as he explained, “The fact that it’s so often used means it’s better maintained by a long shot. If you want to risk a detour, you’ll need the guidance of a local. There’s a reason that merchants and adventurers choose this route.”

“D-Don’t talk back! Just follow my orders!”

Lionel’s arrogant attitude wasn’t earning him any loyalty.

One of the knight’s subordinates whispered to his superior, “Who is he? I understand that he’s part of the crown princess’s Special Guard, but why’s someone like him out here, throwing his weight around?”

“I don’t know. Apparently, he’s chasing after some fugitives...”

The knight and his subordinate looked at the wanted posters that had been made on Lionel's instruction. The sketch was the spitting image of Lionel himself, perfectly capturing the frustrated furrow of his brow, his angry glare, and his disheveled hair.

This made it incredibly confusing for them.

The other paper depicted a beautiful female adventurer who'd been deceived and led off by the fugitive.

"Are there even any adventurers this beautiful? I know a few adventurers, and they all lament that there's nothing but strong-willed women around them."

The knight pressed his fingers to the bridge of his nose. "It's been nothing but insanity from the central region. What's going on, good grief? He insists there's a fugitive, but we haven't gotten any word through official channels."

The central region—the nation's capital city of Central—had not given any orders. Lionel had simply barged in, lording over them while throwing out demands.

Nevertheless, they'd had to comply, as Lionel had been able to prove his station.

The knights and soldiers stationed in the distant east had no idea what was going on in the central region. They'd put out a wanted poster for Lyle, but it wasn't on Ceres's orders. This was purely based on Lionel's vendetta.

Lionel frustratedly bit his thumbnail. "Dammit! Useless, the lot of you! I need to rescue Aria, and fast!"

Unbeknownst to Lionel, the knight and his subordinates were watching him with fed up looks on their faces.

We'd deviated from the shortest route from Banseim to Baym and arrived at a different checkpoint. The soldiers there eyed Damian's Dump Truck with fear.

"An iron box that moves without horses. Times sure have changed," the knight in charge muttered.

The Dump Truck attracted attention, and there was nothing we could do about it.

“Can we pass?” I asked.

The knight fretfully nodded. “It shouldn’t be an issue.”

I waved to Damian, who was sitting in the passenger seat. The driver seat was occupied by an automaton named Lily. She skillfully manipulated the handle, maneuvering the large craft down the narrow path.

The knight seemed concerned that she might break the checkpoint along the way.

“How does that thing move?”

“It’s a Demonic Tool developed in Aramthurst. I think it might be widely implemented soon.”

“A vehicle that doesn’t need a horse, huh? Looks convenient, but I think I’ll feel safer with my horses.”

As we chatted, I glanced at the nearby bulletin board. The posters for both me and Aria were hanging there, but the knight didn’t seem concerned.

It seemed Lionel’s curious alterations had made us unrecognizable. We were in luck, but it was quite bothersome that the posters had already made it to these remote checkpoints.

Peeking into the building, I could see a mountainous stack of what seemed to be more of the posters. It wouldn’t be long before they were spread around the entire region.

If this went on, I’d be known as a fugitive in other countries too.

In regards to that matter, Monica had insisted, “Leave it to me!” but...that only made me more concerned.

The knight scratched his head with his pen.

“Hmm, there’s been a lot of you adventurer sorts lately.”

“You mean adventurers passing through this checkpoint?”

“Yeah, that’s right. Wait, you didn’t hear?”

He spoke as if it was common knowledge, but I honestly admitted I knew absolutely nothing.

“Did something happen?”

The knight, upon hearing that, tucked his pen into his pocket and rubbed his fingers together with a faint smile on his face.

The gesture irritated the seventh head. “Looks like these eastern knights aren’t anything to write home about.”

“It’s pretty much the same wherever you go,” the third refuted with a laugh. “He’s just earning a bit of chump change on the side. For us, it’s a small price to pay. What’s the market price like these days?”

The ancestors got into a lively conversation and ultimately decided on one silver coin.

But, when I took the coin from my pocket and handed it to him, the knight seemed startled.

“Hey, I’m not *that* expensive.”

“I want to hear *all* the details. And hey, I might be passing through here again. I should pay my respects, right?”

“R-Really? Then, let me fill you in.”

The knight led me into the checkpoint’s managerial building, and Monica followed like that was the obvious thing for her to do. Although the knight seemed to have something to say about that, he quickly gave up.

To summarize, beyond Banseim’s eastern border was a jumble of small countries. Among them was a land that had quite recently become prosperous. Perhaps they’d found a dungeon, and perhaps they’d found a good way to manage it. In any case, they were suddenly dealing in a far greater number of Demonic Stones. Merchants and adventurers were gathering to that land, and at this point, it was now a country that stood out among all the others in the area.

The knight ended his explanation by saying, “If you come across anything suspicious, let me know when you get back. I don’t want to get caught up in a

rampaging dungeon.”

If dungeon management went awry, the dungeon would run out of control, spitting up massive numbers of monsters. These monsters would go on a rampage, causing wanton death and destruction. Poor management wasn't just a problem contained to a single nation. After all, in most cases, these rampages had caused entire nations to fall, and they didn't stop there.

This seemed to be his concern.

“What country?”

“The Kingdom of Lorcan. It's part of the confederation, and I've heard they've been given more of a voice lately.”

“The east's a place where feudal lords were constantly snatching up land from one another. At some point, they started trying to declare their independence from the kingdom.”

As we advanced down the narrow trail, we stationed ourselves around the slowly moving Dump Truck. We used our hands to move away any rocks and branches that would get in the way as we proceeded at a sluggish pace.

As expected, it was the fifth head who told me about the east in greater detail.

“Independence?” I replied in a voice that wouldn't be overheard.

“At some point, Central stopped paying attention to the east. It was pretty common for lords to go independent and shave away at the territories of other lords.”

“That's quite something...”

Is it really right to betray the nation like that?

Picking up on my thoughts, the fifth head gave a slight laugh. “Does that sound terrible to you? But the feudal lords had their reasons. They couldn't stand listening to the orders of a central government that didn't provide them any half-decent support.”

Knights would fight tooth and nail to carve out territories for themselves and would become the governing lords. But there were many skirmishes that followed, and even when foreign powers would invade them, Banseim wouldn't raise a finger.

Of course, the kingdom had its own reasons. The territory extended too far to the east, and it took far too much time, money, and effort to dispatch an army.

"As far as Banseim was concerned, it was much more convenient for them if those lands just split off and became their own thing. When the lords proclaimed their independence, they did their share of griping, but they accepted it nonetheless. But that gave way to a conspiracy theory. Isn't it strange that they accepted succession so easily? There has to be something more to it, people would say."

They relinquished the territory because it was more trouble than it was worth. *Was that really all right?*

"A conspiracy? Was it true?"

This was answered by the sixth head. "Even now, I couldn't tell you. Maybe it happened, maybe it didn't. Just look at me; I might have done a few things, but a lot of it was blown out of proportion or just rumors taken as fact. That's how it is with conspiracies—it's mostly just nonsense."

"Right, that happened," the seventh head reminisced. "There was a rumor that House Walt was going after the throne, you know?"

"There were others too, but I think that was the main one. Why would I even want the throne? It's nothing but trouble. I was busy managing the expanded territory and completely uninterested, but the folks around me kept raising a ruckus about it."

As the sixth and seventh got into tales of their troubles, the fifth head brought the conversation back to me.

"Anyways. There are a lot of small countries beyond Banseim's eastern border. Those countries got together to form a confederation."

"A country with a lot of smaller countries within it, you mean?"

“Banseim’s pretty much the same. We just call ourselves lords and kings; I’d say the only difference is who’s on top. Back in my day, matters were decided through a discussion between all their various kings. They didn’t have a supreme ruler.”

“Can they really come to a decision like that?” the fourth head wearily asked.

The third plainly answered, “Rather than coming together, aren’t they just laying down the rules of the land? No one wants to have a war with no rules.”

“War has rules?”

“That’s important. If we seriously tried to crush one another, there’d be nothing left,” the third told me. “We’d be poisoning rivers and killing everyone—and that’s no laughing matter. It’s definitely a no-go. You should use every means at your disposal to win, but that’s a different issue. Don’t make that mistake, Lyle.”

Even I understood that was no good.

“The important part is to never lose sight of your goal—and of who you should be. If you think anything goes, then you’re no different from Ceres.”

“I know.”

The fifth got it back on track. “I’m curious about Lorcan. Maybe you should get a quick look at it before going to Baym. If they really do have a dungeon, this could spell trouble.”

The ancestors were suddenly silent. After a while, the fourth head spoke up.

“Lyle, could you look into it for us?”

“I don’t have a problem with that, but don’t you think we should hurry up?”

“I think there’s enough value to warrant it.”

Going along with the fourth head’s words, I decided to stop by Lorcan along the way.

“Lorcan, huh? I wonder what we’ll find there.”

“We don’t know. That’s why you should look into it,” the fifth said to me. “On another note, Lyle—your Art. You’re sure you can use it, right?”

My new Art was...incredibly difficult to use. No, using it was simple in and of itself. It was my personal Art, so I understood it better than anyone.

It was precisely because I understood it that I struggled to use it.

“Honestly, I don’t think I can.”

“I...understand how you feel. But you need to do something about that.”

He didn’t need to tell me. I knew well enough... But it was a little special. Ideally, I didn’t want to have to use it.

The cargo hold of Damian’s Dump Truck was loaded to the brim. It was so packed it was hard to even find any place to step, and proceeding through this jumble was Sophia. Her long black hair and baggy robe would often catch on the assorted bits and bobs.

Squeezing herself through a corridor so narrow it crushed the chest that even her robe couldn’t completely hide, she finally made it to Damian’s work area.

“P-Pardon me. I have a message from Lyle. We’re going to be setting course for Lorcan.”

Damian—who was facing his workbench—was a small man whose brown hair was so unruly one might think a bomb had just gone off in his face.

Lifting his goggles and turning to Sophia, he said, “Oh, is that so? Who were you again?”

Damian—who never seemed to remember a name no matter how many times he was told—was a professor in the Academic City of Aramthurst, where he was considered a genius. However, a sharp mind did not an upstanding man make, and his terrible personality caused its share of issues.

Sophia didn’t know how many times she’d answered this same question already, but she answered nonetheless.

“I’m Sophia. What are you making this time?”

Evidently uninterested in Sophia, Damian returned his eyes to whatever it was he was working on.

“Can’t you tell by looking at it? It’s a prosthetic.”

Propped up on the work surface was a metal mechanism made in the shape of a human left hand.

Sophia nodded. “Oh, Clara’s new arm!”

Professor Damian cocked his head. After thinking for a moment, he said, “Come to think of it, that was her name. Yes, that kid. I’m making an arm for her. Lyle requested it, after all.”

“You remember Lyle’s name, but you don’t remember any of us...” Sophia said with a sigh.

Sitting in Porter’s driver seat, Clara found herself a little confused as she received the new schedule from Novem.

“Lorcan? It’s a feasible rest stop, but is there any reason for us to take an extended stay?”

As Ceres had broken her prosthetic arm, Clara was now making do with just one hand. She had light blue hair and red eyes. Her bespectacled eyes stared at Novem.

She could tell just by looking at her—Novem hadn’t a shred of doubt in the decision Lyle had made.

“He heard something curious at the checkpoint, and I imagine he wants to look into it.”

Novem had lustrous tawny-brown hair tied up in a side ponytail. Her purple eyes were practically glistening.

Although Clara took on a supporting role in the party, she could handle magic to some degree. And from her point of view, Novem was extraordinary. An exceptional magician.

But more than anything, she was someone that even Ceres was wary of.

Owing to this little detail, Miranda was convinced that Novem was hiding something, and this caused something of a large trench to form between the two women.

After a pause, Clara replied, “Understood.”

Clara was of the same opinion.

One look at Novem was enough to tell she wholeheartedly served Lyle, but... She clearly had a secret she would never share with her comrades. Things had changed, and Clara could no longer simply regard her as a *reliable magician* as she had before.

Once Novem had done what she’d come to do and left the driver compartment, Clara heaved a sigh. She pulled her glasses off with her right hand.

“How troublesome.”

Naturally, Clara had noticed that the party’s vibe had changed.

Chapter 89: The Kingdom of Lorcan

We passed through a handful of checkpoints before reaching Lorcan. It certainly deserved to be called a small country, and it only had a single city. Other than that, there were only a few villages and forts dotting the surrounding area.

As for the atmosphere...

“It’s quite close to eastern Banseim. Identical, even.”

The architecture and general feel closely resembled the places we’d passed through right before leaving the country.

“There was a time when this area belonged to Banseim,” Clara offhandedly answered as she stood beside me, holding up a book. She quite skillfully flipped the pages with her single hand. “The local lords proclaimed independence, forming a mishmash of smaller nations. After a period of war, they finally came together into a confederation.”

It was the same as the fifth head’s explanation.

“A confederation, huh?”

“It’s a gathering of small nations and not a very large gathering either. The entire confederation is even smaller than what we would consider Banseim’s eastern region.”

Small nations had gathered together to intimidate eastern Banseim.

Clara closed her book and began stuffing it away in her back. She seemed to be having a bit of trouble, so I helped her out.

“Thank you,” she said, bowing her head. “Still...” She glanced around. “It’s quite lively.”

We hadn’t stopped for long at any of the other countries of the confederation we’d passed through, but nevertheless, Lorcan seemed quite different from them all.

“Right.”

There were loads of people on the streets. If I didn’t focus, I was prone to bumping into someone.

A new wall was being constructed outside of the protective wall that surrounded the city. There seemed to be ongoing work within the city as well, as the demolition projects stuck out like sore thumbs. They came hand in hand with new buildings that were being erected all over.

“It’s practically like the city’s being reborn,” I said, muttering my honest thoughts.

This caused Eva’s eyes to light up.

“It’s crowded as can be. I’d love to sing in a place like this. Hey, if we’re going to hunker down, you could at least give me a day to sing. Please, Lyle.”

As Eva put her hands together to make her plea, Clara turned away.

“If you’ve got something to say, just say it, Glasses.”

“I have nothing to say to a lying elf.”

“You said it again! What’s wrong with adding some excitement to a story?! That’s right, there’s nothing wrong with getting people excited!”

“I’d appreciate it if you didn’t falsify stories for such a petty reason. This is why I can’t stand elves.”

These two got along like oil and water.

In fact, the only members of my party who actually got along were... Miranda and Shannon, I guess? Aria and Sophia were pretty close, and I’d often see Novem chatting with Eva.

“It’s like my party’s become a confederation.”

I sighed, only to hear a chuckle from the Jewel.

“I get what you’re trying to say. You have multiple cliques forming within a single party. It’s definitely an issue, but for now, it might be best to wait and see where this goes.”

The fourth head’s words put me on edge.

Are we going to be okay?

Then, the fifth head offered me some advice. “Intervene in any infighting that gets in the way of your objective. As for anything else—pretend you didn’t see it. You’ll only wear yourself thin if you meddle too much.”

“Wow, you didn’t have five wives for nothing,” the fourth snarked. “Some real advice from someone in the know.”

“Shut it.”

The fifth stayed silent after that.

He was known as a womanizer, yet whenever it came to women, the fifth would always tell me to keep my distance. Did he really have so many lovers? The way I saw it, he would have been going after them more aggressively if he really liked women so much.

I mean, look no further than the sixth head.

The sixth head ran away from home and had a bastard child at the house he took refuge in. A child even he didn’t know about—the incorrigible man.

Knowing that he was the punching bag whenever the topic turned to female relations, the sixth head was similarly quiet today.

“It’s just like what we heard at the checkpoint,” I said. “There are a lot of merchants, but a bunch of adventurers too.”

By the look of them, the adventurers had gathered from all over the lands. Adventurers and merchants tended to gather whenever a region experienced a period of growth. They’d do business with the locals, and so the locals would rake it in too.

After taking in the local situation, the fourth head said, “They’ve definitely pulled off something. The most likely possibility would be a dungeon.”

Dungeons—a strange phenomena that occurred without rhyme or reason. They could be within a forest abundant with nature, or the ruins of an abandoned castle. There was no telling when or where one would occur.

The inside of a dungeon would take on a mazelike structure that would become home not only to traps but to hordes of monsters as well. And the

foolhardy folk who made a living by charging into such dangerous places were called adventurers.

It was widely believed that dungeons were made to lure in humans. After all, the farther one made it through the dangerous halls, the more valuable the treasure they'd come across. There were exceptions, but dungeons were generally just as profitable as they were risky.

One final thing of note: dungeons were supposedly alive.

Once cleared, a dungeon would wither—it would die and vanish from the world. If anyone snatched away the treasure in its innermost chamber, the dungeon would cease to be.

Yes, dungeons were a great risk, but rather than getting rid of them as soon as they cropped up, wouldn't it be far better if we could cultivate them for an endless supply of Demonic Stones and treasure?

With this in mind, many countries attempted to place dungeons under management. It wasn't a completely fruitless endeavor, and there were a handful of managed dungeons in Banseim. They remained uncleared, allowing adventurers to continuously reap the bounty of their depths. To put it simply, they were regarded as mines.

"It's difficult to get quick results with respectable means. If they've grown this much in such a short time...it'd have to be a dungeon," the third head said with a hint of discontent.

If management failed, a dungeon would run out of control. A rampaging dungeon would expel all of its monsters, wreaking havoc on the surrounding nations. There were even entire nations that vanished due to a single dungeon rampage.

Shoddy management could lead to disaster, and borders meant nothing to monsters. The failure of one nation would spread to its neighbors and beyond. This was a sad reality that had been repeated far too many times throughout history.

"Ahem," the fourth head cleared his throat. "If they have a troublesome dungeon, then why don't you go and clear it? By all means. That would be in

this country's best interest, and it will provide some peace of mind to the surrounding countries too. As a knight defending the weak civilians who live in these lands, and as a noble doing his due duty!"

Let's do our best for everyone's sake!

He made it sound like he was doing a good thing, but I'd already spent a year getting acquainted with these men. I knew what they were really trying to say, and this understanding made me press a hand to my brow.

"And let's nab some treasure while we're at it," the third enthusiastically interjected. "We can add it to our war chest!"

The sixth head raised his voice. "No matter how much money you get from here on out, it will never be enough. Lyle, you should fill your pockets before you get to Baym. Fill that war chest!"

"Trying to manage a dungeon without the proper know-how is just a nuisance!" said the seventh, who sounded like he was having fun. "Lyle, for the people—nay, the world, and more importantly for our objective, why not break a leg?"

Their four voices were as one.

"This country's treasure is ours!"

A chance to gain some assets had come around—and these four men couldn't be happier.



Yes, this was it. This was how my ancestors really were. They said they were curious about the place, but as it turned out, they were apparently after the treasure of the dungeon's innermost chamber.

Only the fifth head remained strangely quiet.

The cave was deep in the forests of Lorcan. Its entrance was well camouflaged to blend in with the surrounding trees, and the area was frequently patrolled by knights and soldiers who kept a constant watch—or at least, that was how it should have been.

This night, what should have been a hidden cave was revealed for all to see. Its entrance had been scorched black. The nearby brush was still burning, and the patrol knights and soldiers were collapsed on the ground. Although they were all still alive, they'd been left unable to stand.

One of the soldiers lifted his head.

“Wh-What just...?”

Right before he'd lost consciousness, he'd fallen victim to a powerful jolt and a flash of light, an explosive sound ringing in his ears as his mind faded away.

Even now, his ears ached.

How much time had passed since he'd been blown away and knocked out?

He shifted his head to get a better look around, noting that his superior and his colleagues were similarly on the ground.

“I-I need to report this.”

The cave contained a dungeon hidden from the nations around Lorcan, and even from Lorcan's citizens. Only knights and soldiers were sent there to train, and to earn some Demonic Stones and riches along the way.

This was the secret behind Lorcan's recent and rapid increase in power. There were a number of such dungeons all over the country.

Though the soldier tried to stand, he couldn't muster any strength and remained limp on the ground.

Concerningly, the fires around him were slowly beginning to spread.

“Dammit, what is all of this...”

It was then that he heard the clopping of a horse’s hooves. What’s more, it was coming from within the cave.

Slow but steady steps.

The soldier suddenly felt a chill race down his spine. He broke out in a cold sweat.

They’d never brought horses into this dungeon before. If anything was coming out, it would have to be a monster.

He shuddered at the thought of being devoured while he was unable to run or resist. Just as he considered playing dead, the footsteps came to a stop nearby.

It had to be a considerably large monster, as the ground would shake wildly with each step it took. A matter of seconds felt like minutes, hours.

Then, a voice spoke to the soldier. A human voice.

“Tell your boss: don’t do anything unnecessary.”

The soldier lifted his head, startled by the vestiges of youthfulness he heard. He looked up just as the moon peeked its way out of the clouds to illuminate the visage of a beautiful life-form. It was like a horse in general shape, but otherwise completely different.

From its head grew a horn shaped like a single-edged blade. Its blue eyes glistened like gemstones, and its body was covered in dragon-like scales. Beautiful white scales, from which sprouted a golden horn and mane. The beast glistened in the moonlight.

The soldier swallowed his breath.

The life-form raced off, gradually leaving the ground as it ran. It galloped as though there was some sort of unseen pathway in the sky.

Each time its hooves kicked at the air, there would be a scattering of light like breaking glass. These sparkles trailed behind it like a long flowing tail. And leaving this faint trail, the beautiful beast disappeared into the night sky.

“A-A divine beast? I’ve never seen one before...” the soldier stammered, once his mouth finally started working again. “So that’s a qilin.”

It was neither an animal nor a monster. This life-form classified as a divine beast was known as a qilin.

The day after Lyle’s party arrived in Lorcan, Aria and Sophia popped into the Adventurers’ Guild to see if the wanted posters had made it there yet.

They’d need to act with caution if Lyle’s face was plastered all over the place.

But, as far as they could tell, Lyle’s wanted poster was nowhere to be seen.

“It looks like they didn’t issue it this far,” Aria said with a breath of relief, confirming her own search request wasn’t there either.

“We’re in a foreign country. Do you think they’ll chase us this far?” Sophia asked. She shifted her eyes from the bulletin board to the rest of the Guild.

There were plenty of adventurers, and the small Guild building was in no way prepared to house them all. It felt terribly cramped. They seemed to be struggling to keep up with the sudden increase in people.

There was a long line at the reception desk.

“Is it just me, or is it crowded wherever we go?”

It was like this at the inn too. And at the pub, the market, and every corner they turned, they’d run smack-dab into a crowd. It had gotten so bad that there were adventurers living out of tents pitched outside the city walls.

This caused other people to gather in the hopes of doing business with these adventurers, and so the city streets now ran beyond the walls.

Aria shared Sophia’s take on the matter. “Yeah, it’s like people are overflowing out of the city. There’s an awful lot of monsters in these parts, so the adventurers won’t have trouble finding work.”

Sophia glanced at the number written out on a blackboard. It listed out the monetary exchange rate for Demonic Stones, and this was the best one she’d seen so far.

As an added bonus, the tax was low.

“There’s lots of work and low taxes. With an exchange rate like that, to boot, it’s only natural for adventurers to gather here,” Sophia concluded.

Growing sick of the crowd, the two girls headed out.

Folding her arms behind her head, Aria said, “Sure, there’s fewer people here than Central, but it’s like they’ve all been crammed in a narrow space. I guess this is what a sudden boom looks like.”

As they walked the road in front of the Guild, they heard the voices of arguing adventurers. They were glaring at one another right in the middle of the road—multiple adventurers on both sides.

The side with fewer people donned higher-quality equipment and looked stronger overall.

By contrast, the other side, though winning in numbers, all wore equipment only a step above standard clothing.

“Aria, it seems like there’s a fight.”

“Looks like it.”

One of the stronger adventurers howled at his opposition, “Don’t screw with me! We already got the Guild’s permission!”

“We’ve got our own set of rules around these parts,” the leader of the more numerous group rebutted. “Don’t come out thinking you’re allowed to do any and everything as long as the Guild says you can.”

Evidently, this was a quarrel between adventurers who’d been brought in by the financial boom and adventurers who’d been born and raised there.

The city’s residents skirted around this less-than-peaceful get-together with frustrated looks on their faces. The abrupt influx of people had turned these scuffles into an everyday occurrence.

“Oh, look at that. The adventurers are fighting again.”

“I hope they don’t destroy anything this time.”

“I saw them arguing with some merchants just the other day. Why all this

fighting lately? It's terrible."

Two housewives gossiped as they passed by Aria and Sophia. The girls quietly slipped away, taking care not to get caught up in the fight.

"I guess a thriving economy isn't all sunshine and rainbows," Sophia sighed.

Aria nodded. "Even if we can make good money, I'd never try to set up base here. Being honest here, I'd prefer it if we could head straight to Baym. What's Lyle thinking?"

The two of them made for the inn.

"Bad things tend to stand out a lot more, you see."

"O-Oh, is that so...?"

We were in the Jewel's round-table room. This was where I generally ended up when I sent my mind into the Jewel. A rather curious space where I could meet face-to-face with my ancestors who could not take any form in the real world.

And—it was also where I could see their memories.

"You can apply it to pretty much anything. Whatever it is, it's only natural that there are good sides and bad sides to it. Though I guess you can also call it an issue of perspective," the third head said, getting a deep nod from the fourth head.

It seemed the man had a few thoughts on the matter.

"I get it. I totally get it! Keep things the same and they'll put you on blast for not coming up with some brilliant idea to change it for the better. It's fundamentally impossible to achieve a hundred percent, but even if you manage eighty, they beat you up for the *missing* twenty! It just makes you want to scream, 'Then why don't you people do it?!' doesn't it?"

The fourth was getting worked up, his glasses giving off even more of an ominous shine than usual.

Did something happen in the past?

The third head seemed a little weirded out himself.

“U-Umm...yeah. Anyways, the bad will always stand out more.”

As for what we were talking about, it had to do with what Aria and Sophia had told me about after they returned from the Guild. According to them, though Lorcan was doing well financially, it was a rather rough land with a fair share of problems.

I tried talking to my ancestors about it, and this was the result.

Glancing warily at the worked-up fourth head, the third head went on, “I’m sure it’s still better to have these issues than to struggle for money.”

“Then in your personal opinion, third head, do you think we should just get on our way and leave Lorcan?”

“That’s a different issue. We’re taking the treasure.”

Clearing the dungeon would put a hamper on Lorcan’s financial situation, yet he didn’t seem the slightest bit guilty.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’ve got a nasty personality?”

“Where’d that come from? In the first place, this only matters if there’s even a dungeon at all. Granted, there’s a high chance; you should hurry to find and clear it if it exists. Isn’t that better than turning this entire region into a desolate wasteland? Lyle, I think you might be underestimating a rampaging dungeon.”

My knowledge mostly came from books. I was aware of the dangers of a rampaging dungeon, but I’d never experienced one myself.

“The moment a dungeon runs out of control, every human who lives in this area is dead. Every single one of them. Even if a few do survive the monsters with some supreme luck, they won’t last long in a barren hellscape with absolutely nothing to sustain them. It’s better to live poor than to go through that. Wait, was Lorcan originally poor?”

“I don’t know the specifics.”

“Then you should start looking into that tomorrow.”

“I don’t mind that, but—umm, why did you call me here?”

Only the third and fourth heads were in the round-table room. The other three were resting. Apparently.

“Well, actually we were curious about something. You know, that door behind your seat.”

I turned around to stare at the door of memories that had manifested a short while back—the door to a room that seemingly contained my own memories.

The ancestors all seemed to sense something peculiar about it.

However, even if I wanted to look into it, the room was locked with no apparent way of opening it.

“There’s nothing interesting about my memories.”

“For you, maybe. But it might not be the same for us, you know. There has to be a key—an item, a gesture, a word. Something. I think the door only manifested because we found that key. Does anything come to mind, Lyle? It can just be a gut feeling too. Anything you can think of that might open it?”

“Not that I can think of.”

The third and fourth slumped down at this lack of leads.

“Unfortunate. I thought I’d get a good laugh out of Lyle’s memories.”

“I was looking forward to it.”

They’re the worst.

Lately, I’d begun to wonder if these guys were completely different people from the ancestors who were lauding my efforts not too long ago.

There was still something else to discuss.

“On another note, how’s the Jewel been lately?” the third asked quite a vague question.

I put a hand on my forehead. “Not good. Those instability periods are happening more and more frequently.”

“The mana consumption’s gotten unstable too,” the fourth said with concern. “You should be careful about using the silver weapons. Still, why is this suddenly happening...?”

“I have a good guess,” the third offered.

Their eyes both turned to my room of memories. If there were any leads, they would surely be in there.

They thought about it for a bit, and as I watched them, something occurred to me. The fifth had been quite reliable ever since I came to the eastern region, but he’d been curiously silent whenever we talked about the dungeon.

“Umm, come to think about it, what sort of person is the fifth head?”

“What sort? Is he more than he lets on?” said the third.

As the third head died in battle, he didn’t know much about his grandson, the fifth head.

With a conflicted face, the fourth muttered, “He used to be...a cute and honest kid.”

The third immediately grew invested. “Used to, huh? Now I’m curious. I doubt the fifth will show us his memories if we asked him, so why don’t we confirm it with the fourth’s?”

He’d surely noticed the dubious look on the fourth head’s face, but the third head still insisted on seeing those memories. He’d usually show a bit of tact and change the subject, but strangely, he did not.

But I was also curious about the fifth head. How did an honest and cute kid change so much as an adult? According to the sixth head, the fifth head had treasured animals far more than he did his own kids. I really had to wonder about that part.

“C’mon, c’mon. Just a little bit. Show us those memories,” the third pestered him.

And finally, the fourth head folded. “Fine, if you insist.”

The fourth head stood and headed off to his room with the third head and me trailing behind.

The fourth head was the head who oversaw House Walt during its turning point. He presided over the house as the late third head’s accomplishment had them elevated from baronets to barons.

The peerage of baron was seen as where true nobility began. Before, House Walt had been dependents who relied on the strength of higher-ranking noble benefactors. But as barons, their position was reversed, and after they had baronets and knights to look after.

In any case, this was when the scale of the house shot up all at once. And the individual who held it together at that time was the fourth head.

The fourth head had no significant military feats, but his handling of domestic affairs that helped overcome the Walts' turning point would become the house's foundation for years to come.

Yet this was also a man whose hobby was saving money, and whose lifelong dream was to fill his treasury with gold.

I observed the Walt estate as it had been in the fourth head's time. Now that the house had risen to the rank of baron, perhaps the previous property had become too small for their liking, as they had relocated to one that was quite a bit larger.

There were servants busily moving about the manor.

"It's quite boisterous," I said, observing the corridor as I chased behind the fourth head.

There were little decorations to speak of, and the place was very plain compared to how it was when House Walt's seventh head ascended to the rank of earl.

Though I'd occasionally bump into the people passing by, I'd just pass straight through them. These were phantoms, possessing no physical bodies.

"Oh, I've got it. It's delivery day," the third muttered.

Then the fourth replied, "That's right. This is the day the fifth was born."

Why is he showing me this moment? I wondered. But the third seemed delighted.

"What's wrong?"

“Marcus is being thoughtful. You know, I never got to see the birth of my own grandson.”

I see. I nodded.

But the fourth head bashfully denied it. “I-I didn’t do it for the third or anything. This is to teach you about Fredriks—the fifth head.”

“No need to be shy. Still, House Walt’s really changed.”

It seemed the third head had quite a few thoughts on the matter, but it all stopped when we came to a certain room.

“Huh?” he exclaimed.

And I, too, was so surprised I had to doubt my own eyes.

“Th-This is...”

Seemingly picking up on what we wanted to say, the fourth head covered his face with his right hand and explained, “We had no connections at the time, and it was a trial and a half to find a bride, you know. Especially with those goddess-forsaken precepts.”

There, we found the fourth head who seemed to be in his midthirties—and what looked to be an exhausted young girl lying in the bed.

Her red hair was glued to her brow with sweat as she formed a weary smile.

Apparently, this strong-willed-looking girl had just given birth. I watched, hoping I was mistaken, as the fourth head in the memory—Marcus—wept.

“Brigette, thank you. Now, House Walt is secure.”

“You mustn’t cry,” the red-haired girl said to Marcus, who looked old enough to be her father. “But I’m in a good mood today, so I’ll give you seventy points. Yes, out of respect for our adorable Fredriks, I won’t dock as many points as I ought to.”

Evidently, it was not a mistake.

The red-haired girl was Marcus’s wife.

“This is...something,” the third head said, shaking his head.

Not that I felt any different.

“Fourth, I’m not sure what to say about this. What’s the age gap here?”

Then, the third cocked his head. “Huh? That’s what you’re caught up on? Shouldn’t you be more concerned about whether or not she can endure childbirth at that age?”

“Huh?”

Apparently, the third and I were looking at different issues. I was worried about the age gap, while the third was concerned she wasn’t even old enough to have children.

The fourth sighed. “That’s not an issue. Brigitte was already well into adulthood when she married me. She’s naturally petite, and she’s got a baby face. It’s just how she is.”

“Well, if you say so,” the third head begrudgingly conceded.

“Huh? Are we really letting this slide? You look like you could be father and daughter!”

“That’s less important than you’d think. It’s an arranged marriage between nobles, and you often get the reverse too. Age is only really important so far as the ability to leave an heir.”

The fourth nodded to that, and it seemed I was the one in the wrong.

I’m struggling to come to terms with this.

“My time as heir was a busy one, all things considered. We’d only just become barons, and as barons, marriage became something completely different. I also had those precepts to contend with, and as a result, I somehow got halfway through my thirties unable to marry.”

House Walt honored the precepts forged by our founder in a drunken stupor. They were a list of conditions that any woman marrying into House Walt had to fulfill. They’d been completely forgotten by the very man who made them, inviting in the ire of the six who came after him.

At this point, I just considered them a funny little story that had nothing to do with me. As for the contents...

1. The girl must be physically attractive.
2. She must be healthy.
3. She must have a good constitution.
4. She must be intelligent.
5. She must have clear skin.

Those were the original five. In the fifth head's generation, an additional sixth clause was added: "She must have exemplary magical abilities."

"Come to think of it, the fifth head was the one who added the sixth precept."

There was a hint of sorrow in the fourth's eyes as he stared at the wailing, newly born Fredriks.

"I personally didn't want the list to grow," he said. "If it were up to me, I'd have done away with those precepts in their entirety."

And yet, Fredriks—the fifth head—maintained them, and even added on.

Chapter 90: The Fifth Head

After entering the fourth head's room of memories, we waded through Fredriks's childhood to probe out the secrets of the fifth head.

Now ten years old, Fredriks turned to the fourth head's wife, Brigitte.

"M-Mom," he said, straightening his back.

Then, all of a sudden, tears burst out of Brigitte's eyes.

"Fredriks turned into a delinquent!"

She was seriously crying.

Not as a joke, or as a bit. She was actually crying.

As he watched this, the third head winced. "Wow," he said, sounding a little weirded out.

Fredriks frantically rephrased himself. "I'm sorry, mama! I'm so sorry! B-But there's something not right with saying it. The other kids said so. I want to use something else."

"I don't want 'mom'! And 'mother' makes it sound like we're strangers! I can't live with anything else! Please call me mama, Fredriks!"

Throwing a tantrum like a child, Brigitte—with her small build and childlike face—looked like she was Fredriks's big sister. The fourth was right; she just didn't seem to age.

Fredriks's shoulders dropped. "G-Got it..." he replied.

A radiant smile spread across Brigitte's face as she embraced him.

She was completely doting on him.

How envious.

"No wonder he can't go against her. He never struck me as the kinda guy who'd say mama, but how's he supposed to win against that?" the third head chuckled.

The fourth, in a conflicted mix of joy and sadness, replied, "Fredriks was an only child, you see. That might be part of why Brigitte doted on him so much."

The third's face turned serious.

"Did something happen after he was born?"

"An injury. Brigitte told me to take a mistress, but I couldn't do it."

"I see," said the third.

The surrounding scenery changed.

Before I knew it, I was standing at the manor's entrance where Marcus and the servants were welcoming in Brigitte.

"Oh," the fourth bashfully started out, "this is the memory of the first time I met her. How nostalgic."

"Huh?"

As for why the scene had shown up so suddenly, apparently, the sight of his wife had gotten the fourth thinking, and his room had reacted in kind.

Brigitte was the daughter of a viscount, but her house had fallen on some hard times. There were very few servants accompanying her, and she hardly had any belongings.

And yet, she carried herself boldly.

Meanwhile, Marcus had a stiff smile on his face.

"U-Umm... Are you, perhaps, Madame Brigitte?"

He's evidently grown nervous when presented with someone who practically looked like a child.

"Twenty points," Brigitte chided. "You're losing points for not even recognizing the woman who's going to be your wife, and you're losing even more for not picking up on that fact when I'm standing right in front of you."

"Ah, no, I don't mean to be rude. You were just such an adorable little lady that I—"

"Another ten points down the drain. That puts you at an appalling ten total. I

don't need any pointless flattery—it's clear you're just trying to smooth over the situation. Admit it, I look like a child, don't I?"

Marcus was overwhelmed, and so were the servants of the estate.

She was taking on quite an attitude with the house she was set to marry into, but there was a certain something to her. She elicited a sense that her actions were the natural course of things.

"I understand my position, and I will do my duties. You don't need to worry about that."

"I-I see."

Seeing Marcus so clearly let down, the fourth head laughed.

"Man, I was really worried back then."

The third head nodded. "So when you sometimes bring up points and whatnot, that's you imitating your wife?"

"She's been rating me for years. Before I knew it, I'd picked up the habit too."

The surrounding scenery faded to various shades of gray—and then, a young Fredriks was playing in his room.

Marcus and Brigitte spoke to him.

"Are you having fun, Fredriks?"

"Yeah!"

"Oh, that's my kid for you! Just look at his immaculate sense for stacking blocks!"

Brigitte praised him and locked the boy in a hug.

"Mama, that hurts," Fredriks groaned.

Although Marcus seemed fond of him, Brigitte doted far more than that.

The third approached Fredriks and peered into his face.

"This kid becomes the fifth in the future? That's hard to believe."

From there, we continued to watch a few more interactions play out, and Fredriks did indeed seem to be an honest and good kid.

But in the next memory...

Quite some time had passed, and Fredriks had grown into an adult. His build was quite close to the current fifth head. But the air around him was even colder.

Brigette—who didn't look a single day older—introduced a woman to him.

"Fredriks, this is Chloe. We talked about her, right? You know. She's from the east, and we're going to be looking after her."

Marcus—now with white specs in his hair—gave Fredriks a sharp glare. "Why don't you say something? You should know well enough that this isn't just a normal meeting, right?"

The woman—Chloe—seemed rather troubled as she fell under Fredriks's cold glare. She had brown, bob cut hair, and boasted a slim, toned body.

"E-Err, do you dislike tall women like me?"

She seemed to be conscious of her height, but Fredriks didn't seem to pay it any mind.

"Have you ever gotten seriously ill before?"

His frigid voice brought frustration to Marcus's and Brigette's faces.

What exactly happened?

Chloe's eyes wandered as she responded. It was practically an interrogation. This was certainly not a mood to grace any introduction, let alone one that was supposed to lead to marriage.

"N-No, never."

"Your body looks sturdy, and your skin's glossy enough."

"I do my share of training, so I'd say this much is normal."

"You clear the precepts."

"Is it normal for a woman to train that much?" the third asked with a tilt of his head.

I had to agree with him there. Chloe looked pretty well-built to me.

“Martial arts flourished in the east,” the fourth head explained. “There were many women there who went through rigorous training. Chloe, for instance, achieved complete mastery in a certain style of fighting. It was around this time that the martial arts really started to enter House Walt.”

I could see it.

Her back was perfectly straight when she sat, and her posture remained rigid throughout.

Fredriks turned to her and asked, “What about magic?”

“I do consider myself a noble. I can handle it well enough.”

As soon as he heard that, Fredriks stood.

“Wait!” Marcus followed suit and tried to stop him.

“We got to know each other, right? That’s everything I need to know. If you think she can put up with me, I’ll get married whenever you want.”

Just like that, he left the room. It was as though he had absolutely no interest in marriage—as though anyone would do so long as they matched the precepts.

Once Fredriks was gone, Marcus apologized to Chloe.

“I’m sorry. There’s just been so much going on lately, and he’s been worn thin.”

“It’s...all right. We’re the ones who proposed this meeting, after all.”

The fourth head explained, “The skirmishes in the east were escalating; it truly was a hectic time. House Walt was among the handful of noble houses that accepted the families of evacuating nobles into their territory. We were quite developed at the time. There were many houses who tried to marry their daughters to us in the hopes of receiving financial support.”

The fourth head had a knack for domestic affairs, and apparently, Brigitte was no slouch either. The territory flourished under their combined leadership—and that attracted the eyes of the east.

They would come knocking on the Walts’ door, saying they’d marry their daughters off for House Walt’s support.

“For their husbands, their fathers, their brothers fighting in the east—the families were desperate.”

Chloe had no way of declining. So long as Fredriks didn’t outright reject her, the marriage was essentially set in stone.

The third head put a hand to his chin. “Surely you know what happened.”

“Please ask the man himself,” the fourth head replied. “But Fredriks is a gentle soul. That’s all I wanted you to take away from these memories.”

Inside the Lorcan Palace, the king was listening to one of his knights report on the dungeon. As he did so, he found himself unconsciously gripping the armrests of his chair. He had unknowingly leaned forward, lifting his behind a slight distance from the cushion.

By the end of the report, his eyes were open wide. With a smile, he asked, “You’re sure you saw a divine beast, right?!”

A knight—now most distinguished by his wounds and his bandages—continued the report with a pale face.

“Y-Yes. A soldier in my unit saw them. By his word, it was a beautiful beast with white scales and a golden horn. Add on the fact that it spoke in human tongue, and there should be no mistaking it.”

There were a few reasons that qilin were known as divine beasts.

For one, they fought monsters, and they were known not to thoughtlessly harm humans.

It was also said that they took care of dungeons that humans struggled with.

They were auspicious beings that were like a blessing upon mankind. So much so that legend had it that any individual recognized by a divine beast was certain to succeed in their endeavors.

Divine beasts were a symbol of success, and the qilin were among them.

But the advisor at the king’s side didn’t seem the least bit pleased to have such a beast at their doorstep.

“Your Majesty,” he said in a panic. “At this rate, that divine beast is going to find and conquer every dungeon in these lands. This could greatly impact our plans going forward.”

To Lorcan, who was concealing its dungeons from the world, having those dungeons cleared would be a troublesome thing indeed.

“I know,” the king spat. He massaged his chin and thought.

And after some time he said, “It might be a good omen that a qilin appeared in this country.”

“Your Majesty?”

“I can obtain a qilin—don’t you think that’s perfect for someone who will become the leader of the confederation?”

Catching on to the king’s intent, the advisor shot him a pained look. He couldn’t just throw his hands in the air and accept it.

“It’s said to be very difficult to acquire a qilin. There’s no telling what calamity may befall us if we offend the beast.”

“Don’t be a coward. A qilin came during such an important time for our nation. Shouldn’t we see this as a sign of fortune on the horizon?”

Rejecting the opinion of his cautious advisor, the king stood and gave his royal decree. “Capture the qilin! Mobilize all the knights and soldiers! Use adventurers! Use civilians! Whoever catches the qilin can name any reward they so choose!”

He would obtain that qilin. And the king swore he would spare no expense to do it.

The next day was a hectic one.

“They sure are lively, so early in the morning.”

I’d gone out into the town to gather information, and my eyes locked onto the massive crowd gathered in the square.

Novem—standing beside me—also seemed to notice that something had

changed from yesterday.

“The noise is mostly concentrated on the very center of the square,” she noted.

Something was clearly going on, but the dense crowd prevented us from seeing a thing.

After a beat, Sophia patted me on the shoulder. “Leave it to me, Lyle!”

“Huh?”

Today, I was operating alongside Novem and Sophia. Thankfully, there wasn’t too much of a strained air between these two. It was a team that didn’t grate on my soul or my stomach.

Sophia turned her back to me and stooped over.

“Here!”

“You’re not giving me much to work off of. What are you getting at?”

Sophia looked me in the eye and said, “I’ll give you a ride on my shoulders. Then, you should be able to see the center.”

What to do...? I really don’t want to.

“I-I’m fine.”

“What are you talking about? This is completely necessary to know what’s going on. Now get on already. With my Art, weight shouldn’t be an issue.”

Sophia possessed an Art that allowed her to manipulate the weight of whatever she touched. This allowed a girl like her to effortlessly swing around a man like me.

“That’s not what I meant...”

I was trying to tell her I was embarrassed, but Sophia didn’t seem to get it. She forcefully hoisted me up.

“Please hurry up!”

My resistance was in vain. The surrounding eyes gathered upon me as I was raised into the air.



Thanks to her efforts, I obtained a higher vantage point, giving me a wider field of view.

“Th-This is embarrassing.”

Novem looked up at me. “Milord, even when given a ride, you look as dashing as ever,” she proclaimed.

Yet her tactful smile didn’t make me happy at all.

“You don’t need to force yourself to praise me, Novem. That just makes me even more embarrassed.”

“My apologies. I did think that was pushing it a bit.”

As I found myself filling with shame, I heard the fourth head’s voice.

“This position is— No, more importantly, you should do some investigative work. What can you see, Lyle?”

I returned my eyes to the center of the square.

“There’s a notice.”

The crowd seemed to be eagerly devouring the contents of this notice. Those who didn’t know how to read were asking for the details from those who could.

“A notice? Is it something important?” The sixth head asked, showing some interest.

Alas, it was too far for me to read.

Sitting on Sophia’s shoulders meant my calves would come into contact with her hefty chest. It did feel like a bit of a waste to put an end to it, but I felt far more embarrassed to have all these eyes gathered on me.

“You can put me down now,” I called out to her.

“Did you figure anything out?”

“There’s a notice posted, but I can’t read it from here.”

Whatever it was, we’d be able to check it later.

As she set me down, Novem pointed out Eva, who pushed her way through the crowd to approach us.

“Why are you on her shoulders? I mean, that did make you easier to spot.” Short on breath, Eva seemed to have been looking for us. “Anyway, it’s a qilin! A qilin appeared! They’re scraping together adventurers to capture it.”

I was startled by the news, only to hear the fifth head’s voice.

“A qilin, huh? I wonder if she’s doing all right.”

There was a hint of nostalgia and joy in his voice.

Once we’d returned to the inn, Eva gathered everyone up.

The room was lined with a handful of beds with only a narrow gap between them. It was a room that really spoke volumes of the overpopulation situation in Lorcan. Simply put, there were far too many people for the number of inns.

Additionally, the cost of staying a night was quite high.

The reason we booked an inn despite the cost came down to how dangerous it was to camp outside. With that said, Damian had spent the night in his Dump Truck, which he had parked nearby, and Lily was tending to him, so they were not present.

The Dump Truck was large, yes, but it was so full of Damian’s things that it couldn’t hold everyone.

“Isn’t this cruel?” Shannon discontentedly complained. “The traveling show is about to start, you know. I’ve been looking forward to it since yesterday.”

She apparently took offense to being summoned on such short notice.

“You’re taking everything in stride, huh,” I said. And immediately, she aimed a kick at my knees.

She gritted her teeth as I took a step back to dodge. “What’s wrong with using my own money to have some fun?!”

“I never said there was anything wrong with it. Don’t be so crabby,” I teased.

Miranda then took on an attitude like she was scolding small children and said, “Keep it at that, you two. Just check out that scary look on Eva’s face.”

“What scary look?!” Eva sullenly shot back. “No, forget about it. I’d like to start by making sure. How much do you people know about qilin?”

It was Aria who answered, “They’re qilin, right? They’re the envoys of the goddesses and beasts of good fortune, right?”

Sophia nodded. “Yes, I’ve heard they’re among the most commonly sighted divine beasts. Not that I’ve ever seen one myself. Also, I’ve heard you can be a hero if you get a qilin to follow you.”

“Huh? Aren’t they just monsters that don’t get up to bad things?” Shannon asked with a curious tilt of her head.

It seemed that the little girl didn’t get it, so Clara offered a simple explanation.

“They are not monsters; they’re divine beasts,” she explained. “Of all the divine beasts, qilin are said to be the ones fondest of humans. There are plenty of sightings, and some known cases of a qilin taking fondly to a human. Those humans succeed more often than not, and so qilin have been called the divine beasts that carry good fortune.”

“I like the sound of that,” Shannon said with a deeply invested nod. “I bet they’ll love me. Though I’m sure they’ll hate guys like Lyle.”

“Say what?!”

She riled me up, but Miranda stopped me before I could snap back.

“You settle down, Lyle. More importantly, qilin are very important to nobility. It’s supposedly a good omen to see one before a battle, and legend has it that any territory that houses a qilin will prosper. There are plenty of nobles who pull out all the stops to capture them.”

Novem listened in silence.

Finally, Monica said, “So putting it all together, they’re essentially walking lumps of good luck? And divine beasts—your people worship multiple goddesses, and I guess the envoys of those goddesses are divine. I can see why Lorcan would be so desperate to find it.”

Having heard it all, the fifth head said wearily from the Jewel, “Looks like you people don’t know anything beyond the rumors.”

Does he know something about qilin? I wondered.

I was about to ask him about it, but Eva spoke before I could. “You guys don’t understand a thing!” she shouted.

My mouth snapped shut at her yell, my eyes drawn to the serious look on her face.

Putting a hand to her hip, she continued, “Qilin and the other divine beasts are very strong and clever. They easily take down even the most troublesome monsters. They’re the whole reason we don’t have issues with the dungeons that form in places that humans can’t reach. The divine beasts conquer them all.”

“Yes, there are certainly a lot of stories of those nobles trying to catch them, only to have the tables turned,” Miranda nodded.

So they’re not easy to capture.

“Then is it really an issue? I felt a little bad for it, seeing as everyone’s trying to trap it against its will, but it sounds like we can just leave it be.”

It seemed like the qilin would be able to escape with its own strength.

Then, Novem turned to me with a dubious face. “Milord, they conquer dungeons. That is what Eva was trying to get at. There must be a serious reason for a clever qilin to act in such a way that it would be spotted by humans.”

“Yeah,” said Eva. “Either there’s a lot of dungeons, or there’s a dungeon that’s on the brink of bursting. Hopefully, it already took care of it and was just on its way out... But if that’s not the case, this could be dangerous.”

“But it’s an animal, right? Maybe it just appeared in front of people because it felt like it,” Shannon disinterestedly offered.

“Divine beasts can understand human words. I said they were clever, right? It might be smarter than you, Shannon.”

At first, Shannon seemed angry to hear that from Eva, but she was more so intrigued by the fact that they could understand language.

“Hey, wait, if we get a qilin to translate, would we be able to understand what the animals are saying? I can see their emotions, to some degree, but their words are beyond me. I’m a little interested.”

I, along with all the others, took in her excitement with weary eyes.

Yes, we all felt the same, except... There was a single impressed voice leaking from the Jewel. That of the animal-loving fifth head.

"I see. So you're curious too, Shannon," he murmured. "Well done."

"We're on this again?" came the sixth head's disgruntled voice.

"Lyle, we won't get anywhere like this. Ignore it and listen to what Eva has to say," the fourth told me.

I turned my eyes to Eva, and noticing this, she resumed her explanation.

"Anyways! A qilin went out of its way to come out, so there's got to be something going on in this country. Also, the fact that qilin don't harm people—well, that's a lie."

"Huh? No way!" Shannon was startled.

Aria's eyes widened slightly. "But they're divine, aren't they?"

"Oh c'mon. If you try to kill it or capture it, it's going to fight back. If a strong qilin goes on just a bit of a rampage, we'll have a huge mess on our hands. Also, they're untouchable when they're angry."

Sophia asked, "Have you seen it firsthand?"

"I-I've seen some qilin flying in the sky. Just once."

According to her, she'd seen a small herd of qilin racing across the sky during her travels. In short, she'd never seen them enraged, nor had she seen them on a rampage.

"I don't put much credibility in the tales of an elf who loves to exaggerate." Clara hit her where it hurt.

"I-It's really dangerous! You shouldn't kick the hornet's nest! If you manage to catch a qilin, even by accident, its comrades could come to save it! And then it's over for you!"

Sophia recalled the intelligence we'd gotten on the qilin. "But this time, they only witnessed a single qilin."

"I-It could have comrades somewhere."

Aria looked at Eva with doubt. “Seriously, you always make a big deal out of things. I just can’t trust everything you say.”

The mood took a dubious turn.

Eva’s information mainly came from the tales of traveling elves, and those stories did tend to be overblown. In fact, it was hard to imagine there was no embellishment at foot.

Is this really the truth of the matter? The question lingered in everyone’s mind.

Then, from the Jewel, came the fifth’s voice.

“She’s not wrong, but it looks like she doesn’t know the finer details. Lyle, qilin are not the envoys of the goddesses. At the very least, they don’t consider themselves to be.”

The way he put it, it was almost like he had heard it straight from the horse’s mouth—or rather, the qilin’s.

“The fact that it’s on its own spells trouble. Perhaps it only just became independent. And the fact it let itself be seen is also curious. You should look into the qilin while you’re gathering information. Find it before anyone else.”

Wait, are we capturing it? I wondered.

And immediately, he shouted, “You fool! You’re going to help it get away. Don’t you feel sorry for the poor thing?”

Is this really the same man?

“You shitty old man,” the sixth spat with a click of his tongue.

It’s, well, that. His animal-loving side is coming out.

He wanted me to help the qilin regardless of profits and so on.

“Well, defeating Ceres will be a lot easier if you’ve got a divine beast on your side,” the third offered, as if in an attempt to fix the mood. “It’s clever enough to understand language, so why don’t you try having a discussion with it? It might just be on board.”

The fourth head hopped aboard that suggestion. “Not a bad idea. Even if that

doesn't work out, help it out and make it indebted to you."

"Ideally, you can get it to follow you," the seventh agreed. "Just what sort of humans do qilin prefer? That's the question of the hour. Do you know anything, fifth head?"

With the conversation turned back to him, the fifth let out a yell. An angry yell one would never think he could muster, given his usual attitude.

"Can you even hear yourselves?! And you call yourselves human?!"

The sixth usually just took the abuse, but this time he latched on. "You're one to talk!!!"

The Jewel was getting loud—and distracting. For the time being, I got Eva's permission before stepping out into the hall. It would be impossible to have a discussion like this.

Still, the fifth head seemed to have some sort of connection to qilin. *What sort of connection could it be?*

The sixth head was panting in the Jewel, tattered from his fight with the fifth head. His clothes were disheveled, and there was a bruise on his face. Presumably, his father had struck him.

"I'm never gonna forgive that bastard."

Anger exuded from his very being as he welcomed me in. I took a cursory look around the round-table room and saw that he was the only one present.

"Did you need something?"

"Oh, that's right. I thought you might be curious, so I decided to show you my memories."

"Your memories?"

"About the qilin—and about the fifth. You were wondering about that, right?"

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't.

"Umm, yes. I was."

“Then hang around a bit. I’ll show you exactly the kinda guy that shitty old man was.”

He placed a hand on my shoulder and walked off toward his room of memories. The sixth was a large and powerful man, and I was partially being dragged by force.

And the scene that spread out in the room... It was horrendous.

Chapter 91: As a Father

“Answer me! Are those damn beasts more important to you than us?!” screamed a younger version of the sixth head—Fiennes—at his father, Fredriks.

By this time, the white streaks in Fredriks’s hair had started to grow rather conspicuous. The now old man was tending to various animals, wearing clothing unbecoming of a noble.

As for their location, it seemed we were on the Walt estate. Part of the yard had been fenced off and the animals had been left to roam freely. There were even stables built for them.

Wearing mobile work clothing, Fredriks was piling up hay. “It has nothing to do with you,” he answered his son.

Fiennes grabbed at him. “It’s got everything to do with me! You send all my brothers and sisters away, and then what?! These beasts are the only ones who get to stick around!”

It looked like the diminutive Fredriks would be no match against the giant that was Fiennes. However, with a masterful move, Fredriks easily tossed Fiennes into the air.

He looked down on the boy, his eyes as cold as ice.

“You’re not training enough. If you have the time to do this, then go shed some sweat,” Fredriks said before returning to his work.

Fiennes had nothing to say back to the man. He stood, gritted his teeth, and left the stables.

The scene faded to shades of gray, frozen in time.

Folding his arms, the sixth said, “How about that? Pisses you off, right?”

“That was a bit much. Rather, what even happened?”

As soon as I asked for the specifics, I was showered with terrible tales of the fifth.

“Lyle, do you know how many siblings I have?”

“I was never told.”

“There are thirty-six of us, including me.”

“Umm... What?”

That many?

“Yeah, well, he had five women, including mom. The man wanted kids, to say the least. To be more precise, he wanted political tools.”

For most of the children, their destinations had apparently been decided from the moment they were born. Nearly all of the sons married into other houses, although a few of them managed to go independent. As for the daughters, they were all married off.

Perhaps it was inevitable, given their positions, but every single marriage was political in nature.

“Huh? But, umm... Wasn’t Milleia different?”

Milleia—the great-grandmother of Miranda and Shannon—had been born to House Walt. She had been the sixth head’s little sister. Yes, when it came to Milleia, the then head of House Circry had proposed marriage to her.

“Yeah, that guy did say he wanted to marry Milleia. But his house had the same status it holds today. You know Miranda comes from a court viscount house, right? It worked out conveniently for House Walt. And there’s also the fact that Milleia was blind to consider.”

If she hadn’t received the proposition, she would have eventually been married off to wherever was most convenient. The sixth head explained it while staring at the animals frozen in the fields of gray.

“Dogs, cats... There’s a lot of them.”

“The shitty old man was soft on animals. He looked at them with a face he’d never show to his family. I grew up seeing that. Grew up hating him.”

He made complete use of his children for the sake of the house. It was only toward the animals that he ever showed any hint of kindness.

Just hearing about it was enough for me to feel thoroughly appalled. I couldn't even begin to imagine how Fiennes felt, having to live in that reality.

"Do you still...hate the fifth head?"

The sixth head scratched his head. "Can't say. I heard a few things, after the fact." A conflicted look crossed his face. "Anyways, he doted on his animals more than us. I'd find myself envious of them, back when I was a child."

"Umm, his wives never said anything to him about it?"

"They didn't. No, they didn't as far as I know."

Just like his first wife, Chloe, the fifth head's other wives had all been women from the east. They'd married into the house in exchange for House Walt providing support to their families, so perhaps they couldn't come out too strongly against him.

And that, too, I found terrible.

"All right, next."

The sixth head lifted his face; quickly, the surrounding sights regained their color. But the stables seemed to have changed a bit. The animals that inhabited them were different ones, and I could hear a voice from the back.

The fifth was speaking to one of the animals.

"May? Are you okay now?" he said in a gentle voice. "I see. That's good."

I peeked in and found...

"That's a peculiar horse."

"No. That's a qilin."

It was a foal with white scales and a golden mane. And according to the sixth head, this was a qilin.

"Huh? But it doesn't have a horn."

"Qilin can freely extend and retract their horns. They usually keep them tucked away but stick them out when there're signs of danger. This one always had its horn out whenever I got close, by the way."

The foal—the small qilin—seemed to be injured as it had a bandage wrapped around its neck. It pressed its forehead against Fredriks, presumably demanding pets.

Fredriks was even older than he had been in the previous memory.

But he had a very soft look on his face.

A face I had never seen before.

“My old man, the fifth head, well, he’s mellowed out a bit. But he won’t make that face, not even in the Jewel. He really does love animals more than his kids.”

“That’s—”

“Ah, I’m just being cynical. Forget about it.”

It was hard to say the fifth and sixth heads had a good relationship. Although they seemed to have come to a mutual agreement, there was still something deep-seated between them.

A while later, Fiennes entered the hut.

He’d grown since the last time I saw him. It seemed like a few years had gone by.

“There’s a letter from the palace. Looks like they want to see House Walt’s qilin.”

Those words caused the qilin to hide behind Fredriks’s back. A small golden horn poked out from its brow.

“Looks like it hates you quite a bit,” I said, looking at the sixth.

“I don’t blame it. Me and the rest of the family, somewhere deep down, we all saw the qilin as some sort of tool. My old man’s about the only one who genuinely adored it.”

There were many who tried to approach the symbol of wealth, fame, and good fortune. The sixth and his family were likely no exception.

However, the little qilin did not take to anyone besides Fredriks.

“At the time, nobles, merchants, and all other sorts of people were barging in,

demanding to see our qilin. My old man turned them all away.”

But a request from the palace wasn't so easily turned down.

A serious look crossed Fredriks's face.

Fiennes looked at him and scoffed. “I'm sure they'll tell you to offer up your little pet; to prepare to hand it over. Oh, I can't wait to see how much they'll pay for a single qilin.”

He was taking his spite out on Fredriks; there were all sorts of negative emotions hanging on each and every word. The sixth seemed a little embarrassed to see his past self like that.

“Back then... I didn't know anything yet. I never stopped to think about what my old man was going through.”

“Well, what was he going through?”

“This and that. But that doesn't invalidate my own discontent. It's complicated.”

He concluded by saying he was still processing it before turning back to his younger self.

“If only he'd told me sooner.”

With those words as the trigger, the surrounding scene once again shifted ever so slightly.

The third memory in the very same stables. This time, it didn't seem like much time had passed from the second memory. Fredriks was simply cleaning out the pens.

That was when Fiennes suddenly stormed in and yelled, “You set the damn thing free?!”

Fredriks stopped what he was doing and turned to Fiennes. “And what of it? I will make an excuse to the palace. Whatever happens, it will be my responsibility. Shouldn't that be enough?”

“You'll go that far to protect that thing? You? The man who did *everything* for the house is gonna put the house in jeopardy for a single beast? You're a failure

of a head—no, a failure of a father.”

Fredriks smiled. It wasn’t the gentle smile he had for his animals; this was a dark and sinister smile.

“You just realized that now?”

Fiennes charged at him, but yet again, Fredriks easily fended him off.

It didn’t seem like the sixth was weak. No, the fifth was strong.

“The fifth is very strong.”

“Hmm? Yeah, that’s right. I heard he learned all sorts of things from my moms. And I heard there was a time he was desperate to grow stronger. I only started training seriously after this. If we went at it right now, I would win.”

The surrounding sights vanished as if swept away by the wind. By the time I realized it, I was in the round-table room.

The sixth head stood in front of me. “Now then, those were my memories. He’s a horrible person, right?”

The sixth was no saint, but the fifth was certainly a piece of work. He could have been a bit more... How to put it? Surely he could have shown even a modicum of kindness to his family.

“The reason the fifth’s so knowledgeable about qilin is because he personally took care of one. He’s probably so concerned about this one because it reminds him of the one he used to look after.”

Fredriks had even named the qilin. *He called it May, I think?*

Regardless, he’d doted on it quite a bit.

The sixth head patted me on the head. He ruffled up my hair, putting in a bit too much strength. It hurt a bit.

“Wh-What is it?”

“I just felt like it. Don’t you grow up to be like the fifth. Also—well, I’m not sure if it’s possible to avoid at this point—but you shouldn’t be like me either. It’s better if you get along with your wives—with everyone.”

“What is this, all of a sudden?”

“I told you. I just felt like it.”

“I’m not going to turn out like you!”

“Oh, pull the other one! It’s too late! You’re already surrounded by women! It was just three for me, and you’ve already surpassed me in numbers!”

I focused and returned my mind to reality, practically fleeing from the man as he laughed and patted me on the head.

It was still dark when I opened my eyes in the inn bed. I just lay there for a while; the mornings were still chilly.

The room was cramped, giving the impression that the inn’s owners had shoved in as many beds as the space could feasibly hold, and my entire party was sleeping inside. Indeed, I was sleeping in the same room as the women, and it felt rather awkward being the only man in the vicinity.

“I envy Damian and his truck life.”

It wasn’t freezing, per se, but with my groggy head, it still felt like a herculean task to leave the covers. I wanted to go back to sleep, but that simply wasn’t an option.

Today was another information-gathering day—we would search for the reason for Lorcan’s prosperity while looking into the qilin as well.

I was thinking over our course of action when I heard a voice from the Jewel I’d placed by the pillow. It was the fifth head.

“How long are you going to space out for, Lyle?” he demanded. “Get up and get ready. You need to investigate that qilin.”

Everyone else was still soundly asleep, but as soon as I started getting ready, Monica—who slept while standing up—stirred ever so slightly.

Although it was still dark outside, it wouldn’t be long before the sun showed its face.

I yawned as I lent an ear to a conversation between the fourth and fifth.

“Shouldn’t we begin by looking into Lorcan?”

“They’re hiding dungeons—that’s hardly a secret. The presence of a qilin is

proof enough. So the qilin should take precedence.”

“Aren’t you forgetting about our plan to take the treasure from the dungeons?”

“A qilin wouldn’t bother coming out over one measly dungeon. Either it’s a very dangerous dungeon, or they’re hiding a concerning number of them... If we follow the qilin, we’ll find the dungeons.”

The third chimed in, “Then wouldn’t it be better to search for the hidden dungeons? That’s probably our best bet for meeting the qilin.”

“That works,” the fifth head despondently said before going silent.

I heard the sixth head click his tongue. This morning was a rowdy one.

“They’re probably hiding some dungeons. The qilin showing up is a clue.”

“Another day, another mission,” I muttered to myself. This prompted Monica to open her eyes.

Her red, glowing eyes were a bit scary in the dark.

“Good morning, damn chicken! I’ll start my morning preparations right away. Oh, I almost forgot the usual morning kiss. Now come, come and kiss your dear Monica!”

“We don’t have that routine.”

“Well, today can be a new beginning. Now kiss your Monica to take the first step!”

“No way.”

“You’re in low spirits, so early in the morning. You have a beautiful girl like me closing in on you. Shouldn’t an adolescent boy be a bit more excited?” Monica loudly joked around. She was already full of energy.

Eva sprang up at her voice, her head swinging around to take in her surroundings. Her eyes were only half open, and she had a terrible bedhead.

“Oh, shut it,” she said in a bad mood. “Keep it down.”

Seeing her pull her cover over her head and go back to sleep, I dropped to a whisper.

“She’s mad. This is your fault, Monica.”

“I care only for my chicken. The rest of the rabble is none of my concern, so there’s not much we can do about that. Anyways, what shall we do about breakfast?”

Despite the relatively hefty fees, the inn was lacking in the service department.

They provided hot water, but no meals.

“We don’t have anywhere to cook, so we’ll have to eat out somewhere.”

On top of Monica, a few of my other comrades had also begun to stir on their beds. They would probably wake up soon.

“It really is an awful inn. Putting that aside, what are the plans for today, chicken boy?”

I stretched and said, “We’re gathering intel.”

Aria and Sophia headed to Lorcan’s Adventurers’ Guild, and there, they struck up a conversation with a man who had drifted in from elsewhere. They tried bringing up the qilin but to no effect.

“A qilin?” the man scoffed. “Not interested.”

“Well, why not?” Aria asked. “I heard the reward was extraordinary.”

“Yeah, well, there’s a bunch of dark rumors when it comes to these sorts of things. Let’s say someone actually caught the qilin and handed it to the authorities. The nobles could just kill whoever caught it—they fulfill their goal, and they don’t have to part with a single coin. Win-win, am I right?”

Flustered, Sophia said, “Aren’t you being a bit too cynical?”

“You gotta be cautious to survive. And hey, there’s more good, honest work for me when everyone else is obsessing over some mythical beast.”

Aria and Sophia exchanged a look and a nod before getting to the meat of it.

“Hey, have you heard any rumors about a hidden dungeon?” asked Aria.

“They’re famous, right? Lorcan’s hidden dungeons,” Sophia added. “Do you know anything?”

The man discreetly pocketed the gold coin Aria held out to him.

His eyes darting around, he cautiously replied, “You shouldn’t dig too deep. There are rumors doing the rounds, but I know a guy who disappeared when he tried looking into it. If you’re asking if they exist or not, they probably do.”

The man told them about everything he’d noticed after coming to Lorcan.

Lately, there were numerous regions where the monster population had increased. There were rumors of there being multiple dungeons.

But the conversation ended with nothing but rumors. In the end, the man cautioned them, “After I’ve made enough here, I’m heading straight to Baym with my comrades. This isn’t a good place to linger. If the rumors are true, the dungeons might just burst. You two better watch out.”

And with that, he went on his way.

Although the pub wasn’t open for business, Miranda was inside nonetheless, having a conversation with the owner. She sat at a bar seat, sipping at a drink. The table seats were a little less convenient, as there were chairs stacked over them, and an employee was sweeping the floor.

The young employee took frequent glances at Miranda, prompting the owner to intervene.

“You can sweep the floor later. Go do some tidying up outside.”

“Y-Yes sir.”

The somewhat unreliable employee had unkempt, overgrown hair that covered his eyes. In his haste to leave the shop, he tripped and stumbled his way through the door.

The owner sighed. “I just hired him recently, and I don’t know if he’s any good or not.”

The middle-aged owner had a mustache and a sizable belly. His rolled-up shirt

sleeves revealed a hefty pair of arms.

Miranda resumed the conversation. “Business seems to be booming around these parts.”

“It started around a decade ago. That’s when the outsiders started coming in, and now it’s only gotten worse. Everywhere’s crowded. The regulars don’t come anymore, and instead, we get ruffians calling themselves adventurers. It’s a nuisance.”

He didn’t seem to think kindly about the current situation.

“Now that sounds like a bother. They must have brought other trouble too,” Miranda said, hoping to draw out some more details.

“Yeah, the price of pretty much everything has gone up, but those shady rumors are my biggest concern.”

“Rumors? About the qilin, you mean?”

“I’m not talking about some lucky creature. You know about the confederation? It’s an alliance of all the nations in the area, but we don’t have a leader. Anyways, the nations are together in name alone. There’s nothing unifying them.”

There was no country powerful enough to rally the gathered nations to do anything. According to the owner’s complaints, the confederation would have dissolved quickly if they weren’t neighbors with a massive superpower like Banseim.

“We’ve got clashes with Banseim, and there are loads of skirmishes between the nations in the confederation too. Well, I hear it’s the same for all countries in our situation. A merchant from Baym said something like that. Apparently, there are coalitions of small nations around there too—and it’s just as war-torn.”

Miranda disappointedly chimed in, “Sounds terrible. And then?”

“Our Lorcan king stepped forward, saying he wanted to be the leader. Thanks to that, there’s a rumor going around that the next war isn’t just going to be some minor skirmish.”

It was a confederation without a leader, and so the king of Lorcan proclaimed himself so.

But the other nations didn't accept it.

This was indeed an issue.

The owner turned to Miranda. "You're one of those adventurers who came searching for a dungeon, right?"

"You can tell?"

"That's all we've been getting these days."

"But there's no guarantee there is one, is there?"

"It would be stranger if there wasn't one. Thanks to that, there are rumors of our neighbors growing impatient. Some people are saying we're hiding a dungeon and purposely trying to make it burst. Sure, the economy is booming, but it's unsettling, living in a place that could be overrun by monsters at any moment."

Miranda tried delving deeper into his true thoughts on the matter.

"I hear those qilin take care of dungeons. If there's a qilin here, I'm sure it'll take care of the issue."

"You can't count on them one-hundred percent of the time. Otherwise, it would be strange that any country ever fell to rampaging dungeons in the first place. I'd love it if they just took care of everything, but who knows."

"Do you know anything? Any place I might find a dungeon?"

"Well... The places with increased monster activity are the most suspicious, but lately, everywhere's teeming with monsters. Oh, but I did hear something yesterday. A customer mentioned that there've been fewer monsters in the south. That may be where the qilin appeared, then."

Hearing that, Miranda considered everywhere besides the south as a possibility.

"Thank you. I'll be on my way."

She left behind an information fee, which the owner took with a slight smile.

“Let me tell you one last thing. The knights and soldiers are the ones managing the dungeons. Find one of them that’s gotten into debt, and they might spill the beans.”

He proceeded to tell Miranda about a pub frequented by knights and soldiers. Surely one of the patrons there would sell some information for loose change.

But Miranda couldn’t take that information at face value.

She gave her insincere thanks and left.

“Now then, should I trust—”

From the moment she left the store, she felt that someone was following her. And so, after walking a while, she stepped into a narrow alleyway.

After arriving at a dead end, she turned and said, “Isn’t it about time you came out, Mr. Bumbling Employee?”

As she called out in what should have been a deserted place, the sheepish employee from the pub appeared, awkwardly scratching his head.

“You noticed?” He smiled, his eyes still hidden behind his bangs.

He wasn’t armed, but Miranda drew her weapon without hesitation.

In response, the man raised his hands in front of his chest and began to panic.

“Hold it right there, ma’am! I don’t intend to harm you.”

“Any funny business and you’re dead.”

But Miranda didn’t drop her guard for a second.

The man sighed and revealed his identity. “You heard about it, right? The surrounding nations consider Lorcan a nuisance. I’m one of their so-called spies,” he said before cautioning Miranda. “The owner was just pretending to sell you information about the dungeon. He plans to sell you out to the authorities. He’s got some connections behind the scenes.”

“Yeah, I had my doubts. But how do I know if I can trust you?”

“I’ve been waiting for someone capable to stop by. After all, this is a crisis for my homeland. I can’t let a dungeon run out of control.”

Miranda thought for a moment, then told him, “I’ll let you meet our leader. He can make the call.”

The man was a little taken aback. He had expected a little bit of doubt, only to be met with near-immediate belief. This left him bewildered.

Miranda theatrically extended her left hand, tossing something at the man.

“Whoa there.”

It was just a stone, but the man had to take his eyes off Miranda for a moment to catch it. Seizing on the opportunity, Miranda shot a string from her hand and sprang onto the roof of a nearby building. By the time he looked back, she was nowhere to be seen.

“I’ll come to pick you up. There’s no use in running away.”

Left behind, the man could only break out in a cold sweat at Miranda’s sudden disappearance.

Night fell. The man I went to meet with Miranda didn’t show any hostility. However, his caution caused the sixth head’s Art to show him in yellow—he was neither an ally nor an enemy.

Even when Shannon stared with her orphic eyes, he didn’t seem to have any intention of harming us.

After confirming this, we led him into the inn room where we could talk without worrying about prying eyes.

He seemed uneasy as he sat across from me.

“Miranda’s outrageous,” the seventh marveled from the Jewel. “How did she find someone like him?”

“It’s her good karma. After all, she’s Milleia’s granddaughter!” the sixth head praised her.

I looked at the man and said, “Let’s start by hearing what you have to say.”

“Yes, of course,” he replied. At first, he seemed hesitant, but he firmed up once the conversation began. “Before we get into it, there’s something I’d like

to confirm. Your goal is to conquer the dungeons, correct?”

I nodded.

He continued, relieved. “That’s good. We can cooperate, then. First, let me tell you about the general locations I’m aware of. Ideally, I’d like to wait until we’ve pinpointed the exact location of every dungeon before we get around to clearing them.”

“There are multiple dungeons, then?”

“There are. Based on my investigations, it’s almost certain. I looked into the places where the knights and soldiers often rotate. However, I don’t know the exact locations.”

Sophia intruded on the conversation. Apparently, she had her doubts about this man who seemed a bit too shallow and unreliable.

Her voice was firm as she said, “Shouldn’t you have investigated that, then?”

“If only it were that easy. They have the dungeons under constant surveillance. If they found a foreigner like me lurking about, it would become a huge problem. But now, we’ve got our convenient opportunity.”

Aria seemed to catch on. “The qilin?”

“That’s right! They’ve devoted their manpower to catching that qilin, so I’m sure their security’s been relaxed. As a matter of fact, a number of knights and soldiers have been recalled from their posts.”

Despite his air of unreliability, it seemed this man had done his share of investigating.

I said, “Then wouldn’t it be better if you looked into it yourself?”

“Gathering information in the city is one thing; scouting the wilderness is another. We had another agent on the task, but they were found out. Honestly, I still can’t believe they were defeated.”

According to the man, the dungeons were all located in out-of-the-way places, away from public perception. The individual who had probed out those places had been considerably skilled.

However, they were found. Did that mean that Lorcan had some incredibly skilled units of their own?

“And because of that, we’re shorthanded. I can’t infiltrate or investigate on-site. That’s why I’m asking for your help.”

Clara chimed in. “Considering that the current situation has been maintained for ten years, Lorcan must have secured the right knowledge on how to manage a dungeon. At this point, the possibility of a burst should be quite low.”

“If it was just one dungeon, maybe,” the man countered. “But a single dungeon wouldn’t explain this country’s current situation. They’ve definitely got multiple, and I’ve got information to confirm it. Don’t you think that’s dangerous?”

They’d likely grown conceited after succeeding in one dungeon, leading them to branch out into managing many more. That was certainly a dangerous situation.

From what I’d heard, managing just one dungeon was difficult enough. If they continued spreading themselves thin—then understandably, the surrounding countries would have to be concerned.

But there, the sixth head laughed. “Lyle, this guy’s not being honest about his agenda. His country can’t stand the idea of Lorcan leading the confederation. So why not crush the dungeons that are the source of their authority? Bursts and all that, that’s just an excuse.”

In that case, it was an awful story. I found myself sympathizing with Lorcan.

“But it’s convenient for us, so clear them anyways,” the third head casually said.

I shook my head at his attitude—the man never changed.

And so he went on with a hint of dissatisfaction, “You’re gathering the necessary funds you need to defeat Ceres. Lyle, you won’t get anywhere with lip service. And I’m also doubtful whether or not Lorcan has the proper know-how to manage dungeons. We won’t be sure until we’ve seen it with our own eyes.”

Shannon was staring at the man with a squint, her expression as though she was dealing with a rather shady character.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“He’s hiding something.”

Hearing this, Miranda immediately drew a knife. Aria pulled a dagger, and Sophia grabbed her axe, positioning herself in the doorway.

The man frantically stood. “W-Wait! I’m not hiding anything!”

I raised a hand, telling everyone to put away their weapons. “Tell us the intel you have on the dungeons. We will find them for you.”

“My, it’s good that your leader is so understanding.”

Relying on the man’s information, we decided we’d search for the dungeons starting tomorrow.

After the man left, Novem approached me.

“Milord, I have something to say about the gentleman from earlier,” she said.

We were in the corridor. Evidently, she’d made sure no one was around before calling out to me.

“About what he’s hiding? Well, he probably wants the dungeons cleared because he doesn’t want to see Lorcan becoming the confederation leader. He’s trying to crush the pillar of their economy.”

That was what the ancestors were talking about. Foreign relations, and whatnot.

“You caught on?”

Novem looked a little happy, and I felt a bit guilty instead. The ancestors were the ones who had noticed. Not me.

Her expression turned serious. “Everyone has their own circumstances. But still, you plan to conquer those dungeons?”

I understood what she was trying to get at. Would we completely ignore

Lorcan's circumstances and go after the dungeons anyway? We would be ruining the nation for our own convenience.

"We'll do it anyway."

I thought she would be disgusted, disappointed, and yet...

"I appreciate your resolve," Novem said, showing her support.

Chapter 92: Dungeon Search

The man had supplied us with three main bits of information. First: the dungeon to the south had been conquered by the qilin. This had been confirmed. Second: the western dungeon was the most recently formed one. And third: the largest dungeon was to the north.

The forests to the north seamlessly transitioned into mountains as one ventured farther in. It would be unfeasible to bring Porter into that rough terrain, and rather than moving in a large group...

“Why am I on this team? I would have preferred to be with Novem.” Eva puffed out her cheeks as she looked at Miranda, who, by contrast, didn’t seem the least bit perturbed.

“I don’t see any issues with this selection,” Miranda replied.

Meanwhile, Aria watched the two wearily. “Get a grip, both of you. On that note, was it really all right to leave the others behind?”

As she stared out at the forest that stretched out before us, I explained why I’d chosen this lineup.

“Shannon can’t keep up, and Clara’s new arm isn’t done yet. And if they’re staying behind, they need some protection.”

Miranda seemed convinced. “We can move fast with these members. Sophia isn’t suited for the task, and we can have some peace of mind if she’s there on standby with Monica.”

“Hey, why did you leave Novem out?” Eva snapped back.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I forgot all about her.”

Eva did not care much for Miranda. However, Miranda’s judgment wasn’t mistaken; Sophia wasn’t suited for maneuvering around a forest. She wasn’t built for mobility, and her weapon of choice was a large battle-axe. The trees would get in the way when she swung it around.

I'd be more at ease stationing her where she could fight to the fullest.

Aria had reequipped herself with a short spear and could fight unimpeded in the forest.

And Eva was an elf. She was raised in the forest, and she was who I was mainly relying on this time around.

As for Miranda—Miranda was a jack-of-all-trades who could fight in any situation.

With all that said, however, combat wasn't the main focus of this expedition.

I'd determined that the four of us—myself included—were best suited for the task.

I did. However...

"I don't like you."

"I see. What a shame. I don't dislike you."

Eva turned away, and Miranda met her with complete nonchalance.

As she watched them, Aria anxiously muttered, "Hey, are we really going to be all right with this team?"

"We'll be fine. Or, at least, I hope so."

My words had her holding her head.

The remaining members of the party stopped by Damian's Dump Truck.

A crowd had formed around it, drawn by the novelty of the peculiar craft. Among them were merchants hoping to purchase it, but they left dejected once they learned they wouldn't be able to operate it.

In the Dump Truck's cargo hold, Monica exclaimed, "Why, you could hardly call this tidy. If it were up to me, I'd put this here and that there and— Oh, how I wanted to tend to my chicken. Why, oh why, do I have to stay behind? I can't muster any motivation."

She was helping out Lily, Damian's automaton. But the moment she

repositioned anything, it would immediately result in bickering. The automatons were not on good terms.

“You piece of scrap! This arrangement has been perfectly optimized for Master. I’d appreciate it if you didn’t move things as you please. Also, take this seriously!”

They argued back and forth as they continued to tidy up.

And during it all, Clara’s new artificial limb was being calibrated.

Damian took a sip of the tea Lily had prepared for him, filled with an extreme excess of sugar.

“How is it?”

Even though the arm wasn’t yet complete, Clara seemed satisfied.

“The movements are smoother than the previous one. I’m impressed.”

Her expression rarely changed, but for once, she seemed quite happy.



And Shannon, who was watching from the side, spoke up.

“It’s kinda plain. Ah, right! Let’s stick a weapon onto it!” she said on a whim, much to Clara’s chagrin.

With a wry smile, Clara said, “Maintenance will become a hassle if you add too many gimmicks. I was satisfied with my old—”

Damian latched on to Shannon’s proposal.

“A weapon, huh? I like the sound of that. Did you have anything in mind?”

“A hidden weapon would be cool. You know, one that pops out and takes ’em by surprise. Other than that, a cannon, maybe?”

“More gimmicks mean more trouble,” Clara protested. “I’ll have to perform daily maintenance, and more importantly, a cannon would have so much recoil it would knock the arm right off.”

But Damian simply exclaimed, “A cannon—brilliant!”

“I know, right? Now you can be strong too, Clara. Isn’t that wonderful?!”

There was a glint in Shannon’s eyes, one she shared with Damian. And putting Damian aside, Shannon seemed to be speaking out of the genuine kindness of her heart.

“U-Umm,” Clara stammered, “simplicity has its own merits, and if it’s too complicated, it will be troublesome to repair when it breaks.”

Damian weighed the practical aspects. “True, cramming too much stuff into a prosthetic of this size could throw off the balance.”

But as his motivation started to take a downward turn, Shannon was struck by another spark of inspiration.

“Then we just have to make it bigger!”

“That’s it!”

Seeing the two of them hitting it off so well, Clara held her head.

“P-Please, just make it a normal prosthetic.”

Damian swept a hand across his work desk, clearing it off and placing a sheet

of drafting paper down on the opened space.

“Yes, now it’s starting to get interesting. Here we go! Let’s make a new prosthetic!”

“Hooray!”

As Damian grew motivated and Shannon raised her fist in excitement, Clara grew increasingly concerned.

Monica remained indifferent. And Lily silently tidied up all the items that had been scattered around the desk.

We entered the forest, cloaked in robes to avoid standing out. Eva took the lead, with the three of us following behind her.

With a break here and there, we scoured the area for a dungeon.

“Elves really are amazing, aren’t they? They can move through places without paths like it’s nothing,” Aria mused.

We were essentially tracing the route that Eva had drawn for us. She would use a machete to clear away any vines or branches that were in the way.

Seeing this, Miranda asked, “If you clear away too much, won’t that leave signs that someone passed through?”

“Anyone who could find us like that would already have noticed our footsteps,” Eva reluctantly replied. “We’ve got Lyle with us, so it’d be quicker just to check the place and leave.”

It didn’t matter if we were found out. Instead, we were focusing on speed.

Miranda nodded. “I see. Sorry for getting in your way,” she apologized.

Aria was stunned. “Miranda apologized.”

“What do you take me for? I apologize when I think I’ve done wrong. And it was just a simple question. I didn’t mean anything by it,” said Miranda.

We stopped and took a break. I invoked an Art as I scanned my surroundings.

Putting a hand to the ground, I formed a three-dimensional map of the area in

my head. Admittedly, I didn't really have to touch the ground at all; the gesture was meaningless. I just felt like it.

I could sense a presence in the distance, seemingly a small group on patrol.

"They're close," I said.

Eva quickly clambered up a tree, looked around, and promptly climbed back down.

"That way. That's where we should be headed."

She came to a very quick decision.

"How can you tell?" Aria asked.

"We're in the middle of a forest. Even if they try to hide it, if a large group stays for a long time, they'll start a fire. And there's just one place where there are a bit fewer trees. They cut down the ones that got in the way."

It was a good decision to take Eva.

"Let's go check it out once we're rested up."

That was one down.

We stifled our voices and approached to find...a dungeon.

Two large trees stood side by side, seemingly forming a gateway of sorts, and everything beyond them was a haze. I tried to observe what was inside with my Arts, but my view was obstructed by fuzzy noise and I couldn't make anything out.

This was the usual reaction whenever I tried to view a dungeon from the outside.

I'd have to go in if I wanted to investigate any further.

A great number of knights and soldiers had set up tents around it. There were piles upon piles of supplies, and a few knights were drinking.

The four of us exchanged glances and nodded. We slowly moved away, and only spoke once we'd taken a safe distance.

“That makes two.”

I marked it on the hand-drawn map and wiped my sweat.

Eva had been the one to spot the second dungeon, just as she had with the first. She’d noticed traces that a large number of people had passed through an area, and we found it after following their trail.

Aria looked tired.

“Once you get down to combing it like this, you really feel how vast it is. Just how many are in this forest alone? And why are there so many dungeons here in the first place?”

“I don’t know,” said Eva. “But it’s strange.”

But there was another curious point. Miranda picked up on it too.

“According to that man, there was someone else searching for the dungeons. They were apparently pretty skilled, but why were they spotted, then?”

To be blunt, the knights and soldiers were not very good at their lookout duty. Was the man’s assessment of his colleague mistaken, then?

Or are we exceptionally good? ...Yeah, no, that can’t be it.

Apart from Eva, the rest of us were barely better than amateurs.

Aria offered an optimistic take. “Maybe the good soldiers went somewhere else? They could be busy with the qilin.”

That was a likely possibility. After all, it was precisely why that man had aimed for this timing. Maybe he’d hastily contacted us because he saw his chance and didn’t want to miss it.

As I thought over the matter...a handful of yellow dots appeared on my mental map. The dots seemed to be tracking the path we’d taken, and they were headed our way.

They were fast, and concerningly, they had begun flickering between yellow and red.

I lifted my face and gathered my comrades’ attention.

“We’ve been spotted. They’re on our trail.”

We immediately started moving, but our pursuers were faster than us. They were gradually closing the distance.

The ones pursuing Lyle and his comrades were a group of four elves. Their faces were masked with cloth, and they wore clothing that blended in with the colors of the forest.

Their leader jumped down from a tree branch and examined the tracks on the ground.

“Four of them. These small footsteps... They’ve got a woman. No, more women than men.”

His subordinates gathered on the spot, and one of them noticed something.

“One of them seems quite accustomed to the forest. They might be one of us.”

A fellow elf. But the leader paid it no mind.

“Going off this route, they must’ve learned about the hidden dungeons. Kill them on sight.”

He had no mercy, not even for his brethren.

The leader then singled one of them out. “You, head to the nearest dungeon and spread the word. Then report to the palace.”

“Understood,” the chosen elf replied and took off.

He was gone in the blink of an eye.

“It’s time to hunt,” the leader declared. “Our prey this time is a troublesome one. Stay sharp.”

The three elves broke into a dash. They ran at full force through the forest, running so free one would think there were no obstacles in their path.

I glanced back as we ran.

“They’re gaining on us,” I muttered.

“What do we do?” asked Miranda. “I could set a few traps if you’d like.”

But Eva spoke to the contrary. “We don’t have time. I don’t think they’ll fall for anything we can set on short notice. I’m starting to think it might be elves on our tail.”

The elves were the best at navigating forests. It was plausible.

Aria looked at me. “Lyle, how about that thing?! That one that lowers the enemy’s speed!”

“Differential?” said the fourth head. “You need to have your foe in your line of sight to activate it.”

It was an Art that raised one’s speed while lowering the speed of the target. Although it was a very convenient Art indeed, it did have its restrictions.

“They’ll know our faces by the time they’re in an applicable range.”

Miranda’s eyes sharpened. “If we can’t run, we’ll just have to do it.”

Her eyes were directed at Eva, who quickly caught on.

“Do you think I’m going to betray you? Even if they’re fellow elves, they’re complete strangers. So long as they’re out for blood, they’re enemies.”

It seemed she’d made her resolve.

From the Jewel, I heard the fifth head’s voice. “It’ll be troublesome if they catch up. You’ve got no obligation to show them your backs. Lyle, start preparing for an ambush.”

I stopped, prompting the other three to stop too.

“We’re intercepting them. Eva, if you know any better places to fight, you should tell me now.”

As I sought Eva’s opinion, Aria sent a side glance to Miranda. Perhaps she thought that the girl would feel a sense of rivalry. But Miranda didn’t say a thing.

“First, I’ve got to warn you that it’s only relatively better, but if that’s what you’re looking for, we should backtrack a bit.”

We were at a disadvantage—unaccustomed to fighting in a forest—but we had no choice but to do it.

Then, the fifth offered, “Lyle, you still have a little time. Cause some chaos.”

I gripped the Jewel.

“Don’t worry. I’m an expert at these sorts of battles,” he added.

The elves pursuing Lyle’s party stopped to examine the footprints on the ground.

“They split into three?” one of the subordinates questioned. Even with a cloth covering most of his face, he couldn’t hide the confusion in his eyes.

The leader stooped down and investigated the prints. “They seem to be in a hurry. Did they notice us? The enemy may have a useful Art, then.”

“Are they having their comrades act as decoys?” his other subordinate suggested. “Perhaps it only matters that one of them survives to relay the information.”

The leader’s concealed mouth curled into a smile. “No. This is a trap.”

One set of tracks headed straight for the mountains. An unrealistic route. They had intentionally made it look like they had split up to trick their pursuers.

Having made his judgment, the leader focused on another set of tracks.

“The man led, and the other three carefully followed while stepping in the larger prints he left. This way.”

These tracks were deeper and far more defined. He immediately decided they would follow the tracks that a man’s boots had made.

“Although they noticed us through the effects of an Art, they seem to be unaccustomed to moving through a forest. One of them is knowledgeable, but that is all they are. They’re no match for us,” the leader concluded.

His two subordinates tagged along without objection.

All three could sense that the enemy was near.

“They’re close,” the leader said. He was looking down upon his foes, certain that they were maneuvering through unfamiliar terrain.

And there, beyond the brush, stood a lone man.

He wore a hood that concealed most of his face and a cloth that hid the rest of it. His right hand clutched a saber, and he seemed prepped for battle.

One of the subordinates grew anxious. “He’s alone!”

Lyle was the only one standing before them.

“Either he’s stalling to let his allies get away, or this is a trap—and it doesn’t matter which. We’ll deal with him at once.”

The leader and his men descended upon Lyle all at once.

Three men were charging at me—two of them with daggers, one with a bow. Due to the cloth they’d wrapped around their faces, I couldn’t discern if they were elves or not. There was one thing that immediately became apparent, though: “They’re fast.”

As I parried the swift slash of the man in the lead, the second one circled to my flank and took a stab with his dagger. I immediately stepped back, only to be met with another follow-up.

An arrow flew straight at my face, and I had to jerk my head to one side to avoid it. This time, the arrow managed to graze my hood.

The two with the daggers are practically stuck to me. Is the archer not concerned about impaling his allies?

“Don’t you think you’re being a bit rude, attacking me out of nowhere?” I quipped, but my opponents offered no words back.

From within the Jewel, the third head appraised them. “So they won’t engage in pointless chatter. They’re going to be troublesome.”

I jumped to the side, stumbling over the forest’s poor footing to avoid an arrow, and found myself caught between the other two assailants with their daggers at the ready.

One of them was exceptionally skilled. When I thrust my saber out, he dodged around it with supple motions and closed in. But I couldn’t just let myself get

stabbed.

As I retreated, I noticed their daggers catch the light in a peculiar way. Something had been slathered onto the blades.

“Poison? I don’t want to deal with that.”

The dagger wielders positioned themselves around me again as the archer secured his shot.

“This really is a pain!”

I sliced through an incoming arrow with my saber, the dagger wielders using that chance to close in on me. Their eyes, their attention—they were all on me. Just as planned.

From atop the trees, knives and arrows came raining down on the two foes right next to me with perfect timing. I activated the second head’s Art, ready to avoid just in case.

One of them caught on and used his comrade to shield himself from the piercing blows.

“You’re sacrificing your buddy?”

By the next instant, he’d already tossed his comrade aside and swiftly taken distance from me.

As for the archer, I glanced to see him locking his bow against Aria’s short spear.

“Y-You little!”

With Aria forced into a contest of raw strength, her foe pulled a knife with his left hand.

“Stupid!” Miranda shouted, promptly tossing a knife to save her.

But in the moment Miranda’s attention shifted, the man who’d sacrificed his comrade took off.

Eva jumped down from a branch.

“One of them got away,” she lamented.

The man who'd been pierced by arrows and knives lay incapacitated, unable to move due to the venom coating the knives.

"You let your guard down, but if everyone's unharmed, I guess you did a good job," the fifth head said.

The third continued, "Your foe was more skilled than expected. On that note, this isn't good. He didn't see your face, but he might be able to identify you or your comrades from your characteristics. You should hurry back."

The darkness was already starting to set in, and Eva looked exhausted.

With a finger, Eva pulled down the cloth covering her mouth.

"Aria, why didn't you finish him off?"

The other two men were still alive. Perhaps we would be able to get some information out of them.

"S-Sorry."

A dry sound echoed through the forest.

The moment those apologetic words escaped Aria's lips, Miranda slapped her.

Her face was terrifying as she looked at Aria.

"What would you do if we had to sacrifice a comrade because of your carelessness? Take this seriously."

"I-I'm—"

Aria couldn't muster her words.

Just as I was about to step in, "Lyle, don't say anything for now," the fifth head told me.

The fourth agreed. "This would have usually been your job, Lyle. But if Miranda hadn't been distracted by Aria, the enemy wouldn't have gotten away."

Just then.

"Something's coming."

The man's indicator disappeared from the map. It was replaced by a larger

point, one that displayed even more hostility.

The elf leader dashed through the forest alone.

There, the trees and leaves cut off the light of the sun, rendering his surroundings dim even during the daylight hours. As the sun began to set and the sky turned to evening, it only grew darker.

“I misjudged the situation. But I’ve gleaned enough information to identify them. I need to bring this information back.”

Delivering this information to the rest of his comrades had become his only concern, having survived through the sacrifice of his subordinates. His opponent possessed quite a proficient Art.

An Art that excelled in searching wide areas, presumably.

Of the four of them, three were women. The hair he saw through the gaps in the man’s hood, and the color of the man’s eyes. They had both been blue. That much info would be enough to narrow down the search considerably.

“I need to hurry.”

He risked being caught up to if he stayed still for too long. It was dangerous to run full speed through a darkening forest, but he needed to get as far away as possible.

But in doing so, he overlooked something he would have usually noticed.

If it were any of the forest’s usual monsters, he would have been able to deal with it on his own.

However...

“This one’s... S-Stop!”

As he burst through a thicket unaware, he found himself cut off by a large serpentine body. Its thickness exceeded that of an adult man’s torso, and it was exceptionally long.

Its large scales gleamed eerily in the dim light. Only after its length had completely surrounded the leader did it finally fully reveal itself.

“A lamia?”

This was a monster that sported the upper body of a woman, and the lower body of a snake. However, this one was far too large, all things considered. The leader had seen this species of monsters several times before, and this one was at least twice as large as the ones he knew.

While its upper body was humanoid, its hands were long and slender. And with its sharp fangs and claws, the lamia descended upon the leader.

He immediately swung with his dagger, but the lamia’s skin was too hard for the blade to penetrate.

“It’s a variant! St-Stop!”

With its mouth gaping wide—so wide, it was like the sides of its face had burst open—the lamia grabbed the leader with its elongated hands and coiled its bottom snake half around him and squeezed.

Blood dripped down the cloth covering the leader’s mouth.

The lamia’s mouth opened even wider, and just like that, it swallowed the leader whole.

Then, it extended a forked tongue from its mouth, flicking it back and forth. It seemed to sense something as it was soon back on the move. Its slithering motions carried it at blistering speeds.

Weaving its way through the trees, the lamia variant shot off toward Lyle’s party.

The forest grew boisterous. The birds cried out and took to the sky in unison, startled by whatever it was approaching us with immense hostility.

“Something’s coming. Let’s run.”

It was big.

I quickly decided on a retreat, opting to leave the men we’d captured behind.

We wouldn’t be able to run through the forest while carrying them on our backs, and even if we could, they’d just slow us down.

Aria looked back at the fallen men, but Miranda forcefully grabbed her by the arm and started running.

“What are you doing?!” she scolded.

Eva called back as she ran ahead of us. “I’ve got a bad feeling. Anyways, we need to hurry and get away from here.”

I did feel a tinge of guilt about abandoning them, but they were still enemies who had tried to kill us.

“Yeah, let’s hurry.”

A while after we’d left, I heard human screams from far behind us. Aria had evidently noticed as well, as a pained look crossed her face.

Novem, meanwhile—having remained in the city—went out to the market with Sophia. As they shopped, they also asked around about the situation in Lorcan.

While the longtime residents voiced a fair share of complaints, the merchants were jumping for joy at the influx of customers. They’d get business even if they didn’t market their goods at all.

The restaurants had similarly realized that they’d get patrons regardless of how terrible the food really was.

Each and every store had a line that stretched out the door.

The two of them lined up in front of a shop for some food, and once they’d finally gotten in— “Is it just me, or is this terrible?”

Sophia’s expression clouded over as she indulged in the less-than-savory cuisine of the crowded eatery.

Taking note of the other customers, Novem submerged her bread in the soup, eating it after it had softened up. It was barely edible otherwise.

Hard bread, low-effort soup, and water.

The high price wasn’t helping.

“Let’s wrap this up quickly.”

They'd gone out of their way to eat out, hoping to eavesdrop on some conversations and gather information on Lorcan's situation. It had been ten years since the economy started to pick up, and from there, people gradually started rolling in.

And around two years ago, the expanding population finally started to become a real issue.

They tried to take various measures against it, but the city and its residents were unable to cope with the rapid change.

The poorly made table and chairs wobbled terribly, and many more had likely been added in haste, as there was barely any distance to the neighboring table.

Luckily, that made it easier to hear what they were talking about.

"Have you heard the news about that qilin?"

"Yeah, someone was making a ruckus over how they saw it in person. I think it was— Yeah, the west side."

"The west? I heard it was in the east."

The conversations mostly revolved around the qilin, whom the palace had put out a capture order for.

Novem paused her hands for a moment.

"How foolish," she muttered.

But Sophia, who was too focused on taking in the conversations of others, didn't hear it.

"Did you say something?" Sophia asked.

"It's nothing," Novem replied with a smile as she got back to eating.

This time, Sophia paused her meal and hung her head.

"What's wrong, Sophia?"

"I was just wondering if it's all right for us to be taking it easy like this. Lyle and Aria are working so hard, but we're just keeping house."

Sophia seemed envious of Aria.

“I made my resolve and came along. But to be benched right at the onset... I’m worried whether or not I’ll be of any help or not.”

Novem looked her in the face and said, “I am the one who fooled you all.”

“Th-That’s, umm... Well, it’s true.”

Sophia panicked. She never thought Novem would be the one to bring it up.

Seeing as she didn’t seem to know what to say, Novem went on, “And just so we’re clear, it would never be in my best interest to keep a hindrance by Milord’s side.”

Sophia’s shoulders dropped. “A-A hindrance, is it? You’re a harsh mistress, Novem.”

“Please don’t misunderstand. I’m saying you have value. That’s why I recruited you into the team. You should have some more confidence.”

As Sophia raised her face in surprise, Novem returned to her meal.

Gradually, Sophia’s face began to flush red.

“U-Umm, that’s, err!”

“Hurry and eat. Also, there’s no time to lament your lack of ability. What are you going to do about it? That’s the important part.”

Now—precisely when everyone was away—there were things only she could do. Novem assured her of this.

And upon hearing that, Sophia felt her motivation building.

“Right! Then I’ll wrap up here and start practicing with my axe. Nom! ...Oh, that’s foul.”

She had a smile on her face as she spooned some soggy bread into her mouth, but her face quickly soured.

“Yes, it really is,” Novem said, smiling back.

Chapter 93: Lamia

We held our breaths in the dark depths of the forest. Though I could hear the songs of the insects and the birds, it was too dark to see a thing.

But it seemed our enemy was onto us.

It was already eyeing us like we were prey, and it was being quite obstinate in its pursuit.

Whatever it was, it stalked at a set distance and inched a little closer whenever our guard was down. I had a terrible feeling about this.

Miranda looked at Aria.

“Aria, tend to your wounds.”

“This much is nothing.”

“I insist.”

With Miranda’s strong insistence, Aria reluctantly dressed her wounds, then turned to me. “How does it look?”

“It’s not going to let us get away,” I answered honestly. “It’ll ambush us before we’re out of the woods.”

We’d run around quite a lot, and our foe had chased all the while.

Eva scanned the area as she told an old story. “Back when I was young, I got lost in the forest and a monster chased me around. This is the same feeling I had back then.”

“What sort of monster was it?” I asked.

“A lamia. They’ve got the upper body of a woman, and the lower body of a snake. Some stories depict them as beautiful ladies, but they’re just plain terrifying to look at. Even your local degenerate would run for the hill.”

Although apparently, its womanly breasts were bare and exposed, it was so scary it made grown men take flight.

Miranda leaned her back against a tree, honing her senses. “I checked up on some reports at the Guild,” she said. “Apparently, they’ve been appearing around the area lately. Maybe they’re crawling out of some dungeon around here?”

Something similar had happened before. That was back when I was still a newbie adventurer.

Eva took in a mouthful of water and slowly swallowed it down. After she’d soothed her parched throat, she spoke up, “I’m not so sure. If it was a lamia, then the man who escaped could have taken it down. Say he let it go on purpose. Well, there’s no way we wouldn’t be able to run away from it.”

Out of all our party members, I’d selected this lineup with an emphasis on speed. On top of this, I’d boosted our base movement speed with the fourth head’s Art.

Yet despite that, we still couldn’t escape it.

Once she’d finished treating herself, Aria stood and looked around.

“The scariest part is that we don’t even know what’s chasing us.”

We were stuck in a dark forest.

To be blunt, it was scary.

I just knew I’d be faint of heart had I been out here alone.

We chatted a bit more, the four of us, before I heard the seventh head from the Jewel.

“Lyle, don’t talk too much. You should rest a bit too.”

So I left the girls to manage the situation and took a short rest.

I was far more exhausted than I thought, and quickly fell asleep.

Once they saw that Lyle had fallen asleep, the mood took a complete turn.

“He falls asleep so quickly. Like a child,” said Eva.

And in response, Miranda said, “That’s not a bad thing. More importantly,

Aria.”

Aria’s shoulders twitched and her face stiffly turned toward Miranda. Going off her expression—the awkward look of a child getting ready for a scolding—she clearly knew what was about to be said.

“What?”

“Why did you hesitate? You could have finished that on the first strike.”

Miranda chastised her, knowing she could have taken the archer out in the blink of an eye.

“I know that. But...my body wouldn’t move.”

Eva shrugged. “We made it out this time, but you need to get a grip.”

“You seem to have it figured out. Don’t you ever hesitate?”

Eva narrowed her eyes. “All sorts of things happen when you’re on the road. We’ve been attacked by bandits more than once or twice.”

“Oh, how reliable,” said Miranda.

Eva lifted one brow, discomfort written all over her face. “Everything you say sounds insincere.”

“Oh, now you’ve said it. I get that you don’t like me, but are you really going to take that attitude each and every time you see my face?”

When we’re stuck in a crucial moment, keep your personal feelings out of it, was what Miranda was trying to say. And Eva seemed to understand that.

“Hey, I’m still doing my job. At least let me complain, would you? Looking at you irritates me.”



The expression vanished from Miranda's face.

"Then pick the right time and place. And, if you'll let me have my say—songs and stories? If that's the extent of your commitment, you'll just get in the way. You might be here for a picnic, but don't compare everyone else to you."

Miranda's words brought a furrow to Eva's brow. The mood was gradually taking a turn for the worse.

Wearily, Aria stepped in to mediate. "Cut it out already. I'm getting depressed just watching you two."

"I don't want to hear that from someone who can't even fulfill their role," Eva snapped back. "I'm serious about this. I'll put my life on the line for my songs. And you say that's the *extent of my commitment*? How am I supposed to stay silent after hearing that."

She was keeping her voice down, but her rage was palpable.

Aria winced. "S-Sorry."

But Miranda assured her, "You don't have to apologize, Aria. As soon as she finds a better scoop, she'll drop Lyle at the drop of a hat."

Miranda was wary of Eva, who'd accompanied Lyle just to tell a good story or sing a good song. Unlike the rest of them, her motive was weak.

When it came to motives, Clara was in a similar boat, but to Miranda, Eva was the bigger threat.

After all, Clara tended to be a bit awkward, and Miranda was confident that she'd notice if that bookworm was ever thinking of turning coat.

But what about Eva?

She had access to the elf information network, and acting was her forte.

The fact that she didn't hesitate to kill her fellow elves when push came to shove—well, Miranda thought highly of her for that. But despite that—no, precisely because of that, wouldn't Eva easily betray Lyle for her own self-interest?

Those doubts were growing within her.

“I knew it. I hate you. I really, really hate you.”

A large divide was forming between Miranda and Eva.

As Lyle drifted into an even deeper slumber, the voices of the girls no longer reached the depths of the Jewel. Once the quarrels cut out, the five men finally opened their mouths.

They all had rather unsettled looks on their faces.

“Girls sure are scary.”

“I get you. I reaaaally get you.”

“Miranda’s concerns are founded, though.”

“Right. The same could be said for Clara. Her motives for following Lyle are a little...you know.”

“When the conversation cut off partway, I was more relieved than disappointed.”

Having been forced to listen to the girls arguing, the ancestors felt envious of Lyle, who could bask in blissful sleep and ignorance. Rather than snippets, it would have been far better for their mental health if they heard everything or nothing at all.

The Jewel could be rather unstable like this.

And those instabilities had only gotten worse as of late. To be more precise—it had started acting up ever since they’d encountered Ceres.

The fourth head heaved a deep sigh. “Perhaps a fake Jewel is destined to be unstable.”

Ceres had called it a fake and a failure. If that was what was leading to these issues, it was unfortunate. But they would still have to rely on the blue Jewel nonetheless.

Not that any of the five men felt discouraged by this.

“Real or fake, its power is the real deal,” the third head said with a composed smile. “A tool gains its true meaning once you put it to good use. The instability

is concerning, but right now, the real problem is...”

Rather than the Jewel, the issue was that the girls were on even worse terms than any of the ancestors could have imagined.

“Clara’s fine,” said the third. “I can completely understand where she’s coming from, and personally, I’m just happy she decided to tag along for the journey.”

The fourth stared at him wearily. “I’m sensing some favoritism here. That aside, Aria doesn’t have enough resolve, and I can imagine Sophia is the same. Aren’t those two the problem?”

But the fifth head saw it differently. “With how proficient Eva is, I don’t even want to think about what will happen if she betrays us. As for Aria and Sophia, the issue will resolve itself once they get some more experience.”

“Miranda’s opinion is just,” said the sixth head—a man who favored Miranda. “I think we ought to be wary of Eva.”

The seventh head seemed to be deep in thought.

“What’s on your mind?” the third asked him.

“No, well, about elves... They exist all across the lands, and some of their troupes travel the continent.”

“Yeah, so?”

“Elves tend to cooperate with one another regardless of nationality. They frequently exchange information and occasionally manipulate the populace with their songs. The elves that attacked us this time were troublesome.”

Everyone present understood what he was getting at.

Lyle had been helped by Eva, and by the elves multiple times before.

That just went to show how competent the elves were.

So how troublesome would it be if they made an enemy of them?

“Historically, demi-humans have rarely ever gone against humans. Those folks after us were dispatched by Lorcan, so they’re essentially being used by humans. That’s different. I’ve been wondering about this for some time now,

but what exactly are demi-humans?”

The third, although interested in the seventh’s question, insisted, “That’s certainly important, but we have a more pressing issue to deal with right now. We need to do something about those girls. I’m getting stomachaches just watching them. Does anyone here have a solution?”

As he posed the question, the other four looked away.

“Please don’t expect a solution from me.”

“It’s impossible for me. It’s more my style to watch and wait.”

“F-Feuds between women give me stomachaches too. Pass.”

“This is beyond me.”

The third head laughed. “Huh? What’s this? You’re all so unreliable... Though honestly, I’ve also got nothing. Seriously, what are we going to do?”

The flighty man raised a dry laugh as he shed a cold sweat, pondering this difficult issue.

He was perplexed—there were no two ways about it.

When it came to women, all five of these men were completely useless.

And not a single one of them seemed particularly concerned about the monster on their tail.

When I woke from my short nap, I found the three girls silently on guard. It didn’t seem like any of them had taken a rest, nor was there any indication that they were doing lookout duty on shifts.

“Sorry. I’ll take over,” I spoke up as I rose and used the Arts to check for the enemy’s position.

Our foe was slowly closing the distance.

“They’re pretty close. I feel bad for the three of you, but we should get moving soon.”

They all nodded, but... Something seemed off about Miranda and Eva. Aria

seemed mindful of them, yet at the same time she looked a little afraid.

“Did something happen?”

“Nothing, really.”

“Nope.”

Miranda replied with a smile, while Eva gave a grumpy reply. Aria tried to say something, only to shut her mouth before she’d mustered any words.

Something was odd. Clearly, something had happened while I was asleep.

“Seriously, what’s wrong? Huh? Are you mad at me?”

I thought, perhaps, they were frustrated with me, but that didn’t seem to be the case.

“I’m not mad. Let’s just go already,” Eva said as she walked off. Miranda followed with a shrug.

Once the two of them had gone ahead, Aria turned to me.

“You looked so peaceful when you were asleep. Color me jealous.”

“S-Sorry?”

She’s mad at me for sleeping? No, I find that hard to believe...

Aria let out a weary sigh before pressing on. I followed behind her.

Clenching the Jewel in my hand, I whispered to my ancestors, “Did something happen while I was asleep?”

The third head, somewhat hesitantly, said, “Nothing... Nothing at all. More importantly, you’re being chased. Why don’t you focus on that?”

It was like he was trying to cover something up.

“R-Right.”

The monster had molted. The fact that Lyle’s party had stopped for a while had come as a stroke of good luck. The lamia could take its time shedding its skin, its form now even closer to that of a snake.

Its entire body was now covered by scales, the slight protuberance of its chest the only vestige of what was once a more humanoid appearance. Its long, slender arms, now six in number, still remained near its head. Additionally, the number of its fingers on each hand had decreased to three, and its claws had become far sharper.

By snuffing the life of a powerful foe, the monster had undergone Growth.

Its forked tongue flitted rapidly in and out of its mouth, its large goggling eyes scanned its surroundings. A large frog passed nearby. The lamia's elongated tongue swiftly wrapped around it and dragged it into its mouth, where it was promptly swallowed.

But this wasn't enough. Not nearly enough. The lamia had grown too large for that. It had used up its energy for the molt and was starving.

Eventually confirming that Lyle and his party members were on the move, its eyes narrowed into uncanny arcs. It was almost like it was sneering.

The enlarged lamia swiftly slithered along the ground, tailing its prey.

The party moved swiftly through the forest. And all the while, Aria chastised herself. *This is pathetic. I'm just a burden.*

Miranda was capable of everything, and Eva was skilled at navigating the woods. Meanwhile, Lyle could perform well in every situation.

Usually, it would be up to Aria to be at the forefront—she was supposed to be the party's scout. But she fell short of both Miranda and Eva on that front. Instead, she was left to assist Lyle in minor ways.

What's more, she could only watch as the party's mood deteriorated.

She despised her pathetic self and her pathetic lack of abilities. Just how much stronger would she have to become before she could stand shoulder to shoulder with everyone? The anxiety within her was swelling.

Lyle had chosen to fight Ceres, and she had to wonder if her presence was just dragging him down. And...when push came to shove, would she even be able to fight Ceres herself?

The more she thought about it, the more insignificant she felt.

“Aria,” a voice called out to her.

Her face snapped up, her eyes locking with Miranda’s.

“Rest time. And remember, let your guard down and you could die,” Miranda cautioned, making Aria flush with embarrassment.

“I-I know that,” Aria instinctively replied with bravado, and even that felt pathetic to her.

It was a vicious cycle indeed.

Miranda didn’t say anything about her attitude. “I hope you do,” she said instead. “Lyle, any changes?”

Lyle looked deeper into the woods in the direction they’d come from with a stern look on his face. “I think it’s going to attack before we’re out of the forest. It’s stopped stalking. It’s gradually closing in on us now.”

He placed a hand on the ground to invoke his Art. By now, the enemy was so close that he could grasp its general shape.

“A person? No, a snake perhaps? It’s like a snake with hands.”

Eva entered the conversation. “So it’s a lamia, then?”

“But it’s large. A lot larger than anything I’ve heard.”

Lyle was privy to the intel they’d gotten from the Guild—the information on all the monsters that appeared in the area. Compared to what he knew, the monster chasing them was too large. And its shape was different too.

“It’s got what looks like six arms.”

“What’s up with that? Are you sure they’re arms?”

“I don’t know.”

The monster chasing them was like a massive serpent swiftly slithering along the ground, and worse, it had made quick work of those elves. They couldn’t afford to underestimate it.

With a weary face, Lyle said, “I’d rather not fight it, if possible...”

They'd originally entered the forest to search for dungeons and had aimed to avoid combat whenever possible.

Looking at Lyle, Aria thought, *Ah, he's grabbing that blue Gem again.*

It seemed to be a habit of his. He'd often do this whenever he was making important decisions. Seeing him fiddle with it, gripping it, and occasionally rolling it with his finger, Aria felt a sense of relief. After all, Lyle was always strong and reliable when he got like that.

"All right," he finally said. "Let's intercept it."

Hearing these words, Miranda and Eva both checked their equipment. And Aria did too, albeit a beat behind. At moments like these, she couldn't shake the feeling that she was inferior to everyone around her.

We waited for it in a clearing. And soon, we heard an uncanny sound growing nearer and nearer. The sound of something slithering, rubbing the ground and scraping against trees.

Eventually, the serpent revealed itself, weaving its way through the crowded trees. Its large body trailed into the distance, its tail hidden among the foliage.

"It's huge," the thought slipped out of my mouth.

The serpent's tongue flickered.

I'd fought snake-type monsters a few times before, but this one was more overwhelming in its appearance than its size. Near the head of its serpentine body were six long and slender arms.

Miranda immediately threw a knife, but it was deflected off of its tough scales.

"So it's not a lamia after all. This monster was never in any of our intel."

There were numerous monsters that took on the forms of great serpents. They ranged wildly in strength, and the means to deal with them varied by species. The venomous ones were especially troublesome.

Firing off an arrow, Eva chimed in, "I don't recognize it either. If it's got

venom, I couldn't tell you how to treat it. We'd better not approach it."

If Clara were around, perhaps we'd be able to get some more details out of her, but she wasn't. So we couldn't.

"Don't approach?" Aria stammered. "How do we defeat it, then?!"

Miranda was calm, and so was Eva. They both turned their gaze to me.

"I don't really want to use it, but..."

I grabbed the Jewel in my left hand and practically tore it off my neck. The silver chain necklace it had been attached to shifted into the shape of a silver bow. Instead of a string, a beam of light stretched from end to end.

As I pinched the light with my fingers, an arrow of light manifested.

The giant snake opened its mouth wide, almost like it was laughing at me.

"It's hard to adjust the output," I grumbled.

Unlike the first head's greatsword, the bow left by the second head was far more straightforward. Earnest. But, to put it another way, it was inflexible and unaccommodating.

If I made the slightest miscalculation—

"Ah."

The serpent spread its six arms wide, making a grab for me. I loosed a bolt at its uncanny visage—and inadvertently so. My unease had caused a bit of panic in me, and that ended up raising the output.

The arrow of light pierced through the serpent's head, leaving a hole in its brow. For a moment, time seemed to stand still as the hole manifested, but soon after, its head burst.

Luckily for me, its flesh and blood were sent flying backward.

After a beat, I heard an explosive boom from somewhere behind the serpent. The arrow had pierced straight through its mark and collided somewhere. It had become even more difficult to control the bow than it had been before.

I looked around to see that the forest had been left in quite a horrid state, smeared all over with serpent blood.

Aria's mouth opened and closed in her surprise. Finally, she shouted, "Hey, you just finished it in an instant! Why were we running, then?!"

Well... She had a point.

But please let me give some excuses.

"It's been especially unstable lately. And this is definitely going to cause a commotion—"

In the midst of our conversation, I saw smoke rising from the direction I'd shot at.

"Oh, you've done it now," the third head teasingly said.

"Wouldn't that big sword have done better?" Eva said with a sigh. "Well, forget about it. Let's go extinguish that fire."

"The sword would have been worse," said Miranda. "He'd need to get close, and Lyle collapses after he swings that thing even once."

"But we can't just go around causing forest fires."

"That's what we were running around for, wasn't it? Do you have to complain over every little thing?"

I reverted the bow to its necklace form and hung it around my neck.

"Anyways, let's start by dealing with the fire. When we're done with that, we'll need to escape the forest as soon as possible."

I didn't want to cause too much noise, lest the Lorcan knights and soldiers find out about us. We needed to gain some distance lest we rouse suspicion.

Aria pouted. "I'm not convinced."

By contrast, Miranda seemed quite understanding. "Didn't we say from the start that we'd try our best not to battle? Did you think we were running because we didn't stand a chance?"

"You're so high-strung, Aria," Eva teased.

Her face flushed red with rage, so I hurried the girls along.

"Let's put out that fire and leave. Good grief, it'll be hard to investigate for a

while after this.”

With this, our goal of finding the dungeons of Lorcan would become quite a bit harsher.

Aria glanced at the serpent. “We’re not collecting the Demonic Stone, then?”

I shook my head. “It’s a waste of time searching for it, and if it’s venomous, we can’t risk handling it without knowing the right treatment. Doing nothing’s our best bet.”

I had no idea where its Demonic Stone was, and it would be too time-consuming to search through its massive body. It was best just to leave it be.

If it was a bit smaller, we could cover it with dirt or...maybe not. It’d be way too suspicious. We should just get out of here fast.

“Hurry up. We won’t be able to deal with it if the fire spreads. As an elf, I can’t let that happen.” Eva seemed itching to put out the fire as she took the lead.

The arrow of light seemed to have penetrated quite far into the forest. Several-centimeter-wide holes in all the trees that stood in its perfectly straight path served as our guide.

“You could have just shot it at the sky,” Eva said, and not without reason.

If I’d done that, we wouldn’t have had any extra work to deal with.

“Wouldn’t it be a hassle if it arced down and fell in the distance, then? In the first place, do those arrows even fall?”

Miranda’s innocent question had me stumped. “I’ve never tested it, so I don’t know.”

The way I saw it, too many capabilities could also be an issue. It looked like it could keep going endlessly, but since the weapon took the shape of a bow, I could also imagine its shots arcing like normal arrows would. I wanted to test it, but I got the feeling the arrows would fly so outrageously far that I wouldn’t even have the means to investigate it.

Aria lifted her face slightly and took a whiff.

“This burning smell... We’re close.”

We hurried to the scene where we found only a few charred trees remaining. The area surrounding them had seemingly burned as well, as it was all blackened with soot.

But the flames had already been extinguished.

Suddenly sensing a presence, I looked around and spotted a girl sitting on a nearby rock. She flapped her legs without a care, but when she approached, she got up and stood atop the rock. She had a youthful appearance, but there was something strangely intimidating about her. Her blonde hair was cut short, while her eyes were blue. Those clear blue eyes were locked onto us.

Although she was rather short, the rock she stood upon allowed her to lord over us. Putting a hand to her hip, the girl began her lecture, “I don’t appreciate it when you go and play with fire in the forest.”

She spoke in quite the condescending tone. And as expected, her voice too sounded young.

How to put it—it’s bizarre...

For starters, her clothes were strange. Completely unsuitable for the forest.

She had a lot of exposed skin. White cloth that barely covered her chest, and nothing else. This left her belly and navel completely bare. Her sleeves only started halfway down her arms, and with how loose they were, it looked like it would be quite hard for her to move without having them slip off. Her bare legs extended from a pair of white shorts, and as for her shoes, she’d opted for sandals.

This was certainly not an outfit for the forest. I could easily imagine the cloth getting ruined as it caught on vines and branches. All that exposure also meant her skin would be endlessly nicked by branches and feasted upon by bugs.

That would normally be the case, at least. But despite the fact that she was so deep within the forest’s depths, I couldn’t see even the slightest bit of fraying or grime on her white outfit. Her skin was also immaculate—I could make out a faint wound on her neck, but that seemed to be an old scar.

“Still, since you came back to take care of it, I’ll forgive you. You there, elf. Were you with the other three elves? Oh, or are you completely unrelated? If that’s the case, I could just be misunderstanding.”

While young, she still had a bit of a chest. She was most likely a girl, but she had a boyish way of speaking. Overall, she gave off a bit of a detached impression.

Eva took it upon herself to speak on our behalf. “Did you put out the fire?” she asked. “Yeah, that was our fault. We were a bit careless, to be honest with you. If you put it out, I’d like to thank you.”

I could tell that Eva was being wary. And the same could be said for Miranda.

From the Jewel, the third said, “There’s something kinda unnatural about this kid.”

“The fact she’s in the middle of the woods, for starters, and her clothes especially,” the fourth added. “Does the fact she isn’t wounded at all with that outfit have to do with an Art, perhaps?”

Then came the sixth head. “She looks like a brat to me, but she seems to be a bit more than that. Be on your guard, Lyle. With that said, haven’t I seen her somewhere before?”

He seemed to be caught up on something.

“Do you have another descendant I don’t know about?” the seventh snapped at him. “Please, we don’t need any more of that.”

“Stupid! I’m giving it some serious thought here. Not about that. There’s really something bothering me.”

I could hear all sorts of disputes, and only the fifth head remained silent throughout.

The girl stared at us for a moment, then her expression softened. She began to laugh. She plopped down, cross-legged on the rock.

“You’re very honest. I planned to teach you a lesson if you lied, but I forgive you. And yes, I did put out the fire. I had some other business in the area, so it was more of a side thing.”

A side thing?

Growing curious I asked, “What business do you have in this forest? It’s not like anyone lives here.”

The girl waved her hand around, speaking a little frustratedly. “It’s like a job. Seriously, you people need to get a grip on things.”

She had a curious way of putting things.

Miranda grew increasingly wary. “You know what we’ve been up to, then?”

With a glance, I stopped her right before she could draw a weapon.

The girl looked at us with a grin.

I don’t get it. Does she really know something?

“I don’t know anything about you as individuals. Personally, I want *humanity* to get a grip. How long will it take humans to learn that dungeons will be a huge issue if they leave them around for too long?”

She was practically screaming that she herself wasn’t human. It didn’t look like she was simply a child putting on airs.

As her words put us all on guard, Eva spoke up. “Who are you? What do you plan on doing to us?”

But the girl shook her head. She seemed a bit panicked.

“Oh, don’t misunderstand. I don’t intend to attack you. Even among my kin, I’m seen as exceptionally kind to humans. But if someone does something bad, you’ve got to give them a scolding, right? Anyway, don’t go using powers like that inside of a forest, okay?”

Her gaze turned to me. It seemed she’d noticed that I was the one who used the silver bow and caused the fire.

I gulped nervously. “You do know about us, then?”

“Well, I was watching that part. That grown-up lamia was about to get up to no good, so I was about to do something about it. But you caught my interest.”

The smile she sent me put me at ease. It looked like we’d be able to get out of this without making a new enemy.

I exchanged a look with my comrades. And after a nod, we relaxed a bit.

“Are you not human?”

“Nope. I’m built differently.”

She beamed at us, clearly not keen on providing any more information than that.

“I’d like to express my gratitude for putting out the fire. Thank you. I’d love to give you some sort of reward—”

But just as I considered what I could give her, the girl immediately pointed at my chest.

“Then I’d like that right there. If you resist, I’ll take it by force.”

Her expression had changed. Her low voice sent a shiver down my spine.

The girl’s blue eyes let off an ominous light. Her smile vanished, and expressionlessly, she stared at my necklace—at the blue Jewel.

“Lyle’s pendant?” Eva doubtfully asked.

Miranda stepped out in front to cover me. “I’m sorry. That’s his family heirloom. Please settle for something else. We’ll do our best to accommodate your request.”

She tried to steer the conversation elsewhere, but the girl wouldn’t allow it.

“I don’t really care about your gratitude. You can keep it. No, I want what he has. And next, a question from me—why is my benefactor sealed within it?”

The fifth finally spoke up. “Is it really you, May?”

Her eyes widened—it was like she had heard his voice. And in the next instant, a golden horn sprouted from her brow.

A glistening golden horn.

The light of the moon poured into the clearing created by the incinerated trees. The girl who stood at its center faced us with hostility.

Chapter 94: The Fifth Head and May

“You grew a horn? Are you a monster?” Aria asked with her short spear at the ready. She was startled by the girl’s sudden change.

“What a terrible misunderstanding. But we can correct that later,” the girl replied.

She wasn’t just angry; there was something more to it. There was a most curious pressure emanating from a girl who seemed younger than us.

Though startled by this bizarre scene, Eva and Miranda drew their weapons. They reacted incredibly fast, but the girl was faster. In an instant, she had closed the distance between us.

Miranda hurriedly threw a knife, which the girl caught between her fingers. All without even sparing a glance in that direction.

Before Eva could even draw her lightning, there was a flash of light, and her quiver was destroyed.

To the two of them, the girl said, “Could you quiet down for a bit? I’m very angry right now.” She then came right up to me and stared at the Jewel.

“What’s going on here?” the fourth head asked in a panic. “Can she hear our voices? No one’s ever been able to do that before.”

Is this because of the Jewel’s instability?

I took a drawing slice with my saber, and the girl easily snapped my sword with a horizontal swing of her hand. The broken blade spun in the air before stabbing into the ground some distance away. She then reached for the Jewel at my chest, prompting me to leap back.

Clenching her outstretched hand, the girl looked at me. “What did you do?” she muttered. “What did you do to Fredriks?”

Miranda took out a new weapon and said, “By Fredriks, you mean...?”

But Eva caught on even before her. “You mean Lyle’s ancestor?”

To have her turn my ancestors' accolades into songs, I'd told Eva quite a few things about them. That was probably why it immediately came to mind.

The girl stared closely at my face. "Hmm, you're his descendant? You do have a...vague resemblance, I guess. But that doesn't mean you can just lock Fredriks away."

"Wait! Listen to me. This is—"

Before I could even begin to explain, the fifth head cried out from within the Jewel. "May, if you can hear me, then listen! I haven't been imprisoned. You mustn't fight Lyle!"

But his voice didn't reach her. Neither did his intent. To be more precise...

"I can feel Fredriks's mana. He's trying to reach out to me. Strongly."

"That's pointless, then!" the fourth exclaimed.

It seemed she could tell he was shouting something, but that wasn't enough to correct the misunderstanding.

"You're kidding me..." groaned the fifth, despairing that his voice couldn't reach it.

"Ah, fifth head. Now you've done it," the third head chided.

And with a troubled voice, the fifth head replied, "We're in for a world of trouble if she takes the Jewel. It'll be practically impossible to get it back from a qilin."

The Jewel was linked to my mana. Apparently, this link was maintained regardless of the distance between us, but if that distance got too great, I'd no longer be able to use Arts. Also, an increased distance meant an increased amount of mana required to maintain this link. If the Jewel was stolen, it really would become purely a cursed item that drained me while providing no real benefit.

"You have it all wrong. This is—"

"I hate this."

The girl unleashed a roundhouse kick. I bent my arm to guard and deflect the

blow, but I failed to completely mitigate the force and was sent flying.

“Ugh!” I grunted.

“Lyle! Why you little!”

Miranda took a slice at the girl, only to be evaded effortlessly with slick, dance-like movements. She backed away as the girl launched an immediate counterattack, dropping her weapon, and producing strings from both her hands.

“You’ll be a little troublesome,” the girl commented. “So sleep for a bit.”

Eva had drawn a hunting knife, but perhaps determining that she would be no match in close quarters, she raced over to me instead.

“Lyle, can you stand?”

“I-I’m fine. I jumped back to dampen the impact.”

Despite my strong front, the arm that had taken the kick felt numb.

That’s some crazy strength.

As I stood with Eva’s help, the girl looked over at us. “You won’t get away,” she said as she kicked off. She ignored Miranda and rushed at us.

But behind her, Miranda grinned. Her threads seemed to pierce into the ground. Six arms of earth burst from the soil, grabbing the girl by her arms and legs.

“You’re too soft,” the girl scoffed. “Do you think this is enough to contain me?”

“It just has to be for a moment. And in that moment...”

The girl forcefully broke free of the earthen arms, only to then be met with an attack from Aria.

Aria had charged forward, her spear held horizontally; she was ready to strike. With a swing, she sent the girl crashing into a nearby tree.

“Aria will do something,” Miranda finished.

The girl’s eyes widened. She’d taken a blow that a normal human would have

been unable to withstand. “How surprising—you’re very fast. But that alone...”

“I know. That alone isn’t enough,” Aria agreed, immediately backing off.

She left just in time for Miranda’s threads to wrap around the girl’s body and fasten her to the tree. And Miranda wasn’t going to cut any corners; she immediately produced several more golems. These golems, consisting of arms and nothing more, held the girl down along with the threads.

“These are specially made. You won’t get out so easily.”

The situation had taken a turn.

Aria turned to me and called, “Lyle!”

I could tell what she wanted to say. She needed me to make the final decision.

But from the Jewel, I could hear the fifth head pleading: “H-Hey, wait! Don’t kill May! She’s a qilin! She’s an adorable little girl!” He sounded like he was in deep dismay.

“Please shut up,” the sixth head said, forcefully trying to get his son to shut his mouth. “Lyle, for now...”

I nodded. “Everyone... Let’s run.”

“Huh...? Why are we running?!”

Evidently, Aria wanted us to end it then and there, but I quickly decided to flee.

I mean... You’re really expecting me to do something about a qilin?

After Lyle and his comrades had left the scene, May hung her head. She remained firmly fastened to the thick trunk of a great tree.

“I need to save Fredriks. I finally found him after so long. I... I *have* to save him.”

With a gleam of her blue eyes, the arm golems restraining the girl shot off of her. May forcefully tore off Miranda’s sturdy threads. As she slowly stepped forward, her clothing expanded and enveloped her body.

And just like that, she changed. From human to horse—and there the qilin stood in all her glory, with white scales and a golden mane. She had reverted to her true form.

Purple sparks snapped and crackled around the horn that grew from her brow.

“I won’t forgive it. I’ll never forgive anyone who does mean things to Fredriks!”

As her hooves hammered against the ground, her surroundings were enveloped in an explosive boom. Dirt danced through the air, and at the same time, May took off into the sky.

She raced at full speed, searching for Lyle. Her gallop raised a wind behind her, causing the forest’s trees to rustle and shake.

“I’ll find you wherever you go!”

And so, Lyle and his comrades found themselves being chased by May, the qilin.

A short while later, we ended up hiding in a moderately sized hollow, the entrance covered up with grass and branches. At times, the wind would pick up into a fierce gale, perhaps evidence of the qilin racing through the sky.

There was no chance of us escaping the forest.

“Hey, I’m just spitballing,” Eva whispered, “but isn’t that girl the qilin?”

“She was clearly a girl. A human one,” Aria wearily replied.

“Well, she could have transformed, or something like that. Oh, I remember now. There’s a story about a qilin turning into a human woman and falling in love with a man.”

“A fairy tale, right?”

“We can’t deny the possibility.”

Apparently, there were plenty of fairy tales about qilin.

“If she is the qilin,” said Miranda, “then we’ve gone and angered a divine

beast. Lyle, what did you— No, what did your ancestor do? She seemed livid.”

Naturally, the three of them couldn’t understand what May was talking about. The girl had accused me of locking the fifth head away, and that had most likely come off as complete nonsense to them.

“This is the worst,” Eva lamented. “Being chased by a qilin is the worst. I know a few stories about people angering qilin, and it never ends well.”

“Then why don’t you go run off alone?” Miranda incensed her.

“You really are one nasty girl. Definitely not. I’m not leaving Lyle’s side.”

That line would have had my heart skip a beat if I didn’t know the context... Unfortunately, I was well aware that she was sticking around to get some inspiration for her songs. It didn’t really make me happy to hear that.

Molding the surrounding soil to cover the opening, we’d completely camouflaged ourselves. We lay prone, nestled close to one another in the hollow as we waited for the qilin to leave.

But she still seemed to be scanning the forest from above, and she didn’t seem to be leaving anytime soon.

The quarrels within the Jewel continued.

“May is a good kid,” the fifth muttered.

The third coldly shot back, “But she’s after Lyle, right?”

“She has her reasons.”

“And it’s all right for her to steal the Jewel, then?” the fourth demanded, just as cold. “Have you forgotten Lyle’s objective?”

“We can talk things out!”

“We can’t. She can’t hear us,” the sixth said with a sigh.

“Give it some serious thought, people!”

“The answer is clear. If she keeps chasing us, we have no choice but to fight. If the other option is to be on the run forever, it would be better to deal with her here... Get rid of the sparks before they start a fire, fifth head.”

The seventh head insisted we had to defeat her.

We did have the means to do so.

If I could bring it to close quarters, I just had to smack her with the silver greatsword. And if the silver greatsword wasn't enough, that was it. I didn't have anything stronger than that.

"Lyle... May is a good kid."

"Hey, this guy just realized he couldn't persuade us, so he's going after Lyle now."

It was rare to hear the sixth head call the fifth "this guy." But the fifth was also unlike his usual self—he seemed desperate.

"I picked her up in the forest."

"Hey, don't ignore me! W-Wait, don't bend my arm that way— *GYAAAAAH!*"

The sixth's scream echoed for some time before the Jewel finally went silent. Then, the fifth began to speak of his past with the qilin.

Fredriks had encountered the qilin in the forest. He'd fought a war against a massive army and had just emerged victorious. And so, at the time, he was covered in mud and in blood.

Their campsite had been erected in the forest. During their time there, they'd found a wounded qilin trying to sneak into the food supplies.

His subordinates had been at a loss—they were dealing with a qilin, after all. And despite the fact that it was an auspicious beast, it had seemed too exhausted to move.

"She's still young."

"What should we do? We can't even treat her like this."

When his knights tried to approach the beast, the young qilin stuck her horn out to intimidate them. Despite her grave wounds, she still managed to emit crackling sparks from that horn, her hostility on full display.

Still, there was a nasty wound on her neck. She would likely die without

treatment.

“Step aside. I’ll do it.”

“It’s dangerous, Lord Fredriks!”

But Fredriks wouldn’t hear the warnings of his men and approached the qilin child.

The qilin attacked. A bolt of magic lightning assailed Fredriks, then another. But enduring these repeated shocks, he continued to administer treatment.

“You’re spirited,” he commented. “If you have that much energy, you’ll heal in no time.”

Eventually, the attacks ceased. Fredriks then cleansed the qilin’s wounds and slathered ointment over them. Once he was done, he wrapped a bandage around her neck and observed her.

“It doesn’t look like you can stand. I’ll get a wagon to take you back to the manor, then.”

At these words, one of his subordinates had excitedly exclaimed, “You’ve obtained a qilin, Milord! You’ve practically guaranteed the prosperity of House Walt.”

“Developing the territory is our job,” Fredriks calmly replied. “Don’t rely on anyone else. I forbid you from speaking of this child to anyone.”

His subordinates puzzled over their lord’s words even as he spoke to the qilin child.

“You’ll be better soon. Don’t worry.”

And so, Fredriks had taken the qilin back to the Walt manor and wound up nursing her back to health.

“She’s a gentle soul, and she would always nuzzle her forehead against me whenever I got close. We were both devastated when we had to say goodbye. She kept looking back at me as she left.”

I’d vaguely picked up on it before, but the fifth really became talkative when it

came to animal-related stories. This time, he seemed even more emotionally invested than usual. Now and then, it was almost like he was on the verge of tears. I couldn't have ever imagined it, given his usual demeanor.

I grabbed the Jewel and rolled it with my fingertip. This meant "no."

"So you're a demon too!" the fifth cried out.

In the first place, we didn't have the option of saving May. I was the one on the run, and she was the one targeting my life. Either we ran with all we had, or we fought with all we had. Those were our options.

At close range, I would swing the silver greatsword. And at long range, I'd snipe her with the silver bow. That seemed to be our best bet if we wanted to get out of this in one piece.

Aria shook me out of my thoughts. "What do we do now, Lyle? Do we defeat her like usual?" Her eyes were directed at the Jewel.

Then Eva objected, "You can't! You'll definitely get cursed for that."

It seemed she didn't want to fight the qilin. The same could be said for Miranda, albeit for different reasons.

"I've heard that qilin travel in groups. Even if she's the only one we've seen so far, it'll be trouble if she's got other comrades around. If possible, I want to find some way to escape."

It was at that very instant that May passed by overhead. The trees swayed violently from the powerful winds.

"Can we run away from that thing?"

We were dealing with someone who could freely fly around the sky, so how exactly were we supposed to run? If I was better at using the greatsword or the spear, perhaps I could deal a nonlethal blow to bide time—but that wasn't possible for me. Not yet.

If I held back, I'd most likely be killed. It was as simple as that.

It didn't seem we'd be able to move for a while.

Should we wait until night to leave? I wondered.

All of a sudden, the fifth—struck by a flash of brilliance—burst out: “Lyle, use *that*! Now’s the time to do it!”

I pressed my forehead against the ground. “By that, you mean...”

My Art. The one I didn’t want to use. I’d manifested my Art’s second stage—and that was all well and good—but it had turned out to be quite awful.

“If you don’t use it now, then when?! I know you can do it! With that Art, I can persuade May directly.”

He was more heated than I’d ever heard him. I could tell how serious he was about helping the qilin he’d looked after once upon a time. *But would you consider how I feel?* The conditions for using the second stage of my Art were very harsh.

Aria shook me out of my thoughts again. “Hey, what’s gotten into you? You suddenly started talking to yourself.”

I cupped a hand over my mouth, regretting uttering a single word. Sure, I hadn’t leaked anything significant, but I hated how thoughtless I’d been.

And wait, how many days has it been since we entered this forest?

I was pretty exhausted. My body and mind were both being worn thin.

“Well, I was considering our options. And, well, my Art... If I use it well, we may be able to get out of this situation.”

“Then you should’ve said that from the start,” Aria whispered angrily. “You keep everything to yourself far too often. Now go and use your Art and resolve this already.”

I turned my face to the side, looking away from her.

“Lyle’s Art. If I recall...” Miranda curiously stared at me.

The first stage of my Art was a perpetually active Art called experience. It was an Art that allowed me to gain more *experience*. Supposedly, it made me go through Growths more frequently, but I really had no idea of knowing whether that was true or not. It wasn’t really something I could test.

Arts were usually divided into three stages. When an Art first manifested, it

was at its first stage. Then came the second stage, which was generally more effective and flexible. The third stage was the absolute pinnacle of one's Art.

Arts generally became stronger and more convenient as they progressed through the stages, but there were also exceptions like Clara. The ones that simply didn't have any stages and manifested in their complete form.

In my case...

"It's practically a completely different Art than the first one. It looks like I have a special type."

Eva butted in, her voice brimming with curiosity. "A special type? That's a bit interesting. If it's powerful enough to get us through this, I'd love to see it. Oh, but you shouldn't kill the qilin."

Ignoring Eva, Miranda sought a more detailed explanation. "But there's a problem with it, by the look of things. Arts come in all shapes and sizes, and I hear that some can't be used unless you meet certain conditions."

As a general rule, each individual only manifested a single Art in their life. A single ability that advanced to stronger forms of itself. Considering this, perhaps I was lucky to manifest a completely different ability as my second stage.

I couldn't even tell if the first stage was doing anything, but the second stage had a definite, tangible effect. I'd be able to use it as soon as I met the conditions.

On the day I swore to fight Ceres, my second stage came to me as if my resolve had been acknowledged. But the power that awakened was terrible.

The moment an Art manifested, the user would be struck by a flash of inspiration—and in that moment, they'd know the Art's name, and how to use it. The same flash hit me...

"The name of my Art is Connection. It's an Art that allows me to exchange information with other people."

Aria cocked her head at my explanation. "That's it?"

She definitely thought it would be something far more incredible than that. In fact, she seemed a bit disappointed.

Miranda—by contrast—latched on. “I’d love to hear more. How do you exchange information?”

“Within the effective range of my Art, I can communicate with those affected regardless of distance. It should be like the words directly enter your head. So essentially, we can talk even if we’re out of earshot, and we can share visual information too—I think.”

Miranda held her tongue, yet her eyes were alight. She’d immediately caught on to just how amazing the Art was.

By contrast, Eva chided me, finding fault with my uncertainty. “Hey, you should at least test out your own Art. You sometimes come across people who forget how to use them, you know. It’s such a waste.”

I...can’t. Even if I want to. The reason? There’s something I need to do to the target in advance. If it just let me connect with anyone I wanted, I wouldn’t be stuck in this predicament.

I told them upfront: “I can’t.”

“Why not?” Eva angrily demanded.

“If I want to target someone with Connection, we have to do a certain something beforehand. Otherwise, we can’t establish a mana line between us. Also, if the line is ever severed, we have to do it again to reconnect.”

Indeed, my Art essentially formed a thin line of mana between myself and the target. It was similar to what I had with Monica—although in her case, the line would reconnect itself if severed, and I didn’t really have to do anything special on my end.

While this was certainly convenient, I couldn’t shake the feeling that her persistent connection was her way of saying, *I’m never going to let you get away.*

Eva thought a bit, before flushing red to the tips of her long elf ears. “Oh, err—I-I see,” she muttered.

Aria didn’t seem to get it. “What? Quit beating around the bush and tell us what you have to do. If you’ve got an Art, it’s a waste not to use it.”

Her understandable response was met with a meaningful smile from Miranda.

“Oh, Aria. You’re so stupid you could give Shannon a run for her money.”

“Wh-What makes you say that?”

“Lyle won’t use such a convenient Art. And he must have a reason for not even telling us about it. Thus, there has to be an issue with the *deed* required to connect this mana line. Are you following?”

Aria looked at Eva’s red ears, and gradually her face began to turn red too.

“Y-Y-You can’t mean...”

I mustered all my courage before finally blurting out the activation condition.

“That’s right. A kiss.”

“Huh?” Eva asked with a gasp.

“W-Wait, that’s it?” Aria demanded, startled.

Meanwhile, Miranda muttered, “Oh, what a shame.”

What’s that supposed to mean?

“Don’t make such a big deal over something like that. You took me for a complete loop there,” Eva scolded me.

But I couldn’t help but be bewildered. “I mean, it’s a kiss. And not a light one—it has to be one of those *adult* ones.”

“Oh. Well, I guess I’d be a bit hesitant about that too,” Aria conceded. “I can see why it’d be hard to talk about.”

Miranda smiled. “Well, what’s the harm? I welcome it. Why don’t you test it out with me, Lyle?”

She closed in on me. I tried to twist and get away, but there was barely any room to move.

I protested. “I-I can’t. Kisses are the sort of thing you need to treasure—I think.”

“You’re surprisingly pure,” Eva grinned. “That aside, let’s say you create a connection with your Art. Will that really solve the issue?”

It was my own Art. If it felt possible to me, then it was most likely possible.

I heard a voice from the Jewel. “Leave it to me. If you connect with May, I’ll do the talking for you.”

“As long as we can connect, I think we can correct this misunderstanding.”

Granted, that depends on the fifth head...

If my Art linked us, it would most likely link to the Jewel too. Instinctively, I felt it was possible.

“Wait a sec,” Eva said, deep in thought. “That means Lyle has to kiss that kid, right? I mean, is that even possible?”

That’s right! That’s the hard part.

I held my head as the girls all had troubled looks on their faces. *I have to kiss someone to use it... Why is my Art such a pain?*

Racing through the airspace above the forest, May stared at the ground with her eyes open wide. Whenever she saw any strange movement, she would descend to investigate it.

In most cases, it would turn out to be a monster or an animal. Sometimes, she’d run into a monster overflowing with power—one that had escaped from the dungeon. But she’d defeat it in one blow nonetheless and return to the sky. It seemed like an endless cycle.

“Where... Where are you?” she murmured, her eyes growing bloodshot as she searched and searched for her savior, Fredriks.

But then, she felt Fredriks’s presence. It emanated strongly from somewhere within the forest.

“Fredriks!”

May forcefully changed direction midair, bursting toward the ground. Lightning coiled around her body, lighting up the night sky with its radiance. Before long, she practically crashed into the ground, creating a crater where she landed.

The surrounding grass and trees were blown away; she had formed a gaping hole in the sea of trees.

And as the cloud of dust died down, she found Lyle, grimy from all the dirt flung at him.

“That was a rough landing. What were you going to do if you broke the Jewel?”

Lyle spoke in a less than serious tone, and May met him with a glare.

“Jewel? I think I’ve heard of that somewhere before— Oh, I remember. That blue stone is a tool that records Arts. Fredriks had it too.”

The blue gem that Fredriks had once kept around his neck. Now, it had been adorned with extra ornamentation and its appearance had changed, but that wasn’t all.

“I never noticed. It feels completely different.”

“Yeah, it’s gotten a bit more convenient. Or rather, it’s been upgraded into something like a cursed item.”

May changed from her qilin form to her human one. But qilin or human, she continued to glare at the boy.

“Cursed? Is that curse what sealed Fredriks? You humans are far too cold to your own families.”

“The fifth head—Fredriks, I mean—was the one who was cold to his family,” Lyle replied.

His misunderstanding irritated May. Incredibly so.

“So you don’t know anything. Or perhaps after so many years, it was simply forgotten. Fredriks thought very kindly of his family.”

A confused look crossed Lyle’s face, but that had nothing to do with May.

She went on, “Do you know something about it? So long as you free Fredriks, I promise I’ll spare your life.”

There was a great power gap between qilin and humans. They were fundamentally a higher form of existence.

As May talked down to him, Lyle watched her with a serious look on his face. “You must understand by now, right? The fifth is no more. Fredriks is dead.”

Those words caused the horn to erupt from May’s brow in anger. Electricity surged from her body, crackling in the air around her. “Don’t say it,” she hissed.

“You said it yourself. The years have gone by. We humans live far shorter lives than you qilin do. But—”

“Don’t say it!” It was a scream this time—a rending cry.

The area around them was showered in lightning. Trees were uprooted, the destruction expanding with each burst more powerful than the last. Then, Lyle came out with a tempting offer. One that was far too good to be true.

“Shall I let you speak with him?”

May knew that Fredriks was already dead, that she would never see him again. But she could feel Fredriks’s presence right in front of her. How could she bear this torment?

“What?”

The lightning ceased, leaving the smell of burnt trees lingering in the air. They could still hear the snapping, burning sounds.

“I’ll let you see Fredriks.”

“R-Really?”

Lyle smiled. “Yes, really. In exchange, could I have a kiss? If possible, I would really appreciate if it was the sort of deep kiss where our tongues entwined. Hey, wait! Wait! I’m not joking. You really can meet with him if you do that!”

May was clad in lightning even stronger than before, her horn growing even longer, and taking on a sharp, menacing appearance. Her blood vessels swelled with rage, and her nails elongated into claws.

“You’re mocking me. You’re using Fredriks as an excuse to deceive me. I won’t forgive you. I’ll never forgive you, human!”

Lyle covered his face with his right hand, clearly regretting what he’d said. But soon enough, he drew the saber from his hip.

“Yeah, I never expected it to work out that easily.”

Even he didn't think that she'd be on board with his proposal. And the more he spoke, the more May was convinced that she was being made a fool of.

“I've heard that you humans worship us as divine beasts, but don't think your worship will prevent us from killing a human! I thought I'd forgive you because you're Fredriks's descendant, but no, you're the one I'll never forgive. I'll tear you to pieces!”

And so, May flew into a rage.

Chapter 95: Connection

Yeah, I don't know what I expected. She's furious.

Watching May get fired up before me, I readied my saber for battle.

From the Jewel came the voices of five aghast men.

"You have to lay out the premise clearly."

"She understandably misunderstood and thought you were *trying* to make her mad. I can't even give you ten points for that performance."

"Lyle, are you even trying?!"

"The fifth is kind? I guess that qilin doesn't understand the subtleties of human relations."

"Still, you did a splendid job angering her. If that was what you were trying to do."

They just said whatever they wanted as usual, so I opted to ignore them. The challenge before me was more important—it'd been pretty much impossible to win before it'd even begun.

How could I possibly succeed in asking her to kiss me? It was absolutely impossible. No matter how I looked at it, it was never, ever happening.

Regardless of how well I managed to string May along until now, things would have always ultimately led to me saying the words: "Please kiss me." This plan had always been doomed to fail.

"Do we really have to settle this with force? Is that the only way?"

The storm subsided and the calm returned. The blast had dulled my sense of hearing.

May was speaking—it sounded like it was coming from somewhere far in the distance. She took a step forward, and suddenly she was right in front of me with her fist raised.

“Whoa!”

I frantically dodged just in time, causing her fist to strike the tree behind me. Seeing that sturdy tree blasted away, I broke into a cold sweat.

Wiping my brow with my left hand, I got back up. May slowly turned her face toward me.

When she spoke, I could hear her this time.

“How painful it is that I can’t go all out. If only you weren’t holding that necklace, I’d turn you to ash in an instant. Ah, it’s a real shame.”

Her eyes were cold as ice. I almost shuddered at the sheer emotionlessness she was putting on display.

A qilin’s power... Even in her human form, she was on another level from humans like us. And yet...she wasn’t as strong as Ceres.

“I can’t lose here. Sorry, but I won’t give you the Jewel either. I need it for my objective.”

“Yes, like that, you sacrifice others for your selfish goals. You humans are always like that. You’re incorrigible.”

“May, don’t push yourself too hard,” the fifth head sorrowfully cried out at these words.

Fifth head...could you please worry about me more than her right now?

She came at me, and in an instant, she was gone. She’d vanished from my field of view.

A beat later, “Behind you!”

The fifth head’s words had me hurriedly dodge rolling out of there, then standing just as May’s fist slammed into the ground. She shifted her eyes toward me.

“It’s a nuisance, how you dodge around like that.”

She extracted her fist from the dirt and vanished again.

“Lyle, this is a basic lesson,” the fifth head instructed. “When she disappears, assume she’ll attack from outside your field of vision. You’ll be too late to react

if you take time to check the Arts. I will direct you.”

His predictions of May’s moves were frightfully accurate, allowing me to easily dodge the attack that followed.

“Why are you so good at predicting her?” I asked as I dodged the next one.

The sixth head frustratedly answered, “The fifth was the one who taught that qilin how to fight. He didn’t teach the rest of us jack, by the way.”

That’s another harsh truth to add to the pile.

“With your physique, how can I expect you to fight in the same way as me?” the fifth head complained. “Lyle, the next one will come from below. May hasn’t shaken off any of her old habits.”

Rather than employing any tactics, May preferred to push through with brute strength. As my eyes adjusted to her movements, I began to understand her *old habits* or rather her fighting style.

Though my breathing had become erratic, I was gradually feeling more in control.

By contrast, May’s frustration and desperation began to show.

“Why won’t my attacks connect? Why?!”

Smiling, I informed her, “You’re just trying to brute force your way through. You lack skill.”

A qilin didn’t need to know human martial arts in the first place, yet for some reason, May gritted her teeth. She seemed irritated.

“You— You’re just— Fredriks was way, way stronger, you hear?!” she wailed like a child, tears building in her eyes.

May launched forward with a spinning kick. By now, I knew my body couldn’t bear any blocks, so I dodged by a narrow margin, grabbed her, and attempted to pin her down.

“Don’t touch me!” she screamed.

She grabbed my arm and forcefully threw me off. Luckily, I managed to break my fall in time. I stood up quickly to see her palm approaching, reaching to grab

me.

“This should do it!”

Blue flames erupted from my body. Using the Art of our founder, I tossed May with all my might.

She was dumbfounded, making no attempts to break her own fall.

“Why...? I’m the stronger one.”

I heard the fifth head’s melancholic voice. “May, I didn’t teach you martial arts for you to do something like this. I taught you because I wanted you to protect yourself.”

As though she could hear his sorrowful voice, May frowned and leaped back to build up some distance between us.

Seeing that, the fifth boomed, “Lyle, dodge!”

A golden horn was growing from her outstretched fist.

“If I dodge wrong, the horn will get me.”

I focused, faced with her sharp murderous strike. And...

“Warp,” I muttered.

Although it only worked over very short distances, the seventh head’s Art allowed me to reposition myself instantly.

“You did it, Lyle!” the seventh cheered. “How about that? My Art’s amazing, isn’t it?!”

It was incredible—don’t get me wrong—but the distance it could move me was only a few paces at best. Warp was a very convenient Art...despite a few issues.

Positioning myself behind May just as she tried to hit me allowed me to avoid her attack entirely—but it was exhausting. The mana cost was terrible, and as I was now, it didn’t seem I’d be able to use it effectively.

Regardless, May started to panic at my sudden disappearance. Unable to kill her forward momentum, she stumbled and fell. And as she popped back up, she stared at me wide-eyed.

Bewildered that I'd dodged her, May asked, "In an instant... How?"

It was a difficult Art to use, but I was glad it worked. Perhaps I could use it for bluffs too.

"With an Art. Did you forget what this Jewel does? It doesn't just have Fredriks's. It remembers the Arts of every head of House Walt."

As I flashed the Jewel at her, May gritted her teeth and faced me again. She was cautious this time; perhaps too cautious. Her steps were shallow.

May tried to slice me with the horn that grew from her hand.

I parried the strike with my saber.

My weapons would easily break if our strikes collided, so I was forced to subtly guide the direction of the blow. But even that was enough to send sparks flying from the edge until finally the blade chipped and then snapped.

"You broke another one."

I cast the bladeless hilt aside, taking an unarmed stance as May swung at me. A rough swing with no technique behind it; unlike with Ceres, I could avoid it all too easily.

Yes, confronting Ceres was far scarier than this. And by facing this qilin, I was realizing just how inhumanly strong Ceres was.

My right hand wrapped around the Jewel.

"Lyle, don't cut her! No matter what! Did you hear me?! Don't do it!" The fifth head pushed the point again and again.

I mentally whispered, "Yeah, yeah," as I manifested the silver greatsword.

Perhaps owing to the Jewel's instability, it was even less manageable than usual. Even with both my hands firmly gripping its hilt, the blade continued to thrash around wildly on its own.

"What's that? I don't know it. I don't know anything about that!"

May was clearly confused, so I put on a thin veneer of composure as I explained, "This is the power of the Jewel. The memories of my ancestors dwell within it. That's your answer."

Unconvinced, May leaped at me.

Shifting my grip on the greatsword, I swung the flat of the blade from right to left like a blunt weapon. I took care not to make contact with May, and the strike, like a violent storm, mowed down the trees in front of me.

May was blown back along with them, smacking into a rock and sliding down to the ground, where she sat in dismay.

That one strike had used up most of my mana.

The silver sword the first head left me possessed tremendous firepower, but would always make away with almost everything I had. It was a weapon made for one single lethal strike.

As I returned the sword to its Jewel form, I could feel the blue fire dissipating from my body. Even standing had become painful for me.

May looked at me and wept.

“Why did I lose? I got stronger. To meet Fredriks, I got stronger—so why?!”

“You were strong. But it’s easy to deal with you if I know how you’re going to move.”

The third head laughed at my words. “The fact she didn’t go all out played a large part too. But still, I think you’re pretty amazing for pulling it off.”

I could tell she was holding back, so as not to damage the Jewel.

May shook her head. “That’s a lie. Why would you be able to predict my moves? That’s never happened to me before.”

She couldn’t accept it, so I pinched the Jewel and showed it to her again.

“The fifth head... *Fredriks* told me.”

Yet again, she shook her head. Her face was colored in complete disbelief.

“Lies. All lies. Fredriks would never betray me. We promised. We promised...to see each other again!”

May was sobbing now. At some point, her words had started to come off as far more childish than before.

“May, this is my fault... Can you tell her for me, Lyle?”

I conveyed his message word for word. “A message for you: I’m sorry for lying. When we had to say goodbye, I told a lie. Because you wouldn’t leave when you had to.”

Her tears dropped down her face as she pointed the qilin horn—sprouting from her right arm—at me.

“You’re lying to me again. You all—Fredriks’s family—you were all so cold to Fredriks. You never even tried to understand him! You just used him and complained—how can I trust anything you say?!”

“What are you—?”

Just then, the clothes she was wearing expanded to envelop her body, changing her into the shape of a qilin. It did seem that May had some stamina to spare.

“And here I am, at my limit...”

May kicked off the ground, her head lowered, her horn pointed at me. She was trying to charge me at full force.

“Are you planning to blow away the Jewel as well?”

“I’m going to free Fredriks. I owe him that much. So...so wait for me, Fredriks.”

It seemed she wasn’t listening to me anymore.

I sighed. “Haven’t you forgotten something? I’m not alone.”

The moment May charged, a red light raced out in front of me. May’s sharp qilin horn was intercepted by Aria, whose short spear had turned gold through enhancement.

She’d swung down, only for her reinforced short spear to break. But still, she’d fulfilled her role. The attack thankfully veered off course.

Aria swiftly hoisted me up under one arm and raced off, with May chasing close behind.

With me in her grasp, Aria complained, “That was really cutting it close! Why

did you volunteer to be the decoy?!”

“It’s a role only I could pull off. May won’t spare anyone else a second glance.”

“May—is that her name?”

Aria swiftly raced through the forest toward the place we’d prepared to capture May. Miranda and Eva were already waiting for us as we arrived. They hid in the shadows; Aria and I sped past them, with May trailing behind.

She raised a deafening sound as she ran. The branches she crashed into were blown away, her hooves leaving firm marks on the ground.

“Let’s leave the rest to those two,” I muttered.

Aria glanced back with concern. “Will they be all right?”

Lyle and Aria had already run through, and Eva was just waiting for the signal. She and Miranda faced one another, some distance between them as they hid in silence.

At Miranda’s signal, Eva pulled a thread, hooking it onto a tree. She stretched out a net made of Miranda’s threads, right in the qilin’s path.

Less than a second after she’d finished, the qilin collided straight into it. The reinforced tree let off grating sounds.

Miranda had bound several trees together, hoping that their combined structure would be able to contain their foe’s momentum. And catch her they did—but even these complex structures seemed like they would break at any second.

“This isn’t enough to stop her? Qilin are amazing.”

Eva pondered whether she should be grateful for being able to see it all up close, or critical of Lyle for angering the qilin. Immediately, she moved on to the second step of the plan.

“Don’t hold a grudge for this.”

With magic, she manifested earthen walls around the qilin. These walls were

blown away instantly, not even serving to buy time. But capturing her wasn't their intent.

This was to obscure her vision, if only for the briefest of moments.

"Nasty girl!" she shouted.

"Is that supposed to be me?"

Miranda emerged from the thicket, joined by a great number of earthen figures that pounced upon the qilin. There were animal golems, insect golems, ones modeled after human arms. All sorts of golems came together to pin her down.

The animal ones bit into her with their sharp fangs but failed to get through the qilin's hard scales.

Carefully manipulating threads connected to her own fingers, Miranda was skillfully controlled multiple golems like they were puppets.

"I've caught you."

But with a swing of the qilin's head, the earthen golems shattered, crumbling away into sand.

"Don't think that's enough to hold me down!" the qilin said in the exact same voice as the girl they'd encountered before.

"So it's true," Eva muttered. She was a little startled, but happy to learn that qilin really could take on human form. This was different from simply possessing the knowledge. She was overjoyed to have experienced it herself firsthand.

Undeterred by her delight, Eva threw a tub-shaped item, which let off smoke as it hit the ground. The smoke had been fashioned from an herb that carried a foul stench and that irritated the eyes.

"Ugh, this stinks."

Although her face scrunched at the scent, the qilin slammed her forelimbs into the ground, raising a wind that dissipated the smoke in an instant.

Just when it seemed that it had all reached an anticlimactic end, the qilin noticed there were threads entangled around her neck. These sticky threads

connected straight to Miranda's hands, and there were others that stretched into the thicket that the golems had emerged from. The golems had been a mere ploy to stick the threads onto her.

"Those won't come off easily."

Miranda tugged at the threads, and the qilin gave a great shake of her head. This easily lifted Miranda off her feet and into the ground.

"Hey, don't act so high and mighty if you're just going to be swung around like that!" Eva scolded.

Frustrated, Miranda changed her posture midair. She snagged the threads on a tree, changing direction by swinging like a pendulum. Once those threads were secure, she cut them and produced new ones, shooting them out to entangle the qilin's neck yet again.

"Just shut up and watch!"

Just like that, more and more layers were being added.

The qilin thrashed about. "This is nothing!" she cried out.

But the more she struggled, the more tangled up she would get.

The worst was yet to come, though. For a while, Eva's ears had been filled with a snapping, popping sound. She glanced down at the tangled mesh of fluffy threads that had fallen onto her shoulder.

As soon as it touched her, it caught fire and disappeared.

This was another part of Miranda's Art. She could produce a thread that sapped a target's strength as it burned.

This woman really is incredible, thought Eva. Despite calling herself a jack-of-all-trades, Miranda was incredibly versatile, and far stronger than she gave herself credit for. And whether Lyle was aware of it or not, his trust in Miranda's abilities was second only to Novem's.

But...yeah. I still can't stand her.

Caught in sticky threads, and unable to use mana as she pleased, May struggled to no avail.

As Miranda finally descended to the ground, her breath was ragged.

“H-How about that?”

She’d swung around the trees as she near single-handedly captured the qilin. An amazing feat indeed. Eva offered her an insincere golf clap.

“Congrats. Amazing. I’m moved to tears. You’re like a spider woman.”

Miranda glared at her. “We could have done without that last one. Now hurry and get Lyle over here.”

Their plan had the three girls set up a trap while Lyle bought them time.

“He’s already back.”

Aria returned with Lyle still under her arm. He was in quite a pathetic state, having worn himself out a great deal.

Eva sighed. “Lyle, you need to work on your finish. You can’t fall apart at the climax.”

“I would if I could.”

Once Aria set him down, Lyle approached May. She let out a threatening growl and pointed her horn at him, but Lyle ignored her and began to speak.

“We’ve been at this so long and you’re still raring to go?” I asked with a sigh. “Qilin really are something.”

Aria was wary of her, and so was Miranda. As for Eva—if I had to say, she was more curious than anything else. She seemed to be looking forward to seeing how things developed from here.

The seventh head observed Miranda’s handiwork, impressed. “She tied her in a way to ensure she couldn’t muster any strength. Even if Lyle weakened the qilin first, that’s aunty’s descendant for you.”

How exactly did the seventh head see his aunt—see Milleia? The sixth head insisted she was a gentle girl who just happened to possess orphic eyes to compensate for her blindness...but the seventh head seemed to have a completely different opinion of her.

More importantly.

“Let’s talk. I don’t have any intentions of harming you. I just want to talk.”

She was breathing heavily as she glared at me. I could tell she was agitated.

Bringing my face close, I whispered so the other three couldn’t hear. “Fredriks wants to talk to you,” I said, holding the Jewel in front of her eyes.

The fifth head called out. “May. Just once is enough. Please listen to what Lyle’s saying. I don’t want you to get hurt anymore. I don’t want you to fight Lyle. I’m begging you—please listen to my request.”

I didn’t know if his voice reached, but May slowly retracted her horn. Begrudgingly, she asked, “What do I have to do?”

“Let’s return to our initial conversation. I have an Art called Connection—an Art that fosters communication. I need to form a mana line to use it, and I need a kiss to do that.”

I know I’m the one saying it, but I really can’t blame anyone for doubting me.

The sixth head would often tell me, “Before you can fool anyone, you need to fool yourself, and believe the hell out of it!”

But this one was really pushing it.

May thought for a moment before saying, “Fine. I’d have preferred a kiss from Fredriks, but fine.”

“Huh? You had that sort of relationship?”

Jeers rained down from the Jewel.

“Huh? You went that far with her?”

“I’m honestly appalled. Don’t tell me you lusted after animals.”

“At this point, can you really blame me for running away from home? Rather, what sort of face am I supposed to make after learning about my old man’s fetishes?”

“It seems we all feel the same way. We’re family, after all. I myself can’t hide my shock, learning that my own grandfather was into that.”

Criticized by the other four, the fifth desperately spun his excuses.

“You fool! I didn’t look after my animals with such impure feelings! What I felt was far more innocent than that. Additionally, there are plenty of animal species that greet one another by pressing their mouths together! You’re telling me you’ve never kissed your dog before? You’re all grinning, you bastards! Are you even listening to me?!”

They were teasing him, clearly. They were finding amusement in his desperate defense. They could have stopped whenever they wanted, but it made him mad, so they did it anyway.

May looked at me with pleading eyes.

“Make it quick.”

“Huh...? Ah, right. But, umm, err.”

May reached her head out, bringing it closer to me.

Wait a second. Am I supposed to kiss her like that? In qilin form? This...wasn't what I was expecting.

Picking up on what I wanted to say, Aria rushed me with red cheeks.

“Get on with it already.”

“No, I mean...!”

Miranda was smiling, but there was something about her. Something that wouldn’t take no for an answer. “You have it hard, Lyle. Now please get this over with.”

Eva seemed somewhat unsatisfied. “A romance between a human and a transformed qilin is enticing, but Lyle’s dead set on having Novem as his heroine. Yeah, just kiss her in qilin form and call it a day.”

Giving in to the three of them rushing me, I leaned forward and exchanged a deep kiss with May in her qilin form.



“What, is May not good enough for you?!” the fifth head demanded.

I don't understand how you feel, fifth head. I just don't.

May's tongue entered my mouth, but that just caused me to gag. The feeling when her massive horselike tongue crept its way in... What we were doing just couldn't be a kiss. But apparently, my Art still registered it as one.

Once the mana line was formed, May's head slumped down. I also crumpled at the knees, with Eva catching me just before I hit the ground.

It was usually voluntary on my part, but this time I was forcefully dragged into the Jewel. I found myself, not in the round-table room, but in the fifth head's room of memories.

Within an empty room, the fifth head was waiting with a smile. Not a smile for me, but for May.

“Fredriks!!!”

“May. You've grown.”

May had initially been in her qilin form, but as soon as she took off toward him, she changed to her human form and latched on to the man. Like one might expect from her appearance, she spoke like a young child, or perhaps even a toddler.

“I got bigger, you know! I got strong!”

“Yeah, I was watching. Look at you now, so big and strong.”

The fifth hugged her and gently patted her on the head. They were practically like father and daughter. I could see why the sixth head got so irritated at her.

“Fredriks, I— The promise, I...”

The fifth head bashfully scratched his cheek before placing a hand on May's shoulder. “I'm sorry. You didn't want to go, so I told you a lie. Back then, I knew we'd never see each other again. I knew, and I lied. It's all my fault.”

“That's not it,” May pleaded, shaking her head. “It's because I didn't make it back in time. Even though I...I promised to be your wife.”

“Huh?!” I exclaimed, prompting the fifth to clear his throat.

“Right, that. That happened. I remember.”

His memories were stirred, and the surrounding scenery changed. We were back in the stables that the sixth head had shown me before.

May was taken aback. Looking at all the animals around her, she cried out, “Mikail! Angelo, and Maya too. Even Zelude!”

Her eyes lit up as she ran up to Zelude, a large dog, and tried to pet him. She let out an audible gasp as her hand passed straight through. She froze with tears in her eyes.

“We’re inside of my memories. Unfortunately, we can’t touch anything here.”

I heard a voice from farther in the stables. Glancing over, I saw a young child—May, who looked to be around five years old by human standards, was sitting on Fredriks’s lap. She seemed delighted. The animals had gathered too, all of them wanting Fredriks to pamper them.

“Looks like someone’s popular,” I said.

“Animals are great, aren’t they? I can feel my heart being soothed.”

“You should have treasured your family too.”

The moment I said that, May glared at me. “Don’t bully Fredriks! All of you go after him without even knowing the pain he’s—”

“May, that’s enough.”

May seemed to know something, but the fifth wouldn’t let her say any more.

“I knew what I was doing. I’m the one who was cold to my family. What’s the point in blaming them for it?”

“But...”

“There was a reason?” I asked sincerely.

Watching his younger self surrounded by the animals, the fifth explained, “After mama gave birth to me, she got into an accident and couldn’t have kids anymore. My old man was too faithful to take anyone else, and his dad, the third, died early so he was an only child. The short of the matter is we had no blood relatives.”

The third head only had one child. The timing had never worked out for him, and he ended up dying young in battle. He was succeeded by the fourth head, who also had only one child—one mistake could spell an end to the bloodline.

The fifth had been unfortunate.

“We lacked relatives, first and foremost. I simply chose the simplest resolution. Political marriages were the most efficient way to silence all those small-time lords under our umbrella.”

The fourth head had become a baron from the third’s achievements and had risen to a position where he was presiding over lesser nobles. However, envy was a constant in every era. A house that had long since been their equal had risen over them.

Apparently, there was no shortage of houses that couldn’t stand this fact, and House Walt’s governance of the greater territory was going nowhere. But, for better or worse, the land under House Walt’s direct control continued to develop and thrive.

“The barons and viscounts around us, and even the earl, saw us as enemies. They mocked us as ignorant upstarts. We had no allies.”

There was an issue that had been bothering me for quite some time now, so I decided to ask him upfront.

“Err...did you not think there would be any potential succession problems?”

Succession issues were part and parcel for nobility. The larger the family, the more cause there was for strife.

“I thought about it and came to the same conclusion. And I succeeded, I’ll have you know. My children all rallied together against a common foe—me. The fact that you’re still around means I managed to protect the house. If you want to put my actions on the scale of good or evil, they’re undoubtedly evil. But regardless.”

May grabbed his arm. “It’s not your fault, Fredriks. And I know you—”

“I’m complete scum. That’s why my children stayed away from me. That’s all there is to it.”

The fifth brought it to an end with that. He didn't broach the topic any further.

Chapter 96: A Promise with a Qilin

This was the fifth head's room of memories, where the days that Fredriks had spent with May were being reproduced.

"Lord Fredriks, a qilin may be the symbol of prosperity, but I've heard they bring calamity once angered. Please leave it in my hands," said a merchant man who'd come all the way to the stables.

Fredriks didn't stop working as he answered, "I've made it very clear I don't want anyone coming anywhere near this place. If you do business with our estate, then you must have known."

"Yes. But this is a very important matter, so—"

"I see. We'd better not have any dealings with someone who can't keep their promises. Take him away."

Fredriks's subordinates led the man off.

"P-Please wait! Lord Fredriks!"

As the young May poked her head out of her room, Fredriks smiled at her.

"It's all right now."

The fifth and May watched the scene with a nostalgic glint in their eyes.

With a sigh, I said, "You stopped doing business over something like that?"

"Not *just* that. He was also trading with territories that were hostile to us, selling our information. I already intended to cut ties."

He tacked on an additional reason, but I couldn't really trust him whenever it came to animals.

The scene changed to one of Fredriks and May talking. Young May beamed as she sat on Fredriks's lap.

"Hey!" she declared to Fredriks. "I'm going to be Fredriks's bride someday."

It was merely the wish of an unknowing child.

“I see. I’m glad to hear it. But you’re still a little girl, May. You’ll have to grow up first.”

“You always say that. I’ll grow up in no time.”

May seemed to be frustrated with her younger self. She clearly wanted to say something to her, but this was just a memory. Whatever she said, it would be pointless.

And so, she turned to the fifth head, tears streaming from her eyes as she conveyed her feelings.

“In the end, I couldn’t keep my promise.”

The fifth shook his head. “We’re here now; we were able to meet again. So you came back after all. I may be nothing more than a memory, but I’m glad I got to see you again.”

“I’m sorry, Fredriks. I... I caused trouble for you again.”

She was likely talking about how she had attacked me. I was an outsider here, so I remained silent, but...

“I have something to discuss about that,” the fifth said. “May, can you lend a hand to Lyle?”

“Me? But your descendant is very strong.”

“He’s strong but unreliable. He’s only become somewhat decent lately. I want to train him some more, and Lyle has to become stronger no matter what—there’s a monster called Ceres.”

May reacted to the name. “I’ve heard about that. It’s that human that’s been making a mess lately, right?”

“She’s another descendant of mine. We need to stop her, and I’d like you to lend your strength. Can you do that?”

May looked at his face, then glanced at me. She thought for a moment before concluding, “All right. Sure. If you think I can do it, I’ll help out for a short while.”

Just a short while, huh? Still, I’m pretty thankful for the help, I thought.

“Will fifty years be enough?”

I was reminded that May was indeed a qilin. She’d looked like a young child in the fifth head’s era, and now she seemed to be just around the age when a girl turned into a woman.

I shouldn’t think about her in human terms.

The fifth gave a happy nod. “Yeah, I’m counting on you.”

“Can I come to see you again?” May bashfully asked.

“Of course. I can’t say you can just drop by whenever, but if you stick around, I’m sure there will be plenty of opportunities for us to meet again.”

“Okay!”

She wasn’t even trying to act like a grown-up anymore. She conducted herself exactly as the girl she appeared to be.

May turned to me. “Umm, Lyle, was it? I’ll be in your care for the next fifty years.”

“Huh? R-Right.”

How exactly was I supposed to respond to that smile? I was happy to have a qilin on our side, but was this really going to be all right?

And then, May consulted with me. “So anyway, there are a few conditions if you want my assistance.”

“What sort of conditions?”

“Truth be told, I’ve only just gone independent. So I want a family. Give me your seed. If I can’t get any from Fredriks, I’d like to have some from his descendant.”

I did a spit take.

“Right, that. Now that you mention it, I remember something about that.”

“I had to beg mama to let me break away from the herd. I knew I wouldn’t be able to see Fredriks, but I wanted to hurry and become an adult, you see. I paid a visit to Fredriks’s homeland before starting my travels.”

I finally snapped back to it. “H-How was it, there?”

I wanted to know more about the land I, too, had once called home.

May’s eyes wandered upward as she tried to remember. “Hmm, I only descended to the ground a handful of times, so I don’t know anything specific. I just felt nostalgic about the place. But something felt wrong, so I left before long.”

“Well, you can ask her about it later,” said the fifth. “That aside, Lyle—please, look after May for me.”

“Hold on!”

“What?”

“No, well, I think we somehow casually breezed past it, but what was that she just said? Wanting my s-seed and whatnot? That’s definitely a no-go! I’m human.”

May looked at me and chuckled. “Huh? You don’t know? Divine beasts are all female.”

“Huh? Really?”

The animal-loving fifth, seemingly knowledgeable on the matter, explained, “There are a lot of stories about divine beasts bringing good fortune, right? That’s because they search for human men to mate with.”

“B-But I don’t hear about that with any of the other divine beasts.”

“The man doesn’t know his wife’s a divine beast, more often than not,” May said with complete nonchalance. “I have plenty of comrades who’ve blended into human society. Also, we don’t really share a turf with other divine beasts.”

“T-Turf?”

More importantly, what is this about divine beats blending in with human society?

Looking at May, I had to wonder if that was even possible.

“Banseim is majority qilin territory, after all. There are whales and other divine beasts that live in the sea. I’m sure you’ll hear some stories if you head to

the coast.”

“But!”

“There’s no ‘but’ about it! Divine beasts are simply that sort of animal, and May chose you. That’s all there is to it. Personally, I’m glad she decided on you.”

“I was quite surprised with Lyle, to be honest. He seems like he’ll give me strong kids, and I’d like three of them, at least.”

Th-Three?!

“May’s kids, huh? I’m sure they’ll be adorable. I’m glad we were able to talk this out. Good for you, Lyle.”

I-Is this good for me? Does this mean I’ve been accepted?

May and the fifth both looked at me funny as I held my head. *Am I the crazy one here?*

Ignoring me, the fifth head said, “One more thing, May... Please keep everything about this place a secret.”

Aria carefully laid an unconscious Lyle on the ground to rest. They’d moved him from where they’d fought the qilin, hiding both him and the beast away for their own protection.

Light was beginning to stream into the forest. The night was about to shift into morning.

With his head propped up by his supply bag, Lyle was groaning quite a bit.

“Is this really going to be all right? Also, I don’t understand why he has to be unconscious to use this communication thing.”

The qilin had fallen unconscious too, and she was very well-behaved for now. Miranda, however, had redone her bindings and was continuing to watch over her warily.

“Perhaps he’s in the middle of persuading her? There’s a chance he might fail, but for now, we just have to trust in Lyle.”

Eva had taken a notepad from her bag and had begun to jot down all sorts of

things. She was presumably going to turn this excursion into a song or story.

Aria sighed at her attitude. “Working on your songs even at a time like this?”

“Hey, I’m worried too. But it’s important to strike while the iron is hot. Also, I believe in Lyle. I know he’ll definitely pull it off.”

Aria was a little taken aback. “That’s surprising. I thought you were more pragmatic than that. In fact, I was sure you only saw Lyle as a source of inspiration.”

“Oh, how rude. I don’t deny that last part, but I’m not heartless.”

If Lyle didn’t work out, she’d search for a new muse. At least, Aria thought so, but Eva was serious.

“I’m staking my life on Lyle. That’s how valuable a song is—wouldn’t you agree?”

Glancing around, Miranda replied, “I can never understand elves.”

“I don’t need your understanding. I want to sing a story with Lyle as the main character. We’ll have a wonderfully happy ending with Novem as the main heroine.”

“Why are you so on Novem’s side?” Aria asked. “You’ve known her for less time than we have.”

Eva didn’t quite know how to answer that frank question. She didn’t quite understand it herself.

“Does time have anything to do with how well you get along? Well, it’s something like intuition. Vibes, maybe? It’s this air around her. Anyways, it’s fun to hang around Novem, and I feel at ease.”

Aria reflected on their journey thus far. Curiously, demi-humans would often take to Novem. On the other hand, despite her good looks, she was rarely ever hit on by human men. Now that it was clear she was keeping multiple secrets, Aria couldn’t help but be suspicious about her.

Novem’s a mystery, she thought. There were many things even Lyle didn’t know about her.

As they watched with concern over Lyle and the qilin—still yet to wake—Miranda heaved a deep sigh.

“They couldn’t have picked a worse time.”

Eva tucked away her notepad, stood, and stretched.

“Well, who can blame them? We made quite the ruckus.”

Aria stood and picked up a dagger. The qilin had destroyed her short spear, and she couldn’t replenish her weapons when Lyle was unconscious. The last few days had been quite taxing, and she hadn’t gotten any proper rest.

She was exhausted and ill-equipped.

“There are a lot of them.”

Judging by the footsteps, the enemy had come in great numbers.

Miranda turned her eyes to Lyle, then the qilin.

“Now, what to do?”

It wouldn’t be impossible to run while carrying them, but their fatigue had built up over several days. It would be hard to outrun anyone, as tired as they were. However, breaking through by force would only add fuel to the fire.

But just as Miranda was weighing her options, Lyle opened his eyes.

“Lyle!” Aria called out and approached him.

The qilin had woken as well. It didn’t seem like she intended to put up any resistance.

As Aria lifted him up in her arms, Lyle put a hand to his face. He didn’t seem to be in a good state of mind.

“What’s wrong? Did you resolve the misunderstanding?”

Aria showered him with questions, all of which were met with a slight nod.

“Yeah. She said she’d join us.”

Eva was startled, her surprise soon turning to a smile. “Then you were right to risk your life, Lyle. Having a qilin on the team, well, that’s a sign of good things to come.”

Though concerned about his lack of vigor, Miranda provided a simple explanation of the situation. “Sorry to interrupt when you’re so worn out, but it looks like we’ve made too much noise. People are gathering. Think you can use your Arts?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Lyle replied, teetering on his feet. “Also, can you free May?”

“Are you sure about that?”

“It won’t be an issue. No, seriously. Why did it come to this?”

She was curious about his inarticulate response, but Miranda quickly freed the qilin from the threads she’d personally created. As the threads melted away, May shook to fling off anything that remained and took on her human form.

“I still feel all sticky. Your threads are the worst.”

“I appreciate the compliment. Now, are you really joining our team?”

“Yeah. I’ll stick around for fifty years or so.”

“I see. We can hear the specifics later.”

After determining that May wasn’t dangerous, Miranda returned her attention to Lyle. “Now, what’s our next course of action?”

Lyle put a hand to his chin in thought, then gripped his Jewel.

It was quite cramped with four of us riding May through the sky. We were practically stuck to one another, hanging on for dear life.

“Hold on a second. This is way higher than I was expecting!” Aria screamed, yet she also looked like she was having a bit of fun along the way.

Miranda seemed perfectly calm as she stared at the ground below.

“Flying is nice and easy, don’t you think? I’m excited to see all the options that are going to become available to us.”

Is she thinking something terrifying?

Meanwhile, Eva...

“It’s a qilin, but a white horse... Yes, Lyle is a prince on a white horse. Then Novem’s the princess... I can put together quite a few ones from this.”

Everyone was a bit out of sorts, likely from our exhaustion.

“Quiet down,” May wearily called back to us. “Carrying four people is already difficult enough.”

She meant it was difficult to keep balance. The weight wasn’t too much for her.

“By the way, May—about, you know...” I whispered in her ear.

She gave a firm nod. “I won’t talk about it. I made a promise with Fredriks.”

That came as a relief to me. The fact that my ancestors had been resurrected as memories within the blue Jewel was still a secret from my comrades.

Ceres was running around, causing chaos with her yellow Jewel. Who’s to say they wouldn’t grow suspicious over my blue Jewel?

I’d talked it out with my ancestors, and we ultimately concluded it was best not to tell anyone.

“Oh, come to think of it...” I recalled May saying she had some business in the forest. “What did you come here for, anyways?”

“A new dungeon formed in the forest, so I went to take care of it. Honestly, I just planned to stop by and leave, but I couldn’t ignore what I was seeing. There were a number of other dungeons on the verge of collapse.”

If May’s words were to be believed, then the country of Lorcan was failing with its dungeon management. We made the right decision not to ignore them.

No wait, since May’s here, doesn’t that mean it would have worked itself out without our involvement?

“A-Are we in the clear, yet?”

“I took care of most of them. I’d just finished up another one before I met you people.”

I’ll have to look into this later.

We made our escape on May’s back. Getting to this point had been quite a

mess, but we'd come out with a reliable new comrade.

After returning to the inn, Aria, Miranda, and Eva washed off, ate simple meals, and went straight to bed. They were exhausted, nearing their limit.

Although the sun was still high in the sky, they wanted to call it a day.

As he had to introduce May to the others, Lyle wasn't in the room. So the three girls were alone, left to chat among themselves.

"Another harsh mission," Eva muttered.

"You can leave whenever you want," Miranda replied, her eyes closed.

"You really are one nasty woman. If this was a story, you'd be the vile villainess tearing Lyle and Novem apart."

"I'm fine with being the villainess. I simply act to maximize benefit. So long as I'm Lyle's number one by the end of all this, I don't mind playing the role."

She said it so offhandedly, but Aria knew. *Miranda would definitely be able to pull it off.*

"You've got enough energy to yap, both of you. Why don't you go to sleep already?" said Aria.

After a brief pause, Eva replied, "You know, sometimes you're so tired and you want to go to sleep, yet for some reason you just can't?"

"Right. This is one of those, then," Aria conceded, as she felt much the same way.

They'd finally been given the time to rest, yet none of them could go to sleep.

"Being serious here," Miranda said to Eva, "I think you'll be a lot happier if you find some safe, peaceful place to sing your songs. That should be in line with what you want."

Eva was driven by a desire to be popular. However...

"I'll do that eventually," she replied. "But what I want is to sing a story all of my own. A story only I know. A song that will be sung a thousand years after I'm dead and forgotten. That would be my greatest happiness."

Miranda couldn't laugh at the girl's dreams. "I see—then do what you want."

"I don't need your permission for that. I've always done what I wanted, and I'll continue to do so."

Once that conversation had finished, there was a long period of silence. Yet still, they couldn't sleep.

Aria was drowsy and weary, and so she said something she would usually never say. "Hey, about the mission. I guess I'm no good, right? You know, when those guys attacked us, err..."

She lamented the fact she had been unable to kill.

Eva gave a slight laugh. "You're still worried about that?"

"I'm seriously reflecting here. You all went through so much trouble because of me," Aria angrily replied.

With a sigh, Miranda said, "You're such a fool, Aria."

"Yeah, I'm well aware."

Aria knew, but it did sting when it was said to her face.

Miranda went on, "We'll all be sad if you slip up and die. You should at least understand that."

Aria's eyes widened. "Miranda, did you just..."

Miranda's eyes remained shut.

Suddenly, Eva was intrigued. "That's a surprise," she said. "Weren't you going to kick everyone down and become Lyle's number one?"

"I won't deny that last part, but where's the benefit for me? I don't want to get in Lyle's way, and I won't do anything that would make him hate me."

Eva seemed a little impressed. "How commendable. But that doesn't sound right coming from a villainess, so those lines are getting cut."

"Go right ahead," Miranda said with composure. "I'll be the one standing next to him at the end. The happy end you're dreaming of will never happen. Oh, but a happy end about me with Lyle—that's a song I can get behind. How unfortunate for you."

“You really are one nasty woman. I hate you.”

“Oh, do you? As long as you’re still useful, I’ll accept you as a comrade.”

“I’m going to support Novem with everything... I...”

They quarreled and quarreled, and before they knew it, they’d drifted off to dreamland.

Aria could feel her own mind slipping away. *I kinda feel...a bit lighter now.*

She mulled over whether it was really right for their relationship to stay like that, but it also felt like they had opened up to one another a bit.

May had disappeared that night, but she was back the next day. Barging into the room, she had a large sack slung over her shoulder and looked a bit weary as she wiped the sweat from her brow.

“What’s that?”

It was quite early in the morning, and I was naturally curious.

“This? This is all the treasure from the dungeons,” she cheerfully replied.

“Ee gads!” the fourth exclaimed from the Jewel.

May had returned with a massive bag.

The drawstring loosened to reveal gold and silver, along with weapons, armor, and Demonic Stones among countless other treasures.

Novem peered in and mused, “You gathered all this on your own? That’s incredible.”

“Hee hee hee, just what I wanted to hear from you, Novem. But this is hardly anything. I’ve only just gone independent, so I don’t have too much savings.”

Yesterday, I’d introduced May to my comrades, and May was especially fond of Novem. The fifth seemed quite conflicted about it but didn’t speak up about their relationship. “If May likes her, then that’s that,” he said.

He really was soft whenever animals were involved.

Rubbing her sleepy eyes, Shannon glanced at the treasure.

“This is hardly anything? You could buy loads of candy with this much.”

“You can?!” May’s eyes lit up. “Then lead the way! Ah, wait, no can do. This is for the wedding.”

“The wedding?”

When Shannon asked, May proudly puffed out her chest.

“That’s right. A qilin must present their stockpile of treasures to their mate—their husband.”

Sophia was startled. Our travel party contained only two men, and I was the only one with any relations to May. Just like that, she concluded that I was set to get married to May.

“Lyle, wh-wh-what’s going on here?!”

Though incredibly unfortunate, Aria, Miranda, and Eva—who knew the circumstances—had yet to overcome their exhaustion, and were all still soundly asleep.

I had no choice but to spin excuses by my lonesome self.

“Well, how should I put this—my ancestor brought us together.”

“Your ancestor?”

For some reason—some incomprehensible reason—the fifth head sounded a little happy. “The qilin I helped out back then is returning the favor to Lyle. This is fate at work.”

The seventh, far less happy, replied, “Are you forgetting that Lyle almost got killed because of that?”

Sophia struggled to accept this.

Meanwhile, Clara asked, “Qilin hand the treasures of dungeons to men?”

“Yeah, apparently, it’s better to have some money.”

She’d piqued Clara’s curiosity.

“I’m starting to understand why you’re known as divine beasts. And this is quite intriguing. With your help, we may be able to learn more about the

ecology of qilin.”

But May pouted and said, “Huh? Keep me out of this. There are lots of bad humans out there, trying to capture us. I’m not saying another word.”

“Aww...”

While Clara fell into a slump, Monica hoisted up the sack.

Feeling out its weight, she remarked, “This is quite a large amount. With this much, we won’t have to worry about money for a while. Isn’t that nice, you damn chicken?”

“Right. Hooray.”

This debt would be paid back in...seed. *How am I supposed to explain this to everyone?*

I couldn’t contain my cold sweat.

Breaking out into laughter, the third head said, “This isn’t exactly our original plan, but you got the treasures anyways, and you’ve got a qilin on board. You’re headed in a good direction.”

“Monica’s right,” said a satisfied-sounding fourth head. “You’ll be fine for a while.”

For a while, yeah.

But this fortune—enough that we didn’t need to work for a long while—was only a drop in the bucket considering what was to come. As we’d decided to fight Ceres, we needed the funds to do so.

Reality’s a harsh mistress.

I looked up and saw that Novem was staring at me.

“Wh-What?”

“No, I was just reaffirming how amazing you are, my lord. I am being honest. You’re incredibly fortunate to be chosen as a qilin’s mate.”

Her smile inflicted a stabbing pain on my heart.

“Right...yep.”

Accepting her would mean making children with May. I hadn't made my resolve, so I wanted that topic to be put on hold, but the fifth scolded me. "What do you have against May, you bastard?!" he shouted.

There was definitely something wrong with him.

Additionally, the other four ancestors were delighted that we had added the combat prowess of a qilin to our growing forces. I knew it was necessary in the battle against Ceres, but was my reluctance really that inconsequential?

As a sweat dripped down my face, Novem said, "I'm sure Lord Fredriks is delighted."

Yeah, he is. I can tell.

With that said... I'd mentioned my ancestor. I'd never said anything about the fifth. Did Novem know that he'd looked after a qilin?

The king had been worn thin by the report he'd received from his minister. Day in and day out, he'd receive reports on the whereabouts of the qilin. But this time, it had come along with a report that every dungeon had been conquered.

"She's a plague on these lands. A divine beast of good fortune? To hell with that. What madness, to destroy every dungeon hidden in my nation."

The minister who delivered the report told him, "I think this is a good opportunity, Your Majesty. We do not have the ability to manage multiple dungeons. This was for the best."

"C-Cease with this nonsense! It was finally time. I was finally going to rise to the seat of leader of the confederation! All for this dream to be crushed by a mere beast! Do you understand how I feel?!"

"If even one of those dungeons burst, our country would fall to ruin."

"We've been pulling it off so far. Surely, we could have kept it up too. That's how it should have been."

The king curled his back and buried his face in his hands. The minister's report continued, but the king was no longer listening.

Chapter 97: Off to the Free City

We'd departed from the Kingdom of Lorcan and were now en route toward Baym. I heard a chorus of tumultuous voices from the rear compartment.

"Stop with this nonsense, you mysterious life-form! Also, who's the one who ate the useless chicken's sweets?!"

"I mean, I was hungry. Human food is really delicious, isn't it? I've grown fond of it."

"You gobbled up the meal I prepared, and you still have the audacity to say that?! No, don't sidetrack me. Who ate the chicken's sweets?! Confess, or you're all skipping lunch!"

"It was Shannon."

"You had some too, May! You've betrayed me!"

"It's your fault! It's because you ate my share! Listen, I wanted to have more, but she wouldn't share any with me!"

Monica's low voice cut through their escalating squabble. "It looks like we have a pair of dunces on our hands. No lunch for you two, and no dessert with your supper."

"I'm so sorry, Monica! I want to eat lunch."

"Forgive me! I tried to stop her, but May wouldn't listen."

"Shannon, you've betrayed me again!"

"You're the one who betrayed me first!"

Alas, what a sad tale it was. To think that the mythical qilin would stoop to Shannon's level. It was a truth of the world I could have gone without knowing.

That aside, May had a hefty appetite. Apparently, qilin were omnivores that indiscriminately devoured meat and vegetables. And, as it turned out, they were particularly fond of sweets.

She would often squabble over sweets with Shannon, and I would frequently catch her just as she was getting an earful from Monica.

Listening to their bickering from the front seat, I turned to Clara who was sitting beside me. Her left arm was now outfitted with a new prosthetic, quite similar to her previous one.

“How’s the new arm treating you?” I casually asked.

She returned a wry smile. “This one was thrown together by Monica and Lily. The professor is getting a little *too* invested in the new one, and it’s not done yet.”

Although it was a stopgap made by the automatons, this new prosthetic seemed to perform better than the previous one. Clara was content with it, though she was still curious about whatever it was that Damian was making.

“I’m grateful that he’s making it for me, but I grow anxious whenever I hear him talking about it.”

“What does he intend to do?”

“The last time I checked, he was trying to incorporate Demonic Tools and add a cannon. Personally, I’m scared about what the recoil would do to me.”

What ridiculous features are he trying to tack onto a prosthetic arm? Damian’s creativity is beyond me. I can’t ever hope to understand.

Next, it was Clara’s turn to strike up a conversation.

“You had it rough this time, Lyle.”

“Are you talking about May? I think it worked out in the end.”

Although she almost killed me.

“There’s that too, but I’m referring to those three. They’ve warmed up to one another ever since they returned. Or something to that effect.”

She struggled to put it into words; as I reflected on the past few days, I just couldn’t see where she was coming from. Everything seemed the same as before. It was like they’d put up walls between themselves.

“You think so? Miranda and Eva are still at each other’s throats, and Aria’s

often the butt of the joke. I don't think anyone's changed."

I got a mixed response from the Jewel.

"They're a little better, maybe?"

"Any improvement is a good thing."

"May is a soothing presence, isn't she? It's good to see her getting along with Shannon."

"You don't sound too interested, fifth head. Personally, I want these quarrels to end. I'm on edge here—I can never tell when it'll break out into a serious fight."

"Yeah, my moms were awful."

Is this really all right?

As I pondered the matter, Clara giggled and changed the topic. "Well, at least we're finally on our way to Baym."

Also known as the free city, Baym was a haven for adventurers. It was called the central hub of all adventurers and was a city that many adventurers set as their ultimate destination. It boasted a dungeon managed by the city itself and was a place where adventurers could thrive.

I wasn't too knowledgeable about it, but considering we were finally setting our sights on the city, I was overcome with a bit of a lonesome feeling.

There was a party I'd promised to reunite with someday, but they'd been killed at Ceres's hand. That promise would never be fulfilled.

It really got me thinking.

Clara seemed a bit concerned by my silence. "What's wrong?" she asked me.

"Well, I'm just reflecting on everything that's happened."

"I see. You even had a wanted poster this time around."

Lionel went and put out a wanted poster for me. He really was just doing whatever he wanted.

I haven't even done anything yet.

The third head laughed. “Well, he’s not wrong, considering what you intend to do. But it’ll be a bit of trouble if you stay on the wanted list forever. You may be going to a foreign country, but I’m sure there will be plenty of adventurers from Banseim there.”

True. It’d be a bother if rumors started spreading about me being a fugitive.

“What a bother.”

Not that the wanted poster resembled me in the slightest, but I didn’t want to have my name spread for the wrong reasons.

“Monica took a few measures, but we were unable to confirm if they were effective or not.”

“Monica? She did something?”

It seemed she’d done something without my knowledge.

I know she said to leave it to her, but did she really do something?

“You didn’t know, Lyle?” Clara jadedly asked.

After I’d returned a sincere nod, Clara began to explain what Monica had done.

“Well, you see...”

Around that same time, Lionel was at a town on Banseim’s eastern border. A small wooden tavern just scraping along under the management of an elderly man. This was outside of normal business hours, but he’d forcefully barged in and demanded alcohol.

He was acting as he pleased, abusing his knightly status.

Drinking alcohol in the middle of the day, Lionel voiced his dissatisfaction.

“They’re all incompetent, the lot of them. What do you mean ‘no need to worry’? They haven’t gathered a single scrap of information.”

Despite preparing wanted posters and offering a monetary reward, they had failed to gather any information whatsoever. In his frustration, Lionel had taken flight from the fortress and traveled across the lands boasting to the knights

and soldiers tasked with defending the border.

There was little else to occupy his time. So whenever he wasn't doing that, he'd drink the time away.

"What do you mean, 'we'll definitely catch them'? They still haven't been caught!"

The old owner seemed to be trembling in fear. Lionel was sure it was because he was a knight. *It feels good to have everyone in awe of my status*, he thought, knowing he'd finally gotten the respect he deserved.

All those humans who'd always looked down on him were now fawning all over him. Lionel was on cloud nine.

Then, his eyes wandered to the store's wall, where a wanted poster had been stuck up. The poster depicting Lyle's detestable face.

"They're even out here, huh? Well, I'm glad someone's doing their job properly. Cheers to that."

He commended the fact that the wanted posters he prepared had indeed been distributed across the lands. He drank his ale and relished in the food, but eventually, both began to run out.

"I want to drink more, and I want to eat too. I should put in another order. Hey, old man— Huh?"

But when he looked at the counter, the owner was nowhere to be seen. He craned his neck to search through the narrow store, yet couldn't find him anywhere.

"What? Did he go out? It's a crime to keep me waiting, you know. I'm a baron, and I'm the captain of Lady Ceres's Special Guard."

Boasting of his status and titles, he polished off the last bit of alcohol in his glass.

"Hey, old man!" he said, raising his voice. "Get out now, or you'll be rust on my blade!"

His speech began to slur, and suddenly he felt a tap on his shoulder from behind.

“Huh?”

Turning around with displeasure, he came face-to-face with the local soldiers, presumably brought in by the owner.

Lionel clicked his tongue. “What do you want? If you want to summon me, you should at least bring a knight. I’m a baron and—”

Ignoring him, the soldiers compared his face to the face on the wanted posters.

“There’s no doubt about it.”

“He’s the fugitive?”

“He’s doing everything he can to stand out. Is he an idiot?”

The words the soldiers exchanged in exasperated tones caused Lionel to flare up.

“Hey, what game are you playing? Me? A fugitive? I’m the captain of Lady Ceres’s Special Guard, Baron Lionel Walt!”

He stood and made a grab at the nearest soldier, but was thrown down all too easily.

As he lay on the floor, he heard them talking among themselves.

“What an annoying drunk.”

“What’s the Special Guard?”

“Who knows?”

They exchanged looks and shook their heads.

Information from the center hadn’t fully reached the outer regions. The soldiers at the bottom hadn’t even heard of the Special Guard before. And so, they knew nothing about Lionel.

Lionel stood with his hand on his sword’s hilt. He drew.

“D-Don’t underestimate me! And take a good look at that poster! I’m Lionel! Not Lyle!”

The three soldiers checked the poster.

“No, this has got to be you. It says Lionel, right here. You just don’t know when to give up, do you? We’re taking you to the station.”

The soldiers smacked Lionel’s drawn sword out of his hand.

“W-Wait! I’m Lionel!”

“And I’m saying, you’re the fugitive Lionel.”

His hands were tied with ropes as he was led off by the three men. In his drunken stupor, Lionel frantically thought over what could have happened.

Wh-What’s the meaning of this? Why is it me and not Lyle?!

The poster the soldiers dropped entered his field of view. Lyle’s portrait had been subtly altered, and furthermore, the name written on it was “Lionel.”

“Huh?”

Lionel felt like he was dreaming.

“Oh, I see. I drank too much. This must be a dream,” he thought aloud.

As the soldiers led him along, he hoped he would wake up sometime soon. Ultimately, the next day came around, and he was still in a cell; only then did he realize it was indeed his reality.

No one paid him any heed for the next few days that followed, and he remained jailed all the while.

“...and that’s pretty much it.”

I had to doubt my own ears.

“She swapped out the wanted posters?”

Apparently, she’d produced some posters featuring Lionel’s name and replaced the original posters all the way up to the point that we crossed the border. I found it hard to believe, but she’d apparently done this at every town we’d passed through.

“She was doing that?”

And suddenly, Monica’s voice rang through the driver’s compartment.

“Heh heh, you’re only noticing that now? What a dull chicken you are.”

Monica had poked her head through the door and was peering at me.

“I didn’t know you were capable of that.”

“Your Monica is a perfect, complete maid. Why wouldn’t I be able to do that? I swapped out every poster in the night and changed out the stacks that were going to be distributed too. I also exchanged the ones at the checkpoint while we were crossing the border. Nothing is impossible for your beautiful Monica. I am a *maid*—in other words, I’m a first-rate all-rounder capable of anything and everything! That’s what a maid is made of!”

“I helped,” Clara chimed in.

“I’m sorry you had to put up with her,” I apologized.

Monica bit at her handkerchief. “There he goes, ignoring me and focusing on other women. But still, I love him.”

“She’s ridiculous, but amazing,” the fifth head said, sounding strangely impressed.

Monica had begun a one-woman skit, so I ignored her and spoke to Clara.

“In that case, there should be some confusion by now.”

“You never know. Perhaps Lionel has been arrested.”

I laughed at her joke. It was a bit refreshing to know she had a sense of humor.

“Yeah, I doubt it.”

“Right. Even I don’t see that happening.”

When she got a bit bashful, her cheeks tinting a bit red like they were now, Clara was adorable. But that warm, laid-back atmosphere was quickly demolished by May.

She barged into the driver’s compartment and closed in on me. She came so close our noses almost touched.

“Lyle, you know about cake? Hey, do you know what that is?”

“Where’s this coming from? Also, you’re too close.”

“Be kind to her,” the fifth grumbled.

When I tried to back away from her, she got even closer, even pressing against me now.

“Shannon won’t stop bragging about it. I’ve never eaten cake before!”

“Huh? Really?”

“Back in my time, I only gave her pastries. Cake was a bit... I didn’t know if it was okay to give it to her.”

The fifth head’s words had the sixth taken aback.

“You never gave any sweets to your kids.”

“No, you lot had your mothers for that. For some reason, they’d never give anything to May, though. I wonder why.”

Isn’t it because of your attitude?

That aside, I tried to escape, only for May to push me down.

“Lyle, I want to eat cake too!”

“F-Fine, I get it, I get it. I’ll get you cake. Monica will make it for you!”

“Really? That’s my hubby for you!”

As May smiled at me, Monica sent me a bone-chilling look.

“This fobby, mysterious life-form is the damn chicken’s wife? I don’t accept it. I’m going to look after that useless bird forever!”

No, how does that have anything to do with me having a wife or not?

“Clara. Help.”

I pleaded to Clara, as she was the only one nearby. Despite the ruckus we were making, she continued to calmly drive Porter.

Her face turned expressionless. “You get along well, I see.”

Those words sent the third head into a frenzy.

“Lyle! Follow up with her. You have to make amends with Clara. She’s mad. She’s probably very mad.”

Huh? Why?

Sitting on my waist, May looked at Clara and laughed. “Do you want his seed too? Then just take it. Don’t worry, I don’t plan on monopolizing him.”

Clara’s glasses slid askew.

“Huh? S-S-Seed?”

Her face turned bright red.

She was in the middle of driving, and suddenly Porter began to move in a wild zigzagging motion. I could hear the screams of the girls from the back.

May fell forward, her face buried in my chest.

“Wh-What happened in h-here?”

And Sophia happened to pick that exact moment to pop into the driver’s compartment.

“Ah.”

I racked my head over just how I would explain the situation as I heard the seventh head mutter, “Lyle, why do you always create situations where you’re backed into a corner?”

Seeing me lying down with May in my embrace, Sophia turned red from ear to ear. May sat up and stared at her blankly.

The qilin clearly didn’t understand the situation... This was incredibly bad.

“Wh-What are you people doing?!”

“It’s a misunderstanding! Someone explain! Clara—”

My words came to an abrupt halt. The very person to which I’d just called out to had hit her head and knocked herself out.

I looked at Monica to see a look of exhilaration on her face. *She’s enjoying the situation, dammit.*

Sophia’s exclamation caused even further unrest from the back.

“What’s with all the noise, Sophia? What could possibly—? Wait, Lyle! Y-You, what are you doing?!”

Even Aria had popped in, and she was soon followed by the others.

Miranda was smiling, but she was terrifying nonetheless. “Oh my, how bold. Why don’t you pamper me too?”

You want me to what?! No, I don’t really mind, but there’s something scary about her.

“I’m not sure what to make of you suddenly going for the qilin. Lyle, I really think you should start with the main heroine. You can’t leave Novem by the wayside! Make Novem your first, okay?”

Eva said something, but really, I wished she’d realized the misunderstanding rather than going on about the order.

Shannon held her stomach, laughing. “If you could just see yourself in a mirror right now. That’s quite the face you’re making.”

She was laughing at all my ills—as I thought, she was a detestable girl.

“Milord, err... I think such things would be better put off until nighttime.”

Novem, I’m begging you. Please listen to me.

“Everyone, wait. This is a misunderstanding. You have it all wrong.”

Then May puffed out her cheeks. “Hey, what do you mean I’m wrong? You promised to give me your seed, didn’t you?!”

“That’s right, Lyle. You have to look after May properly,” the fifth chimed in.

“I knew it! Lyle, come with me for a second.”

Aria apprehended me and forcefully dragged me to the back. Monica got to treating Clara, waving me off with a smile.

Evidently, she had no intentions of resolving the misunderstanding.

A perfect maid? Please.

You’re not even trying to save your master from his crisis.

“Lyle, this happened because you didn’t properly explain May’s nature to your party members.”

“You’re hopeless. Thirty points.”

“Don’t forget about the cake.”

“Fifth, just shut up.”

“You have it rough, Lyle.”

I ignored all the arbitrary criticism coming from the Jewel.

More importantly, how do I get myself out of this?

Within the Jewel, the round-table room. I entered to find my five ancestors waiting for me.

Seeing my haggard face, the third head chuckled.

“Please don’t laugh.”

“Well, what else do you want me to do? Granted, they should have seen it coming when they heard about you being the qilin’s mate and whatnot. They’re all, well, you know. Pretty naive, I guess.”

I was planning to tell them about the seed business once everything settled down. But I ended up forgetting about it, and it came to light at the worst possible time.

Miranda’s smile still sent shivers down my spine.

She’d told May, “We have an order here. Wait your turn.”

An order? We do? This is the first I’m hearing about it.

“Putting that aside, let’s talk about a few things before you get to Baym. Thanks to May, you’ve secured the funds to operate for a while.”

The third head’s serious air made the other four tense up. I was still a bit dissatisfied and had a few choice complaints I wanted to get out, but I held back.

“We’re going to work toward defeating Ceres, right? Is there anything else?”

“Lyle, the third is not talking about your objective, but about the process. You’ll defeat Ceres. That’s obvious enough. But you’ve yet to decide how you’re going to do it,” the fourth head said.

The seventh then began to list out my options. “First, you could unite a force great enough to take her on. But the chances of that are slim. After all, there aren’t many foreign countries that see her as a real threat, and the situation within the border is too chaotic. Perhaps the opposition is gathering strength, but we don’t know about them, so we can’t join them. Even if they do exist, you’re Ceres’s brother.”

The surrounding nations were waiting for Banseim to grow weak and planned to watch and wait until the massive superpower had completely exhausted itself.

Even if someone made a rebel faction, my lineage would pose an issue if I wanted to join it.

“Next, you could infiltrate an already existing power, and guide it toward defeating Ceres. This is also unlikely. Regardless of whichever nation you enlist in, it will take far too much time.”

I’d have to enlist, rack up achievements, rise through the ranks—it was a lengthy process, and I couldn’t even imagine how bad things would be by the time I had any authority.

“Third, you could search for a hero. With this method, you’ll be lending your full assistance to someone who fits the bill.”

A hero—does such a thing even exist?

If there was a hero out there great enough to fight Ceres, I’d love to help them in any way I could.

But the sixth head denied all of them.

“All three of those options have their issues, so I’ll propose another one. Lyle, you need to take a stand.”

I understood what he was getting at. I’d have to personally raise the banner and build my own force.

As I contemplated this option, the fifth head laughed.

“What, are you getting cold feet?”

“I’m not hesitating over defeating Ceres. I just don’t know if I can play that

role or not.”

“You just have to do it. That’s the path you’ve chosen.”

As I remained silent, the third head clapped his hands, drawing everyone’s attention.

“It depends on the situation, and we’ll have to gather more information before we can reach an informed decision. But Lyle, you’ll have to think carefully about how you’ll fight.”

“I know.”

The fourth began talking about our future plans. “For the time being, you should work as an adventurer while you gather funds and information. If you find a country that’s wary of Ceres, that’s a plus. And if you catch wind of a hero, you can go check them out.”

“But you can’t keep at adventurer work forever,” the sixth head said, folding his arms.

“Right,” the fifth agreed.

As I cocked my head quizzically, the seventh head explained, “Lyle, people care about titles. As an adventurer, you’re no different from a ruffian. Having a proper title alone will net you more credibility.”

“Often the title matters more than the individual,” the third added. “It all depends, but you should do everything you can in the meantime.”

There were loads of things I wanted to do.

“Gathering funds and intel is indispensable, but why not gather comrades too?” said the third. “Quality is important, but you can’t knock quantity either.”

The fourth went on, “If it comes to war, moonlighting as a mercenary might not be a bad idea.”

“I have my qualms about it, but asking May for help is also an option,” the fifth conceded. “If it gets out that you’ve got a qilin by your side, I’m sure quite a few people will flock to you.”

“Use whatever you have. But even with that, you have far too little to best

Ceres. Lyle, you need to be aware of that,” said the sixth head.

“Even if your deeds will have you branded a villain, you must be prepared to do what’s necessary,” added the seventh.

I nodded at their words, and the third head smiled.

“Let’s do what we can. Right, for starters, how about gaining some experience, Lyle? Fighting strong opponents will be a valuable experience.”

“Strong opponents?”

“You’ve got them right here, don’t you? Let’s not forget your wounds heal instantly in the Jewel. It will be impossible to train your body, but you can still learn how to fight.”

The fourth head nodded. “Good point. In that case, the strongest among us —”

“I’ll take you on.”

“Surely me.”

“Me, I guess.”

“It’s my time to shine.”

“You must be talking about me.”

All five of them proclaimed themselves the strongest, and for a long while, the Jewel was wrapped up in silence.

What is this?

Wait, all this time, all five of them had been certain they were the strongest?

And suddenly, it all burst.

“No, it has to be me! I might not look it, but I have plenty of experience on the battlefield.”

“I may have been praised highly for my management of internal affairs, but I never said I couldn’t fight. Not once! I just didn’t have the opportunity.”

“Just how many enemies do you think I buried with my own hands? My individual ability and my aptitude in group battles have been proved countless

times.”

“It was nothing but defensive battles for you, Fifth. Meanwhile, I’m the one who expanded the territory more than anyone. I’ve defeated more foes than anyone here.”

“All nonsense from a bunch of outdated old men. The times have changed, Sixth. And I am the strongest member of House Walt.”

The five glowering men began to fight.

“It’s me!”

“Oh c’mon, Third. You’re the one who ended up dying in battle!”

The third and fourth grasped at one another, while elsewhere, the fifth and sixth had begun exchanging punches.

“You already lost to me!”

“Shut up! I wouldn’t have lost in my heyday! And your martial arts are powerless before weapons.”

The seventh head sighed. “You already lost the moment you turned to weapons from a bygone era. It’s the age of the gun. Lyle, you should learn how to use guns. I’ll teach you.”

The other four looked at him.

“Are guns even useful?”

“Each individual bullet is too expensive. It’s financially unfeasible.”

“Considering they still aren’t widespread, I’d say they were a failed invention.”

“You’re always too quick to cut corners, to turn to the nearest convenience. It’s a bad habit of yours.”

With all four on board to condemn him, the seventh head sprouted a vein on his brow.

“You little— Do you want me to fill you with holes?!”

They all pulled out their weapons, glaring at each other again.

Is it really that important, knowing who's strongest? In the first place, I'm better off fighting a wide variety of opponents if I want to get stronger. In that case, the right answer is...

“Ah, then I just have to beat all of you, right?”

Time seemed to freeze as soon as the words left my mouth.

Their faces took a serious turn as they turned toward me.



“Hey, what do you think he means by that?”

“Isn’t he underestimating us?”

“Compared to Ceres, everyone else might be a small fry. But hearing him put it so bluntly does tick me off.”

“Lyle, you think too little of us.”

“You’re making your grandpa cry, Lyle. You need to be taught a lesson.”

The five of them began to close in on me.

“Huh? Did I say anything wrong? I mean, fighting all five of you would give me more experience than fighting just one of you, right?”

The fourth and sixth grabbed my arms, one each, and lifted me up.

“You’re not wrong, but there’s something called phrasing.”

“Lyle, you’re being a little naive.”

“No, but it’s true!”

As I tried to resist, the fifth and seventh grabbed my legs and lifted me up.

“As you wish, you’ll fight all of us.”

“That’s right. We’ll have Lyle decide who’s the strongest.”

The third head looked at me with a dark smile on his face. “It’s good for us to fight amongst ourselves, but why don’t we let Lyle get some experience while we’re at it? So Lyle, you’ll fight all five of us. We’ll ask you who’s strongest after that.”

“Hey! Why are you angry!”

I was carried straight off into a room of memories.

“Someone save me!”

The sixth head laughed. “There’s no one to help you here! Lyle, we’ll whip you right into shape. We’ll show you our full strength. After all, you can die here and come right back!”

“What’s gotten into you all of a sudden? Ah, wait—”

I was tossed into the room. Behind me, back in the round-table room, I heard a metallic click. But that was the least of my worries.

Epilogue

“Wake up.”

I felt terrible.

“Please wake up, Lyle.”

I felt someone shaking me awake and barely managed to crack my eyes open. And there was Sophia’s face peering into mine.

“Good. You’re finally awake.”

I put a hand to my forehead as I reflected on what had transpired in the Jewel.

It was terrible, plain and simple.

The third head’s slippery, formless swordsmanship paired with his illusions.

The fourth’s dagger style fully leveraged his speed.

For the fifth, it seemed his sword was a Demonic Tool of sorts, as it split into countless segments and moved like a whip to ensnare me and tear me to pieces. To make matters worse, he was a master of magic, so he’d mince me, then burn me.

The sixth’s weapon of choice was a halberd. A polearm with an axe and a spike that allowed for a wide range of attacks. When swung around by that mountain of a man, it was a frightening sight to behold.

But worst of all was the seventh head.

He’d use his pistol to aim at my vitals. If I tried to run, he’d take out my joints again and again, and I couldn’t even count the number of times he’d shot me to death.

I’d faced death in the Jewel countless times, and with each revival, I’d be pitted against a different opponent. I was forced to fight no matter how many times I went down and died countless times all the way up to the moment I was

awoken.

Well, we're talking about the Jewel here. It's not like I actually died.

"You're covered in sweat. Do you need a towel?"

"Thanks."

I borrowed Sophia's towel to wipe away my sweat.

"You were groaning a lot in your sleep. I was wondering whether I should wake you or not, but you didn't stir even when I called out to you. I was worried."

Yeah, I was being murdered by some terrible people.

"Was it that bad?"

"Yes. You didn't wake up even when Shannon pinched your nose."

"I'll do the same the next time I catch her sleeping."

Sophia gave a wry smile and covered for Shannon. "Please forgive her. She was worried in her own way."

"I don't believe it. I'm sure she was just having some fun."

I just knew I would have laughed had I done the same.

"You don't need to be so blunt about it," Sophia mumbled, looking rather troubled.

"So, did you need me for something?"

I looked around and saw that Sophia and I were the only ones aboard. Porter had come to a stop.

"We're on break. I thought you might want to take a look around."

Looks like I slept for quite a long while. Yet I don't feel any less tired. It's the opposite, actually.

"I'll head out, then."

"That's a good idea. I'm sure you'll be surprised when you see it. I was surprised too."

“See what?”

Curious, I stood and stepped out. And there, for once, I found that Damian was outside too, having brought out a table and chair to drink tea. This was a rare sight.

“Oh, finally up?”

“It’s rare to see you having tea outside, Damian.”

“I have interests beyond research, you know.”

Lily was nearby, pouring tea as his attendant.

“Would you like a cup?”

He offered me some—a cup filled with mostly sugar, and a sprinkle of black tea. I shook my head. And when I turned to the direction the two of them were looking, my eyes widened in shock.

“It’s incredible, isn’t it?” said Sophia. “You can see it clearly from here.”

In the distance, I could see the Free City of Baym. It was still a considerable distance away, but I could make it out clearly.

We were up on the top of a hill, looking down at the sights. Over the rich plains that carpeted the earth, the high walls that surrounded a massive city, and the handful of buildings that protruded out from them... They were all a sight to behold. But the most remarkable thing was...

“This is my first time ever seeing the ocean,” said Sophia.

Hearing her delighted voice, I gave my own thoughts. “The ocean’s pretty vast, isn’t it?”

I could only provide such a mundane comment as I gazed at the ocean that spread out just beyond the land. Though I knew it existed, seeing it for the first time left me speechless.

It seemed that everyone felt the same.

Shannon held Miranda’s hand and said, “So the ocean’s like a really big lake, right?”

“Shannon, the ocean is completely different from a lake.”

“Huh? No way! I always thought a big lake was called an ocean!”

Eva looked moved, and so did Clara.

“This is a first for me too. Truly, this is incredible.”

Being inland, Banseim had no contact with the ocean. Even Eva—who lived on the road—had apparently never seen it before.

Clara was hugging a book to her chest. “It’s even greater than what I’ve read in books. I’m glad I got to see it.”

Aria turned to us, waving her hands. “Come over here!” she called out in delight.

And beside her, Monica was shaking her head. “Good grief, you’ve all got a long way to go if you’re getting excited over this. But this is my perfect chance to wear my custom maid-style swimsuit to bewitch that useless chicken. I can’t wait to go to the beach.”

She was on about something or another again.

Even the wind that stroked my face seemed a little different.

May sat and looked at all of us curiously.

“Is it that rare?” She glanced at Novem, who was some distance away from her excited comrades. “Novem isn’t getting too worked up over it.”

When I called out to her, Novem sent me a troubled look and nodded. “Yes, well... I’m so surprised I don’t know how to react.”

Come to think of it, I don’t think I’ve ever seen Novem get excited before. She’d always carried a calm demeanor, now and back then.

In contrast to Novem, the ancestors in the Jewel were in an uproar.

“The ocean’s amazing!” the third exclaimed. “It’s greater than I ever imagined.”

“I heard that Baym had a port, but now that I’m getting a good look at it, it’s incredible,” said the fourth.

The fifth noted, “It’s bigger than Central. It’s like a completely different world across those mountains.”

Speaking of mountains, we'd come to Baym after passing through a checkpoint at the bottom of a valley between some. The scenery had certainly changed since then.

I could see a number of small towns and villages around the highly developed metropolis. There were fields of grain, making for quite a tranquil landscape.

But the closer one got to the walls, the more buildings would be packed together, and soon they crowded into one massive jumbled mass. All at once, it turned from little farming villages to one massive urban sprawl.

"This...would be a hard city to capture," was the sixth head's take on it.

Meanwhile, the seventh ominously added, "It would be easy for me...well, not exactly. Still, I'm surprised they got to this point without a king or lord."

The Free City of Baym was a city of merchants and adventurers. While there were many adventurers, the ones who actually governed the city were the merchants. With that in mind, it reminded me somewhat of Aramthurst—the academic city ruled by the Academy—but the atmosphere here was entirely different.

We'd finally made it here.

I gripped the Jewel with that thought in mind, and the ancestors called out to me in turn.

"Now then, it's time to get to work. Are you ready, Lyle?" the third said in his usual light tone.

"You should be able to do many things here. More than anything, this is beyond Ceres's reach." The fourth seemed most concerned about the time it would take Ceres to reach us.

"People, goods, money—it all seems to gather here. I'd like to ask them what they did to get it to this point." The fifth head sounded slightly cynical.

"So this is where Lyle can gain strength. Well, it all starts after you get in there and gather some information—but it's starting to get fun, isn't it, Lyle?"

The sixth head's cheerful voice seemed to ease my anxiety a bit.

"Raising your expectations too high can also be an issue, but we must have

hope. Let's pray that Baym turns out to be a convenient city for us. Well, if it isn't—we'll just make it into one." The seventh was surely giving a nasty smile as he received widespread approval from the other four.

Good grief, why are they so reliable when it comes to scheming?

As I listened in silence, Novem reached out to me.

"Is something wrong, Milord?"

"No, it's nothing. This is going to be our base from now on, right? That just got me thinking a bit."

Novem peered into my face and nodded.

"You will surely gain a lot of power here, Milord."

And not just simple strength—I needed to gain power in every sense of the world. If that didn't work out, I'd just move my base elsewhere at the first opportunity I got, but for now I had my hopes on Baym.

This was the hub where adventurers gathered.

Here, any adventurer could grab fame and fortune as they please—or at least, that was what I'd heard. I hoped those rumors turned out to be true.

"It's starting to get fun, Lyle," the third head told me.

And I took a moment to lament it. From his voice, I just knew the delighted, mean-spirited face he was making.

Perhaps those feelings made it to my face as Novem looked at me with concern.

"Milord?"

"It's nothing. For now—let's have some fun with it."

Novem was startled by my words. Far more surprised than when she'd seen the ocean.

It did seem that my ancestors' catchphrases were rubbing off on me. I felt so embarrassed I cupped a hand to my mouth.

I need to be careful, I thought, but I didn't really hate it.

“Just kidding. We’ll act cautiously, as we should.”

“I-I see. Yes, of course. Let’s be careful, okay?”

Novem frantically got her story straight with mine, yet she seemed strangely pleased.

Now then, we’ve made it to Baym, but what do we do from here?

At Baym’s harbor, soldiers were busily at work on the deck of a ship waiting to depart. Among them was a girl standing under a parasol whose black hair and purple eyes left a striking impression.

The people around her seemed mindful of her.

“Miss—no, Captain. I pray for another safe voyage.”

The girl turned to the voice. Her pigtailed black hair swayed and sparkled.

The girl smiled. “Yes, I hope so too.”

The rough sailors raised laughter at her words.

“We’re safe so long as the captain’s around.”

“She’s like a goddess of fortune on the sea.”

“With the captain, and with this ship, we can cross any ocean.”

The trusted girl—the captain—folded up her parasol, propping it against her shoulder as she raised her voice. “I’m no goddess or anything fancy like that. But I’ve got a good feeling about this voyage. We’ll make it; the problem’s whether the cargo sells or not.”

Her burly first mate crossed his arms and let out a laugh.

“No doubt about that!”

The vessel the girl and her sailors rode was a long one indeed. But that wasn’t only what set it apart from the vessels around it. Among all the sailing ships, theirs was powered by steam. There were paddle wheels attached to both sides of the hull, and a long and slender smoke stack that let off a billowing trail of white.

Ships like these showcased Baym's advanced technology, but they were very few in number. The girl, entrusted with this valuable ship, wasn't chosen as captain purely for her luck.

A face popped in on the deck—the girl's father. A middle-aged man whose black hair was slicked back, and whose body was tough and toned. He wore a red suit and gave off a sharp and able impression. With all the tough bodyguards surrounding him, it was almost like he was a mafia boss.

The rough and tough sailors straightened their backs at the sight of the man.

"Get back to work," he told them before approaching the girl.

And then, he cast off his sharp demeanor. "My dear Vera, I've come to see you off," he said, taking no attempts to hide the face of a doting father.

The girl—Vera—spoke with a hint of exasperation, but she was grateful nonetheless.

"You didn't have to, papa."

The man's name was Fidel Trace—one of the wealthiest merchants in Baym.

"What are you saying?! A sea voyage is fraught with dangers. The thought of never seeing you again makes your papa's heart feel like it's going to burst. Honestly, I'd prefer it if you stayed safe in the mansion."

As Fidel worried for her, Vera reassured, "Have I ever not returned?"

"W-Well, that's true..."

The man who had made a huge name for himself was falling apart in front of his daughter.

"This time, I'll be back before you know it. Just wait for me, papa."

"A-All right."

It was a sight that made one worry more about the father than the daughter.

"We're about to set off, so you should get off the ship."

"You're so cold, Vera. You could be a little kinder to papa."

"Maybe when I get back."

As she waved her hand, Fidel reluctantly disembarked.

Vera, accompanied by her first mate, started their walk to the bridge.

But along the way, Vera suddenly stopped and turned.

“What’s wrong, Captain?”

“No—well, I just got a feeling.”

She took in the familiar sights of Baym’s harbor and felt something curious—something different from usual.

“A bad feeling?”

Her first mate looked at her, concerned, so Vera shook her head.

“Not at all. A good one, in fact. Maybe something nice will happen when we return.”

“That’s good to hear. A real load off my mind.”

Vera started walking again. With a premonition of something on the horizon, she set off from Baym.

The gates sent into Baym’s outer wall were enormous. They were big enough for Damian’s Dump Truck to easily pass through, and they seemed to be very sturdy. The number of people passing in and out of those massive gates was also very high.

People, wagons, and whatever else. There was a dizzying number of them all.

The roads that led to Baym were well-kept, but the horse and cow dung had left them in a terrible state. I could see some people cleaning it up, but they were just dumping it on the roadside.

I looked up at the Dump Truck.

Clara was in there, calibrating her prosthetic arm, and Shannon, who didn’t want to be outside, had accompanied her. Crammed full of all manner of luggage, Damian’s Dump Truck couldn’t take too many people, so the other members were waiting in a line outside.

The Dump Truck was drawing attention from everyone in eyeshot. It was the same wherever we went. Whether it was Porter or the Dump Truck, they always stood out.

Turning my eyes back to the ground, I said, "Stowing Porter away was the right call."

Novem, standing next to me, agreed, "It would have gotten dirty, after all."

But a contrary opinion came from Eva. "A little dirt won't hurt. I'd have much preferred to be inside."

The heat and smell of so many people gathered together...made for a terrible experience. Honestly, I didn't want to stay for long either.

Without masks, Aria and Sophia had taken to covering their mouths and noses with cloth.

"The city gates are usually the same wherever you go, but this one is especially bad."

"Isn't that a sign of just how many people use it?"

The fact we were outside prevented it from getting too bad, but I was scared to think about how it would be inside the city. *I hope the residents of Baym are hygienic.*

From within the Jewel, I heard some appraising voices.

"There's a lot of foot traffic. Too much, I'd say."

"Considering the scope, it has to be even more than Central."

"They have a port, and other gates besides this one. And it's still this bad. It must be incredible inside."

"Looks like we can get our hopes up."

"It's the city of merchants and adventurers. I wouldn't be surprised if it's in a complete state of neglect and disrepair."

As per usual, the seventh was strict on adventurers, but it would be pretty troublesome if it was too bad. After all, it'd make me anxious about using the place as our central base from here on out.

Putting that aside.

“Damn chicken, please get in the Dump Truck. You’ll catch something if you stay around here. Now abandon these women and join your Monica!”

Monica had been very annoying for a while now.

“I’ll be fine.”

“How can you be so optimistic in these unsanitary conditions?! Hey, isn’t that vixen adept at magic? Use some cleaning magic or something.”

Novem answered her unreasonable demand with a smile; albeit, her smile didn’t reach her eyes.

“Magic is not that convenient.”

“In a fantasy world? You’re useless. Then you, spider woman.”

Next, she turned to Miranda, who had her mouth covered with a scarf.

“Don’t want to. And if you can use magic, you can mitigate a lot of this stuff.”

With magic, you could make shade, or soften the smell. If you wanted to protect yourself with magic, there were plenty of ways to go about it. Monica turned her neck, staring back at Novem.

With a nonchalant face, Novem said, “Yes, if that’s what you want, I can do it. But cleaning is something else entirely—there isn’t anything as convenient as that.”

With a first-rate magician like Novem saying it, it was probably true. I’d never heard about it either.

“Nothing but sophism... This is why real women are no good.”

As Monica grumbled, May grabbed her skirt.



“Monica, give me some food.”

“You’re eating again?!”

“Yeah!”

May had gotten bored with waiting in line and had instead gotten to thinking about food. *Is this really the best place to eat?* I had to wonder.

“Once we’re in Baym, let’s find a good place to eat. Wait until then, May,” I said.

May pouted. “You’re no fun.”

Novem offered a gentle reprimand. “May, please listen to what Lord Lyle says.”

“Ugh! If Novem says so, I’ll do it. But why are we in line? Can’t we just get in from the sky?”

If only it was that easy.

“There are a few things we have to investigate, and we can’t just come and go as we please.”

“Humans sure are a pain.”

As much as I wanted to agree with her, she would have to be patient.

The line slowly proceeded, and as I wondered, *When are we ever going to get into the city?* I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned to see Eva pointing behind us with her thumb.

“They’ve been glaring for a while now.”

Looking in the direction Eva indicated, I saw a group of men. The one who stood out most was the young man at the center. He was around the same age as me, and he drew attention because there was something about him that made it clear he was their leader.

Also, he had a bit of a peculiar appearance.

The greatsword on his back was conspicuous, but, well... He was wearing trousers and boots. Greaves, kneepads, and armor around his waist. But up top,

he exposed his bare skin. He wore nothing but a tank top.

Despite his heavily armored legs and waist, his upper half was almost completely exposed.

His skin was well tanned, and his unkempt black hair had been swept back. A wild look—if you could call it that.

“Are we making too much noise?” I asked, feeling self-conscious.

To which Eva replied, “In this line? I doubt that’s the whole story.”

There were voices all around us, some louder than others. It wasn’t like we were the only ones making a ruckus.

Miranda observed the group and seemed to realize something. “Oh, I get it.”

“You do?”

I, for one, did not. *Hopefully, she’ll enlighten me.*

The men in the Jewel evidently couldn’t care less.

“More importantly, aren’t his clothes a bit strange? I don’t see anyone else dressed like that, so I don’t think that’s the trend.”

“Why a tank top?”

“So unbalanced.”

“Lyle, go ask him: ‘Is that what you’re into?’”

“No, it could be due to family circumstances or religious reasons. Otherwise, there’s something off with that outfit.”

Instead of commenting on his attire, I wish they’d just tell me why we’re being glared at.

As I kept glancing back, Aria grabbed my arm.

“Stop paying attention to them, or else they’ll pick a fight.”

“Lyle, don’t turn back too many times,” Sophia agreed.

“I mean, I’m curious.”

Then Novem heaved a sigh. “Milord, you mustn’t pay any mind to the

jealousy of others, or you'll never have rest."

"Jealousy?"

I cocked my head.

Just what part of me, what factor would anyone be envious about?

On closer inspection, the group seemed to be dressed as adventurers. Their equipment seemed a bit less than reliable, but they were in the same business as me.

Seeing as I didn't get it, Monica turned to me wearily and said, "You're being served by someone as magnificent as me. Isn't it obvious why everyone would be jealous of you?"

"Really? I don't see it that way."

"You're terrible! What a terrible chicken! But even if you're a damn useless buffoon, I'll serve you to the end. After all, I'm an adorable, dedicated, commendable automaton!"

I'd flipped a strange switch once more, and she was back to her theatrics. I promptly started ignoring her.

Folding her hands behind her head, May said, "You're so dense, Lyle. You're like a completely different person than in battle."

"No, I mean..."

My attitude got some discontent voices from the Jewel as well.

"He's a bit dense, no?"

"You should be able to figure it out with a bit of thought."

"Even I'm jealous. I wish I could go on a journey with May."

"Fifth, just shut up already. But Lyle... You're seriously dense."

"Your grandpa is worried about you, Lyle."

Seriously, why?

I was about to say something, but suddenly, Miranda and Eva exchanged a look, and then it was like they had rehearsed it in advance.

“He really is dense. When it comes to these things?”

“Yeah, Lyle can be like that sometimes.”

It seemed they were both teasing me, as they hugged me from both sides with rather cryptic smiles on their faces.

“Hey, wait!”

I heard footsteps approaching from behind. The two of them quickly backed away, and instead, I was face-to-face with the man in the tank top.

“You’re putting on quite a show, huh?”

The young man raised his voice threateningly, so I put my hands in front of my chest and showed my palms in a gesture of peace.

“If it’s about the noise, I apologize.”

I heard a variety of shouts from the Jewel, including, “Pathetic.” “Beat him to a pulp!” and “Go for the eyes!” I wanted to settle things peacefully though, so I ignored them.

“I don’t feel a lick of sincerity from you. Is that it?”

Behind the young man, his gaggle of grinning peers had gathered.

Miranda was smiling, but she had discreetly drawn a knife where they couldn’t see. “There’s nothing Lyle needs to apologize for. You were the ones who glared at us first.”

Novem had picked up her staff and was ready to fight at a moment’s notice.

“You’re demanding a sincere apology from Milord? And for what? This is beyond the pale.”

Just when I thought I’d stop them, the young men suddenly shied back. They huddled into a circle right in front of us and started discussing something.

“The big city sure is different. We’ve already run into beauties out here.”

“It was the right call to leave the village.”

“We’ll make it big here, and prove those village folks wrong.”

It looks like they set off for Baym from the countryside. Their lacking

equipment probably meant they hadn't even become adventurers yet.

The leader turned back to me.

"If you wanna show some sincerity, then fight me!"

"Huh?"

I was wondering what he was going to say, but he suddenly came out with a duel.

"Oh, he's a bumpkin," the seventh muttered.

More importantly, I can't understand what's going through their heads.

"Why do we have to fight?"

"Well, that goes without saying! If I win, then... Uh..."

The young man's gaze shifted to take in my comrades around me. His face turned an embarrassed red as he mustered a smile.

"Ladies, my name is Erhart Baumann. I'll free you this instant."

The young man—apparently called Erhart—was acting like he'd come out with some grand declaration.

May promptly cocked her head and asked, "Why?"

"No, well— Look, a man who's got women fawning all over him's obviously bad news. I'm tryna help out here!"

Aria and Sophia exchanged a look and shared a shrug. They didn't get it either.

Monica scoffed.

But from the Jewel, the third head sounded genuinely moved.

"This kid's actually surprisingly fun."

"Third, please settle down," the fourth head chided.

Once he was silent, I addressed Erhart. "Umm, I do not accept the challenge."

"Q-Quit your griping! You'll be nothing but rust on my Demon Sword Grammer!"

He tried to draw the greatsword from his back, but he couldn't. And after he took a bit too long, his comrades helped him out.

The sword that was finally revealed...well, he called it a Demon Sword, but it was a tattered greatsword whose most notable feature was its rust.

The Jewel grew rowdy.

"Demon Sword, he says! And the sword with such a grandiose name turned out to be a shoddy, decrepit thing! This man sure knows how to make people laugh."

I could hear the sixth head, sounding like he was holding his stomach in laughter.

Even by their judgment, the greatsword didn't seem to be anything special.

Noticing something was off, people gradually began to gather.

Amid this, Erhart pressed on. "C'mon, draw it, you coward. Or are you going to run away in front of your lady friends?"

I never agreed to fight in the first place.

"No, we'll just be causing trouble for everyone around us, so I'm not going to fight."

"What a coward! Hey, are you really sure you wanna follow this guy? Y-You know, y-you could join our party if you'd like."

Erhart, a man who glared at me, and fawned over my comrades. I'd gotten involved with quite a strange person.

"C'mon, fight! And, if... If I win, introduce me to those ladies!"

"Not happening."

"Why?! Fight me, you coward!"

Erhart stamped his feet in frustration.

We were going to live in Baym from here on out, and I couldn't help but feel uneasy.



8

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The
sixth head
patted me on
the head. He
ruffled up my
hair, putting in
a bit too much
strength. It
hurt a bit.

SEVENTH



Putting a
hand to her hip,
May began her
lecture:

“I don’t
appreciate
it when you
go and play
with fire in
the forest.”

“These
won’t come
off easily.”

Miranda tugged at
the threads, and the
qilin gave a great
shake of her head.





Sophia happened to pick that exact moment to pop into the driver's compartment. Seeing me lying down with May in my embrace, Sophia turned red from ear to ear. May clearly didn't understand the situation... This was incredibly bad.

"Wh-
What
are you
people
doing?!"

**“Hold on
a second.
This is way
higher than
I was
expecting!”**

Aria screamed, yet she also looked like she was having a bit of fun along the way. Miranda seemed perfectly calm as she stared at the ground below. Meanwhile, Eva...

**“Yes, Lyle
is a prince
on a white
horse...”**

Everyone was a bit out of sorts, likely from our exhaustion.















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by Yomu Mishima

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SEVENTH 8

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